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LEARNING FROM OUR MISTAKES: A note on anarchist tactics since Seattle.

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<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L268xH400/ROUTE-63013.jpg>

INTRODUCTION

Having just returned from Cincinnati, it seems as though it's necessary to do an analysis on anarchist tactics and strategy at anti-globalization protests. We definitely did some things very well in Cincinnati, and I would like to begin by saying that I was very pleased with the Black Bloc there, which was around 250-300 strong (an incredible accomplishment for the Midwest). Of course, we also did some things very wrong, and with the FTAA meeting coming up in Quebec City, I think we have ample time to make sure that we learn from our mistakes.

THE BLACK "BLOC" The whole idea of a Black Bloc is that people wear all black, and stay in a tight formation. If people don't stay in formation, and wander around with large gaps in-between, well, that's not a black bloc, that's a march of anarchists wearing black. A black bloc requires that people stay tight and stay alert. In Cincinnati, we did very well with this idea. People (for the most part) stayed tight and alert, and there were very few instances where gaps became a problem. In DC (IMF Protests), this was a *huge* problem. The Bloc was very loose, and a lot of times, it seemed like people were not alert to what was going on. This luckily didn't turn too ugly, but if the cops didn't have their heads so far up their ass, they could have used that opportunity to divide us and make mass arrests. We cannot allow any opportunity for them to do that, an injury to one is an injury to all, remember.

BLACK BLOC ATTIRE Seattle was probably the most effective Black Bloc we've seen in this country, and yet there was one glaring mistake that the Black Bloc made. Their black bloc attire wasn't exactly anonymous. It all boils down to this: Wearing a bandanna doesn't mean much if you have blue hair and a huge "Aus Rotten" patch on your back. Part of the purpose of a Black Bloc is to provide anonymity for its members. You are not doing yourself or your comrades any service by dressing in a distinct way. Individuality is great and all, but sometimes it's okay to ditch it for a few hours in order to avoid jail time. Cincinnati was definitely better in this regard, but in order for a Black Bloc to truly be effective, then that means that we should dress appropriately. This means, black jeans or pants, black hooded sweatshirt, black shoes, and, if necessary, plain black jackets. Face masks should be plain black, whether bandannas or ski masks. Most black bandannas that are purchased are black and white. This is not good. You're better off just cutting a piece of plain black cloth into a bandanna shape. As the police and the FBI learn more about anarchist culture, they're going to become much better at singling people out based on patches or clothing. They didn't have much experience with it in Seattle, which is why people were able to get away with wearing patch-pants or other distinctive outfits, but rest assured that they're getting better at it, which means that we're going to have to get better at dressing properly.

STOP RUNNING! Sometimes, in a march, people get the idea to run. This is a bad idea. Usually, this results in the march getting separated, which would provide a perfect opportunity for the police to split us up. This happened a couple of times in Cincinnati, and luckily the cops there were so inept that they didn't do anything with the opportunity. Basically, the point is this: Sometimes you'll find yourselves without a police presence, and you'll get the urge to get a head start in order to occupy an intersection. When you get this urge, just remember, even if you police get there before you, you have a better chance of dealing with them as a solid group than a dispersed crowd. So, if you get the urge to run, just lock arms with people, and walk quickly. But don't run.

DON'T LET THE MARCH SPLIT UP. If a march is headed a bad direction, be careful about how you get people to change direction. Yelling, "Let's go this way" in the middle of the march is a bad idea, because the first part will keep going the first way, and people will get split up. Instead, run to the front of the march, and tell of the new direction. Also, make sure that people know the tactical reason for changing direction. If the same people keep changing the direction of the march, the march will stop trusting them. This is good, because if that happens, those people are probably either infiltrators or assholes. Usually you can deal with both in the same manner.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD PIGGIES. A big problem in Philly is that we actually allowed ourselves to be intimidated by a row of bike police (5 or 6 usually). The march would actually become scared and bothered by a bunch of guys in spandex shorts. Why?!? The number one weapon of the police is intimidation. Intimidation actually works as a crowd control technique. If we refuse to be intimidated, all they have left is tear gas and pepper spray, which time and time again have been proven to be ineffective as tools of crowd control. Usually, they don't disperse crowds, they just piss us off.

DO NOT ALLOW ARRESTS TO OCCUR. There's a lot of people facing felony charges in Philly right now that would have loved to have been unarrested. I think anarchists should take a "no arrest" policy. Any time that the police grab somebody, no matter who they are (yes, even members of Stalinist groups like the RCP, except for maybe Bob Avakian) we should do anything in our power to make sure that the arrest fails. The only exception to this should be those who choose to be arrested, i.e., people doing civil disobedience. This is their choice, and they probably wouldn't appreciate people interfering with it.

