

G20 mobilizing in Toronto and community organizing: opportunities created and lessons learned

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This action note is written based on demonstrations and actions organized in Toronto in June of 2010, to protest and disrupt the meetings of the G20 that were happening at the time. More specifically, this note attempts to explore the following questions: how can radical anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-patriarchy¹ community organizations form lasting coalitions? Is it possible to use large scale mobilizations to assist in achieving this goal? And if so how?

I am active in the Toronto anti-poverty (and anti-capitalist) organization, "Ontario Coalition Against Poverty" (OCAP) and the migrant justice organization "No One Is Illegal" (NOII). I call myself an anarcho-communist, but there may be some who disagree as to whether I fit those politics.

Background

The G20² had its meeting in Toronto on June 26th and 27th while the G8³ met 5 hours north of Toronto in Huntsville on June 25th. Local activists in Toronto came together, some to protest the policies of these organizations, and some to protest their very existence. A week of protest events was organized under the umbrella of the Toronto "Community Mobilization Network" (TCMN), a network emphasizing community-based organizing, anti-capitalist politics, and embracing a diversity of tactics⁴. The week of protest began with an anti-poverty demonstration on Monday the 21st of June: a demonstration on sexuality and gender justice on the Tuesday (featuring our unloved Prime Minister in drag, dry humping a leather daddy); a demonstration for environmental justice on the Wednesday; an Indigenous Sovereignty demo on the Thursday⁵; a community-

¹ I will use radical to define groups with an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-patriarchal politic. It often occurs in North American organizing that radical is used on the basis of tactics. I think this is an error, though I recognize that a variety of tactics including those defined as "radical" may be necessary to defeat capitalism, imperialism and patriarchy.

² Representatives of the 20 wealthiest nations in the world, formed well prior to the economic collapse, but having gained much more prominence since that collapse.

³ Likewise, leaders of the top 8 wealthiest nations.

⁴ A policy whereby activist groups agree to respectfully discuss tactical differences and to support each other despite these differences; choosing to avoid discussing these differences in the media or to the police.

⁵ The colonial creation named Canada features a large number of indigenous nations who are in contention with the Canadian state: many never had their sovereignty extinguished, others had

led demonstration on the Friday June the 25th that demanded migrant justice, the liberation of the poor, an end to racist and police violence, cuts to social services, and linked these and other issues important to base communities in Toronto, to the austerity policies of the G20 and G8; a large permitted demonstration was organized by unions on the Saturday, with a breakout march that challenged the security fence erected around the meeting; and the week ended on the Sunday with a number of smaller actions including a bike block, an anti-prison demonstration and a civil disobedience demonstration.

The context

The real organizing for this week began only six months before the June mobilization. In particular, the Friday June 25th action that I will focus on began to be organized in March. The organizing reflected the context of left organizing in the city – there were long standing radical groups doing anti-poverty (anti-capitalist work); migrant justice work (anti-imperialist work); radical disability rights work; loose networks of radicals doing queer liberation work and feminist (anti-patriarchal work); and loose networks of environmental justice organizers and a very active Palestinian solidarity movement, headed by the “Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid” (CAIA). Prior to the G20, these organizations had worked together informally, supporting each other’s actions, campaigns, and disagreeing with each other at times⁶. When the organizing for the G-20 began, these groups started to work more closely.

Around the same time, an anti-capitalist assembly called the “Worker’s Assembly” had formed and the June 25th organizing officially happened out of this body. While this body has performed a useful and important role in Toronto for building analysis and some campaign work, especially around the funding and accessibility of public transit, before the G20, it was still very new and working out its role in the Toronto Left.

The organizing was also rooted in the history of large scale summit actions in North America⁷. These actions, often using a militant range of tactics, and

their sovereignty extinguished under threat of violence or under fraud or both, and where there are legal treaties they have been broken and ignored.

⁶ Coalition for June 25th was the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, No One Is Illegal, Jane Finch Action Against Poverty, the Gender Justice Folks, DAMN 2025, Environmental Justice folks, with peripheral involvement from Justicia for Migrant Workers and the South Asian Women’s Rights Organization. Post G-20 people doing harm reduction work and HIV/Aids work became more involved, and the Environmental Justice folks formed Environmental Justice Toronto.

⁷ So called since they tended to be based around large scale summits. The most well known would be the actions and protests against the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle which shut down these meetings in 1999. There were many other such protests following Seattle, including a huge series of demonstrations and direct actions when the North American Free Trade organization met in Quebec City a few years after (probably the main “summit action” in Canada).

involving alliances between disparate movements, began to develop after the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization. Often people will include European and Global South Mobilizations in this wave, but I think there are particular features of the wave in Canada and the US. This wave included protests against various World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings, conventions of the key political parties in the United States, and in Canada, protests against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas Meeting in Quebec City (2001) along with a G8 meeting in Kanaskis Alberta (2002).

There were key debates that emerged out of these mobilizations (a major one being around diversity of tactics⁸, but this debate is not the subject of this action note). More central to this action note is the debate that emerged about whether or not it is useful for community-based radical organizations to become involved in organizing for such large scale mobilizations. This discussion was connected (in an essential way) to a concern about the overwhelmingly whiteness of the mobilizations, along with the overwhelmingly middle-classness of the mobilizations⁹, and more importantly to the cost to community-based organizations of such mobilizations (whether in terms of the cost to send members to these actions, or the cost of the repercussions on local community-based groups after these mobilizations - in terms of burn-out of organizers, and in terms of state repression).

