

NON A TOUTES VIOLENCE (NO TO ALL VIOLENCE)

REFLECTING ON NATO'S 60TH ANNIVERSARY AND THE METHODOLOGY OF PEOPLE'S OPPOSITION TO THE MILITARY INDUSTRIAL MACHINE.

Where were the voices of peace in Strasbourg this weekend whilst NATO 'celebrated' their 60th anniversary? We were there, but we were not sufficiently organised and ready to act. We were too few, and too silent.

Some friends of mine spent Saturday morning blockading peacefully one of the entry points to the venue for NATO's sixtieth anniversary summit. Over two hundred people closed the road for five hours, making visible the fact that many people are concerned by the actions of NATO and living the change they wish to seek in the world by resisting nonviolently. Were it not for other commitments, I would have been with them. Nevertheless, I arrived in Strasbourg in time to join with the international demonstration, and it is my experience of that day that I would like to share with you.

I went to Strasbourg to support my European partners in peace because NATO now compromises 28 countries, and continues to expand, and I believe that the only way in which they can be stopped is through the strengthening of our international coalition of peaceworkers. Whilst NATO share military support and nuclear weapons, so we will share support for life and pool our collective resources for peacework and a sustainable future for all people, not just a privileged few.

My friends and I arrived at Strasbourg's temporary peace camp to the sight of smouldering barricades and sheathes of broken glass. We slept to the sound of helicopters overhead and early the next morning gathered ready to walk to the meeting point for an international rally and demonstration. Needless to say the agreed route missed out the

centre of Strasbourg as well as the location of the summit. The French Government were hell bent on keeping our opposition quiet lest NATO be disturbed.

It was clear from the very first point at which groups lined up (a vision in itself alarming) and marched out of the camp shouting their various self-defining slogans that this demonstration was unlikely to unravel peacefully. Before we even reached the start point for the rally a stand off between protesters and police exchanging rocks, bottles and debris with tear gas, sound grenades and rubber bullets, pushing the largely peaceful crowd back and forth. In light of this, three friends and I formed an ad hoc affinity group and switched into semi direct action mode. And one of our party



wrote 'Anti Violence' on a piece of card to make visible our voice. But we were too few to risk striding into the foray and sitting ourselves down, so we stuck together, sang a song or two to strengthen our purpose and resolve, and breathed through our onions when the tear gas hit.

Make no mistake – police provocation was present, and tear gas wildly overused. And without doubt, too, some of the masked rioters were 'undercover' police officers. But there were some people, too, who thought that violence was the only way to get through the police blockade. But how shall we show NATO alternative ways of engaging with the world if we respond by throwing rocks and stones? Are we any better than Bush and Blair in their apparent belief that they can bomb a country into peace?

Eventually we were allowed passage and some people seemed to think that violence had won us this small victory, but they were mistaken. If the police wish us to pass, the police will let us pass, and if they do not wish us to pass, then their might is greater than our own, however many crash barriers are thrown in their direction. The police kept that road blocked until the whole of the NATO delegation were safely tucked up in their meeting room. What would have happened, I wonder, if we had approached the police block peacefully and, in our thousands, sat down to face the police in their illegal suppression of our right to protest?

We finally gathered for the rally - a breath of fresh air and a turning point, we hoped. We sat down, ate our sandwiches, listened to some live music and danced in the sun. An international delegation of Women In Black lined the front of the stage, bringing a smile to our hearts. But before long, a great plume of smoke rose behind us. A building was clearly on fire. I gazed between peace flags towards this blackened sky and wondered idly how the rest of the day would unfold. I was glad to be with my friends. Shortly afterwards a second plume of smoke rose from another direction, and before long some tear gas canisters were thrown into the thankfully open air rally as members of the 'black block' ran our way. Thousands gathered and marched swiftly away from this absurdity of burning buildings for peace and walked together to say "NATO – change your ways – another world is possible." I felt like our message had been deeply undermined.





A few hours of trudging, standing, sitting and becoming increasingly enclosed followed the rally – presumably the police were keeping us penned whilst the NATO delegates were chauffeured away, sadly oblivious to the thousands (representing millions) who deeply oppose their methods. Frustration boiled up and, gradually, destructive methods were again employed by the so called ‘black block’, but there was no way for us to escape. After a short period of general panic and stringent

keeping an eye on each other, we found ourselves penned into a factory which was being taken apart by masked strangers with little awareness of the effect flying debris can have on thousands of trapped people. There was only one thing to do, so we gathered with some other colourful looking people and sat in a circle to reclaim some peaceful space for ourselves. After a short time, however, word passed through that the police were opening up an escape route for pacifists, and not having time to explain that we were in fact nonviolent activists, off we went.