FUCK THE MEDIA. One thing we found in Cincinnati was that there was little opportunity to do property damage without the corporate media immediately filming from two feet away. Hell, they even did this when people were simply doing graffiti in sidewalk chalk. As soon as anybody leaves the block, the media was on their ass, documenting the action. Because the point of a bloc is not to provide a cool action photo for the corporate press, it's time that we stopped allowing them to fuck up our plans. This means that we have to take a much more adversarial approach to the corporate media and their presence during black blocs. First, when you leave the bloc to do an action, make sure a large group of people (preferably your affinity group) goes with you. This should provide a decent amount of cover, and should slow down the rest of the bloc so that you don't have to worry about catching up with them. Second, if members of your group have shields, these can have a dual purpose. If the media parasites show up, throw up the shields in front of their cameras. This may make them mad, and they may threaten you, or start throwing a fit. This leads to our third option. Very politely and calmly tell them that if they do not get out of there, that you will break their fucking camera. If they don't listen, do your best to keep your promise. It's time that we started treating the corporate media along the same lines as the police: As the winged-monkey servants of the ruling class.

ASSUME INFILTRATION AND SURVEILLANCE One big problem we had in Cincinnati amongst members of the Black Bloc is that we got cocky. We had meetings where we assumed that we were not infiltrated. By the events on Saturday, it's obvious that we were. I'm not laying blame or pointing fingers, we were all somewhat guilty. Even people I know who are completely obsessive about security culture were open and candid at the meetings. We cannot make this mistake again, because at some point the stakes may become much higher. We need to practice a good security culture at all times.

DON'T BLINDLY FOLLOW MARCH "LEADERS" There have been situations, such as the Steelworkers march in Seattle, or the Stop Police Brutality march in Cincinnati, where march leaders lead a march directly into the hands of the police. Whether this was the work of infiltrators or undercover, or just plain stupid leaders, doesn't really matter. Next time a march starts going somewhere sketchy, or if it leaves early while people are still showing up to the starting point, we need to put our foots down, maybe even run up to the "leaders" and cause a ruckus. Usually in situations like that people are wondering if it's a trap or if what is happening is the best thing to be doing, but most people just stay quiet about it. If somebody speaks up, usually people will speak up as well.

RUMOR CONTROL For those who have been to most of the major actions, have you noticed that ever since Seattle, there have been a lot of cancellations of teach-ins, marches, actions, etc? This has probably been a tactic that the Feds and police have used to disrupt our activities. You start a rumor that an event has been cancelled, then very few people show up, and the event gets cancelled. So from now on, if you hear a rumor that something has been cancelled, assume that it hasn't. Confront anybody who is perpetuating the rumor, and ask them if they have confirmation about it. If they say that they have confirmation, still assume that it hasn't been cancelled. Hell, start a counter-rumor that it has not been cancelled. Better that a bunch of people show up somewhere with nothing going on than a bunch of really important events get cancelled due to what seems like a lack of interest.

BRING PROPAGANDA Why is it primitivists always have the most propaganda? Seattle had an incredible amount of anarchist propaganda. It was out on tables at the convergence space, people would sometimes just hand it out, it was everywhere. DC, a few months later, was abysmal. Philly was a slight bit better, as was Cincinnati. Los Angeles had quite a bit of anarchist propaganda, but most of it seemed to be, again, primitivist oriented. Because this movement is becoming increasingly anti-capitalist, and increasingly anarchistic, we anarchists need to be prepared, and we need to make sure to bombard any action with anarchist propaganda. Flyers, magazines, newspapers (given away for free, of course), posters, banner hangs, etc. We need to get ourselves in gear and make sure that there is more anarchist literature than people can handle. And then we need to do things like wheat pasting, hang banners in visible sections, etc. We cannot find ourselves empty-handed when local people come up to us and ask us what we're all about. It's also a good idea to have anarchist, syndicalist, and green anarchist flags, banners, and visual representations of who we are. This makes sure that our presence cannot be ignored. So do whatever you can, there are plenty of pre-made flyers to print out all over the Internet. Visit your local infoshop for more options. The Malatesta League website also has plenty of flyers for downloading: <http://www.geocities.com/malatestaleague/> FTAA in Quebec City is going to be a major turning point in our movement. We need to be there on the street level to make sure that movement "leaders" don't take credit for all of the hard work that anarchists have done.

NEVER TRY TO REPEAT THE SAME SITUATION. One problem we've consistently been having is attempting to recreate situations. First of all, this is dumb. Cops can learn, although usually not as quickly as us, so if we want to stay a step ahead of them, we need to stay random and spontaneous. In Cincinnati, we had an impromptu march on Friday where we took to the streets and had a little bit of fun. It was very empowering, and very enjoyable. The next day we tried to do the same thing. It didn't work. The cops were willing to do whatever it takes (even search people before they got into the starting rally) in order to make sure we didn't have our right to assemble. So, remember, if at one point you kick ass in a certain way, and you're all fired up to do it again, don't. Quit while you're ahead, and switch your tactics. For instance, you may want to do the whole mass action thing one day, and if it works, move to guerilla tactics the next day. Whatever you do, stay spontaneous. Assess the situation, and figure out which tactic the police will be expecting the least, then use that tactic to it's fullest.

CONCLUSION. This whole movement is getting very interesting. It's also getting very serious. We need to start taking it seriously, while still having fun and being empowered by our actions. The FTAA meeting in Quebec City is coming up in April of 2001. Let's do our best to make sure that Anarchists are recognized as being organized, self-disciplined, and visible. See you there...

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