What happened?

These debates greatly influenced the organizing for the G20 and in many ways led directly to the politics of the TCMN, and to a coalition of community based organizations (the same aforementioned) taking on a key day: the June 25th action. In the lead up to the organizing both the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) and No One Is Illegal (NOII) debated as to whether it was even a good idea to get involved to begin with, because of the concerns identified above. Somewhat as a result of these worries, the first coalition formed to organize the G20 protests fell apart¹⁰. We also debated whether or not it was a good idea to become very involved, specifically taking key leadership roles in the coalition, and for some organizations this is what happened. This put huge strains on our organizations.

To organize effectively in this context, we needed to work with groups we had never worked with before. For example, OCAP worked with environmentalists

⁸ The debate being as to whether the actions should prescribe which tactics would be acceptable in the actions, or embrace "a diversity of tactics" i.e. the idea that many different tactical approaches can be used beside each other, respecting each other even when disagreeing.

⁹ Also the often male dominated leadership, the invisibility of Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Transsexual/Two Spirited/Queer activists, and the many barriers to the involvement of disabled organizers and activists.

¹⁰ Formed in the spring of 2009.

who later formed "Environmental Justice! Toronto". This was, to my knowledge, the first time OCAP had ever worked with an environmental group. Our organizations also got caught up in serious and hard debates with anti-capitalist groups organized around disruptive action during the summit (which ended up scheduled for the Saturday the 26th). This was very hard and often focussed on a divisive discussion of who was truly anti-capitalist (and built on an unfair distrust of these groups by the community organizations). Our historic divisions and prejudices (on all sides) played out in these discussions.

Despite this, somehow it all held together and by and large there was strong solidarity throughout the week and in particular during the June 25th action. This is not to say that there weren't any problems: it is still to be resolved whether June 25th was completely successful. The demonstration, which was intended to march to the fence around the meetings, making a number of symbolic stops at local sites symbolic of state oppression (such as a local welfare office, a transit stop inaccessible to people with physical disabilities, police headquarters, etc.) was seriously curtailed by a large and militarized police presence¹¹. Although the final action of the protest did happen, a tent city of poor and homeless people took place in a park in the city's east end (an area long home to poor communities who have been increasingly policed out of the area along with being forced out by gentrification and the closing of services), many of the other actions/stops had to be abandoned, and the march did not get anywhere near the fence.

After the Friday June 25th action, there was severe state repression. Arrests began of organizers on the Saturday morning, followed by police violence and mass arrests ending up with over 1,100 arrests by the time the police stopped. Most of the most serious charges were directed towards the community organizations in Toronto. These charges of conspiracy mostly targeted at young organizers in allied organizations or in radical organizations (often community based) from outside Toronto such as "AW@L" (an organization doing very important anti-war and indigenous solidarity work) or the anarchist organization "South Ontario Anarchist Resistance".

In the aftermath of the week of protest, the support work for those charged continues. Even though this support and the legal defence has drained resources, and taken an emotional toll, it has actually brought different communities and organizations closer together (i.e. OCAP ended up doing solid support work at the courts). The coalition that organized the June 25th demonstration continues to work together. Although some fear and burn out prevailed at first, we have organized two militant demonstrations together versus the new right wing mayor in Toronto, Rob Ford.

¹¹ 1 billion dollars was spent on the summit in total. It was the largest police operation (and arrest) in Canadian history involving a joint mobilization of federal, provincial and city police along with imported cops from across the country. New weapons including a sonic cannon, arwins (guns firing teargas and rubber projectiles), were introduced and a huge intelligence-stroke-sting covert operation was organized involving the deep planting of police officers amongst the organizing groups.

During this work, sometimes the tensions re-emerge. We are still learning how to work together across boundaries based on identity, based on the communities we work in, based on tactical differences and so on. And the repression continues, police go harder than ever before on actions, people are held overnight for things they would have been released for prior to the G20 demonstrations, police use much larger numbers for demonstrations including the new toys they acquired during the G20 protests (they had snipers on roof tops for a recent police brutality demonstration on March 15th).

However, the police also look worse than ever before. There have been three enquiries into the policing of the G20 protests, the Ontario Ombudsperson slammed aspects of the G20 policing as the worst civil liberties crisis in Canadian history and the main Toronto paper, the "Toronto Star" broke a series of photos showing that the police had covered up the identities of officers who had broken an activist's arm.

Almost a year later, the left is operating in much more of a right wing context. In the city election last fall, a fairly far-right mayor took office, and as I write this action note, the conservative (xenophobic, anti-poor, anti-woman, anti-queer) party is posed to win a federal election. At the provincial level, the so-called Liberal Party continues to wring its hands while cutting welfare cheques.

So what is my conclusion? At the risk of sounding flaky, I think movements are like relationships. For example our little anti-capitalist coalition is rocky, we fight each other and probably always will. Despite this (or perhaps because of it) we learn more and are more effective working together. We have made it through a bad time and if in some ways now it's harder we know we can make it through some rough shit. The coalition of grassroots community organizations that formed for the June 25th action still holds, and is still avowedly and publically anti-capitalist. I also think the thing I have got out of this experience is that learning how to work together, in particular learning new ways to talk and to disagree, is in many ways key to building revolution. I think we have learned some of how to do this through the G20 protests, and now we need to keep doing it.

In the end, as we build, we remember the old and true saying: they are many, but we are many, many more.

Fight to win!

About the author

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