

Account of the bust of A Space Outside squat

A Space Outside was a gathering of educational and creative workshops and direct action training that took place in the lead up to the G20 summit mobilisation in Melbourne from 17th to 19th November, 2006. Over the course of five days, approximately 400 people came through the space before it was busted by seventy police on Friday 17th November, the eve of the main protest.

The tactics used by police were intended to demobilise all forms of protest, not just criminal acts. The legitimacy of the legal means by which police exercised their powers was in many instances questionable, and yet the tone of civility and the lack of S11-style police violence revealed their desire to be seen as "doing the right thing". This was a kind of passive aggression. Powers were exercised in ways that were excessive. They presented no evidence that they were acting on the authority of the owner, possession was taken by force, banners were confiscated under the justification that they would be used to commit a crime and were suspected to be stolen property, and photos and video footage were taken and later used against people in the mainstream daily press for the Crime Stoppers "Persons of Interest" campaign.

Lack of proof of authority from the owner

The proprietary status of adverse possession (squatting) stipulates that an occupant (squatter) has greater proprietary rights over everyone in the world, except the owner. Squatting is not a criminal offence, in fact adverse possession includes this proprietary right to possession. The only way police can legally evict someone is with the consent of the owner. This right of possession means that the onus is on the police to demonstrate that they are acting as an agent of the owner. But police often do not respect this and it's kind of hard to demand when seventy police are sledging down the doors.

When the police came to evict the ASO squat, they were asked if they had been in touch with the owner, to which they replied "yes". They could not name the owner and failed to produce any evidence that they were acting on behalf of the owner regarding the re-possession of the space.

Entry and re-possession by force

Within minutes of approximately seventy police arriving at the scene, they ignored our attempts to negotiate outside and smashed their way through the doors. All police then immediately began the eviction and insisted that we gather everything in the space and prepare for a swift departure. Police displayed intimidating behaviour such as forcing individual people to search distant rooms under the supervision of police, but without a buddy. They made remarks such as "we love this" as people were ushered to the front of the building.

Included in the proprietary right of adverse possession is the requirement that possession not be taken by force. If anyone had been charged with trespass, criminal damage or any other squatting related offence, the defence could have been tested in court that this was adverse possession, and that police had gained possession through the use of force, in contravention of the squatters' right of possession, a right that is superior to anyone else's right except the owner.

Confiscating banners

Police confiscated a number of banners using two justifications. Firstly they believed the banners were stolen property. When someone stated they were the owner of one banner, this banner was returned. But some banners, painted on the

back of advertising slogans, were not given back, even when people stated they were the owners and they were willing to risk being charged with theft. Police had no proof that the banners were not simply given to these 'owners'. Secondly, in relation to the Stop G20 banner, police stated they had reason to believe that public order offences would be committed. They gave no indication that they had evidence of any planned criminal activity. So it can only be concluded that the public order offences police referred to include protest itself. Since when has marching in the street with a banner been a criminal offence?

Videotaping and gathering information that would later be used to arrest and charge people.

Over a dozen police took photographs and videotaped the entire bust. Photographs from this bust were then used by police in the Crime Stoppers list of 28 people wanted for G20-related activity that was published in the newspapers. Video footage has also been used in arrestees' brief of evidence, presumably as a way of supporting identities.

After the bad press of S11, when 200 complaints about police violence were made to the Victorian Ombudsman, resulting in a \$700,000 pay out, it was clear that the State intended to avoid a similarly vulnerable public image. Their response was in many ways more sinister than beating the crap out of people, like they did at S11.

As social movement organisers, we need to acknowledge and learn from the police tactics that were employed at this mobilisation. The excessive use of police video cameras needs to be taken into consideration. The fact that so many police were used to intimidate protestors using such dodgy tactics, like confiscating banners, goes to show the extent to which the Victorian police struggled to maintain the legitimacy of the G20 event, in light of our resistance. The fact that they had to confiscate our banners (what??) shows that they are vulnerable to any kind of dissent. The State's response has been exaggerated. This intimidation has been a political tactic.

In the brief of evidence for G20 arrestees, Christine Nixon says she expected that after some arrests, other protestors would go away and hide. In the media, however, she said she never wants to see a meeting like G20 in Melbourne again. In that sense, the mobilisation was a success. Similarly, we never see WTO, IMF or World Bank meetings anymore! What, are they scared? Perhaps they are threatened because they know they are standing on shaky ideological ground.

The impacts of police intimidation and repression should not be underestimated, and no one deserves to have their direct experience of repression trivialised or abstracted. But the fact that so many police resources was poured into the campaign just goes to prove the Tranny Cops slogan, "YOU'RE WEAK!!"