

Statement on the G20 demonstrations

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The recent G20 protests in Melbourne posed some political questions that are now being explored by different sections of the left. Firstly, and quite immediately[,] is the question of how to relate to the confrontations with police. Second[ly]... the political isolation of the anti-G20 demonstrations from the ongoing campaign work of the activists involved.

Confrontations with police

The fact of the matter is that right now our comrades are being grabbed off the street by undercover thugs. The Victorian Police Commissioner has "vowed to hunt down protestors" and set up a Task Force including the AFP and "other Federal Agencies" to identify and arrest activists involved in the riot. Police have told press about a list of 200 names of suspects associated with the protest who could be arrested. At least one man arrested has not been granted bail. A number of activists have been stopped and searched at the airport attempting to leave Melbourne. One man not even associated with the demonstration was detained by undercovers, tied and beaten in an unmarked van before being released. A small demonstration at the Melbourne Museum on Sunday was baton charged, leaving a woman hospitalised.

It is vital in these circumstances that the left speak out against this repression and help defend those targeted. Many have been involved quite centrally in environment, student and anti-war movements. Comrades need to feel supported to continue being active with or without charge. Moves to increase state power need to be resisted. In the climate of the recent "anti-terror" legislation, there is a real move to curtail democratic rights to dissent and we have to confront this. Arguments about the nature of what happened here are secondary: we support the right of people to protest even when we may disagree with the tactics that they employ.

Contrary to some reports posted in the media and on some leftwing websites, participants in the "violence" were not all "from overseas", but were overwhelmingly Australian activists, including large contingents from Melbourne. It should go without saying that, on top of this, we encourage people from overseas to join us in protest and defend their right to do so. The response by sections of the left has been shameful. Deploying the racist rhetoric of the media about foreign agitators and 'mindless violence' is helping the police to isolate, divide and victimise. It is also undermining attempts to build a radical analysis of how the demonstrations could have been more effective.

The real violence

Over the course of the afternoon, more than 500 people left the main demonstration to either participate in or support pushes on police lines. Much of this action, such as removing barricades and forcing police retreat towards the Hyatt, was inspiring in the context of a showing of police force that kept the warmongers of the G20 miles away from the protestors.

We know well the arguments about the real source of violence. We know that the people sitting in the Hyatt are responsible for the 650,000

dead in Iraq, the bombing currently happening in Palestine, deaths in the Australian workplace, Aboriginal deaths in custody.

We know well that the police are not kind, nor that they were acting with any kind of restraint on Saturday. We know that the police were there to protect the killers sitting behind the doors. Whether or not we think that the actions taken by the "Arterial Bloc" were the way to confront this power - we know that it exists, and that fundamentally this is what needs to be challenged.

Tactics on the day of the G20 demonstrations

People from many radical political tendencies either joined or supported the "Arterial Bloc". The action was certainly not confined to the 'hardcore anarchists', as the media would have it. With a lack of leadership coming from the other elements of the demonstration, the "Arterial Bloc" led a large section of the demonstration in direct action. This leadership, whilst inspiring in the context of the demonstration, had some serious weaknesses.

The attire of the bloc, dressed in masks and white suits[,] and their secretive practice on the day[,] did little to encourage broader sections of the rally to participate in direct action. Most importantly, not enough effort was made to communicate either to the movement or the media the politics that justify confrontation with police lines at such summit meetings, contributing to the political isolation which is now being exploited by the state.

There was no real attempt to lead the direct action on a mass or explicitly political basis. At no point before, after or during the demonstration did the bloc communicate to the mass of people at the demonstrat[ion] or to the spokescouncils about the reasoning behind their actions. The "Arterial Bloc" gave direction to the mood of the demonstration, but it wasn't willing to take the political responsibility for doing the hard work that is necessary to make these actions more effective and with a real, broad base in the demonstration.

Leadership from the organised left

The fact remains however that no other section of the demonstration seemed to be offering any kind of political lead.. Following directly from this, the other tendencies were unable and even unwilling to engage with what was a (perhaps surprisingly) militant mood on the day. There was no attempt from any other section of the demonstration to argue for or organise any kind of direct action against the conference.

Liz Thompson said on the Leftwrites blog that 'It was almost farcical that I was chosen to speak on behalf of StopG20 at the rally - so little political discussion seemed to occur that I was unclear exactly who everyone was.' The lack of political analysis and coherence coming from those involved in planning the day meant that many people - including those involved in or supporting the actions of the "Arterial Bloc" - felt a sense of frustration that their actions were not more effective, more targeted or more widely supported. There clearly needed to be an attempt [to] cohere and direct the militant mood of the demonstration.

The relationship between summit demonstrations and social movements

The results of the lack of leadership and the isolation of the demonstration on the whole are demonstrated clearly by the actions of the contingent from the Sydney Uni left. They believed the G20 meeting

called for more than a simple protest outside the conference and, arriving quite late in town and with little organisation, saw supporting "Arterial Bloc" as the best way to do this. But the fact that Sydney Uni, which this year has successfully defended its SRC from VSU, was represented in comparatively big, militant numbers also points some way to the kind of activism that can strengthen strong ranks at the summits.

Stop G20 was built in an extremely abstract fashion, disconnected from social struggles challenging the Howard Government. While the platform at the opening rally featured some good speakers from different movements [-] a member of the TCFUA, a Muslim cleric, an indigenous activist to name a few [-] this seemed forced and unrepresentative of the crowd. Perhaps most stark was that in a city with the most active and combative working-class movement in the country there [were] no union banners.

This is a far cry from S11, with its 20,000 people. Off the back of the struggle over the MUA, a success at Jabiluka, the defeat of VSU legislation through mass action and in the context of a growing global anti-capitalist movement, it made sense for activists from strong broadly-based movements to take their struggle to the World Economic Forum. However, even during and out of S11[,] many on the left have demonstrated a tendency to focus too squarely on building the radical "event" of the summit.

The political climate today is substantially different to the time of S11, granted. But the basics are no different. These demonstrations can politicise people, and they can act as the catalyst for ramping up campaigns against Howard. But that will only come to fruition if the demonstrations are built on a solid political basis, from the campaigns and networks where we are active day-to-day.

We need to use these demonstrations to strengthen and generalise the analysis and organisation of our movements. To effectively challenge APEC next year in Sydney we will need ten times this week's numbers. This will not come however through "building APEC" in the abstract. We need to rebuild the student movement, bringing thousands into confrontation with neo-liberal reforms on campus. We need an anti-war movement which can grow and effectively respond to the barrage of racism and militarism coming so consistently from the Howard Government. We need to build rank-and-file strength in our unions and support growing instances of strike action against the IR reforms.

When we come to APEC it needs to be with wide layers of people in these movements who we work with consistently and have convinced of a more generalised opposition to capitalist globalisation. A connection to the campaigns would make discussions about tactics on demonstrations real and grounded in a more thorough assessment of the political situation, rather than an abstract question. APEC itself needs to be a demonstration that can politicise and harden up these networks.