As we moved through the crowds, one of many young masked men clenched two stones in his hand, and my wise friend took her hand and put it on his heart, looked him deep in the eyes and told him that this was their language, not ours, and that he was better than this. And he faltered. He didn’t drop his stones, but he faltered. And he would no doubt remember this moment long after the factory had been torn down. But he was one person, and had we been more, we could have reached more people. It was at these moments that I was glad to be on this demonstration, glad that peaceful voices were present, however limited our song.

We finally reached the line of police and, with thousands of others, filed towards relative freedom (most roads were still blocked and we passed many more lines of police on our way back to the camp, including a group of officers who appeared to be guarding some allotments – if only they had



been in London last year when so many allotments were turned into car parks for the upcoming Olympics...) But the escape route was closed when one police officer, entirely unprovoked, began beating a member of the 'pacifist' retreat. My friends and I knelt ourselves down with open hands and peace signs facing the police. They were scared, and the people around us were scared, and both sides were tired and angry as well. I looked into the eyes of the police officer who had used his baton – this is no way to behave, I tried to convey, as I shook my head at him with a sad heart and a very firm “No”. He was pumped up to the eyes with adrenaline, and quite obviously scared as well. And I looked around me, too, at the protesters, most of whom were standing aggressively facing the police lines – falling again into this trap of ‘us and them’ so enabled by uniform and apparent power discrepancies. But how would these police officers have felt about their role if every person had knelt down, showing the palms of their hands, or the universal symbol of peace, and looked these people in the eyes? Would the protesters had felt so scared? Would the police? Would it have been so easy for the leaders of NATO to disregard our voices? Would the police have more readily questioned their orders – to subdue the democratic voice of the people? If we dehumanise the police, so the powerful have won, and we have dehumanised ourselves as well. And what is this perception of power now, when two human beings face one another? The police are not my enemy, they are part of this global nation of humanity for whom I work to oppose NATO. They have been pulled further still into this cycle of violence, and it is our job to at least try to pull them out of it by offering them our hands, by showing them our humanity. How dare these governments pit citizen against citizen for the benefit of the few, and how stupid we are to fall for it.

The next day we attended an alternative peace conference, gathering together with representatives from that broad diaspora that comprises the international peace movement: A summit that could have focused our collective energy upon alternatives to NATO's methodology, that could have sprung fresh and exciting ideas of how we can dismantle this all too effective military machine together. But in the smouldering ruins of the previous day's demonstration, we spent much of the conference chewing over how to address this use of violence amongst supposed peace people. It was a debate that mimicked the vision of protesters and police from the previous day, the back and forth. Therapeutically, a few of us gathered as an international delegation of peaceful people to reclaim the Europa bridge for ourselves, passing a still smouldering customs office, holding our peace flags and saying and singing to all who passed “non a toutes violence, refuson toutes violence”.

If the tactics of those in power was to divide and conquer, then on these two days they succeeded. And we will not stop NATO, nor the other powers perpetuating the military industrial machine, until



we stand united in resistance to the use of all violence, to challenge the very foundations upon which this militarism stands.

Next time I will most likely join the nonviolent blockaders, steadfast remains my belief that this is the only way in which we can dislodge this cycle of violence. What would have been the outcome, I can't help but wonder, had the peaceful thousands gathered to non-

violently block all of the entry points to the summit as my friends had so successfully blocked one of them? And what of the other thousands of peaceful protesters who gathered in Strasbourg? Some will never demonstrate again. Others may continue to protest with an increased uncertainty about those around them and perhaps with a greater feeling of powerlessness – we have all wondered “will our voices ever be heard?” Others may themselves turn to violence, so filled with despair we who see and feel the injustices of this world can become. But there is another way, the way of nonviolent resistance, and if there is one thing that this weekend, NATO's sixtieth birthday, has shown us, it is that we must work harder. We must continue educating, engaging in dialogue and sharing ideas, and roll whole-heartedly into action, whatever that action may be. This world needs us, we who believe that the cycle of violence can be diverted through peaceful and creative means. And our voices will be heard – sing it loud “Non A Toutes Violence, Refuson Toutes Violence.”

Penny Stone, April 2009.

