

## **Mass action speed dating: an experiment in making mass actions empowering and effective at Reclaim the Power 2013 and 2014**

**Claire de la Lune**

Mass actions can be moments of great inspiration and power, where huge numbers of people come together to get in the way of the machine, corporation, industry, government department, global summit that they oppose. They can be opportunities for new people to take their first steps into the world of direct action. They can also be frustrating, futile and disempowering. In organising the 2013 and 2014 days of action for Reclaim the Power<sup>1</sup>, organisers sought to learn lessons from the Climate Camps<sup>2</sup> and to try out a new way of making a mass action effective and empowering.

An *effective* day of action requires planning and co-ordination. An *empowering* one requires autonomy and a chance to use your creativity. The Climate Camps largely tried to achieve both of these aims of empowerment and effectiveness by involving people in the planning through an open organising process. However, this gives the forces of darkness all the information they need to stop effective action in its tracks. An alternative approach could be to allow small trusted groups (affinity groups in movement jargon) to take on specific secret roles on an action and for everyone else to join in as a mass with little or no information about what they are doing or how they can helpfully input into making the action more successful. This can be disempowering for those new people looking for their first taste of direct action and fails to involve people who want to put energy and thought into what is going on.

For the mass action at Reclaim the Power 2013 at Balcombe we tried out a new method. People wanting to take part in the day of action were sorted into affinity groups with other people with who wanted to take action in a similar way through a 'speed dating' process. Each group formed was then given a mission by the organising group outlining their role in the day of action. The

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1 Reclaim the Power is a mass action camp that took place in 2013 and 14 organised by No Dash for Gas, following their successful occupation of West Burton gas fired power station – the first of 40 new gas fired power stations planned in the UK. The camps have largely targeted the fracking industry – a new form of drilling for gas. [www.nodashforgas.org.uk](http://www.nodashforgas.org.uk)

2 The best round up of the Climate Camps online is unfortunately Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp\\_for\\_Climate\\_Action](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_for_Climate_Action)

idea being that everybody would have a small piece of the jigsaw that revealed the full picture of what would happen on the day of action. Only the coordinating group of people would get the whole picture, but all of the fine detail would be decided by the affinity groups. Each group would be able to put their creative energy and input into making their mission happen and feel part of the success of the whole thing. The process was used first at Balcombe in 2013 and revised with more time for groups to plan their missions at the camp in Blackpool in 2014.

### **The process (in theory)**

1. A secret group of people is formed in advance of the camp to plan the day of action, recce targets, gather supplies and information, write the missions, brief facilitators of the plenaries at the camp relating to the action
2. People state their preferences for the day of action - In the main meeting people who wanted to take part in the day of action but were not in a pre-formed affinity group were invited to fill out a form stating their levels of experience, the type of action they would be up for, arrestability etc.
3. The forms are sorted by the secret group into affinity groups. The pre-existing and newly formed affinity groups fill in another form to communicate their joint preferences and needs with the secret group (e.g. would they be happy to travel to take action, do they have/want medics, legal observers, photographers, media, drivers etc.?)
4. The secret group provides each affinity group with a mission sheet including all the information they have available and can securely give out to help the group complete their mission.
5. The above stages are repeated as more people arrive and want to get involved.

### **...and in practice**

In 2013 the process was initially devised for organising an action focused on a single target – West Burton gas fired power station. The missions allowed the timing and strategy of the shut down of the power station to be communicated to a few people but for everyone to have a clear idea of what their role was on the day – from blockading roads, to creating diversions to getting in food and

toilets. Three weeks before the camp the situation changed drastically and the decision was made to move the entire camp to Balcombe to put our organising muscle behind the fight against fracking. In doing so all the work that had been done on the missions needed to be started from scratch, while security was ramped up massively at the drilling site with multiple layers of fencing, leading the group to decide that a more decentralised mass action hitting targets further afield than the fracking site would be necessary. At the camp the decisions on what the missions would be were still being made and as a result little time was given to groups to plan their missions. However, the tactic was successful with a blockade of the fracking site supported by many affinity groups complete with diversions, an occupation of Cuadrilla the fracking company's head office, a superglue blockade of the entrance to Cuadrilla's PR company, an action targetting the local MP and Tory minister Francis Maude with a wind turbine blade dumped on the roof of his constituency office.<sup>3</sup>

In 2014 organisers faced a similar situation in terms of last minute planning. With the situation changing month by month in terms of which fracking sites were active, the decision to go to Blackpool was made only a month before the camp. A week later Cuadrilla announced that they were extending their public consultation, making it clear that there would be no live fracking site in the area at the time that the camp would descend. This necessitated another decentralised day of action with a number of targets planned at the last minute and with a group exceedingly lacking in capacity. Much of the final planning and all of the missions writing happened on the camp at the same time as the 'speed dating' process was underway which was far from ideal and the amount of time groups had to plan their action was again cut short.

However, a very successful day of action was again pulled off with actions against thirteen different companies, government departments and frackademics who stand to profit from the extreme energy industry. Two actions were planned independently by affinity groups.

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3 A round up of actions at Reclaim the Power 2013:  
<http://www.nodashforgas.org.uk/uncategorized/cuadrilla-hit-with-protests-across-the-uk-campaigners-condemn-aggressive-policing/>

## **Rundown of actions at RtP 2014, with links<sup>4</sup>:**

1. Occupation at DEFRA: DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) was targeted to draw attention to the report published the previous week on the potential impacts of shale gas exploration on rural communities, which contained 63 redactions. Black tape was worn across the mouths of some of the activists to highlight the hidden information.

2. Blockade at IGas HQ, London: There was a complete blockade of the headquarters of IGas Energy – one of the major fossil fuel exploration and production companies involved in fracking in the UK.

3. Lock-on at Crawberry Hill, live fracking site: At Crawberry Hill, East Yorkshire, campaigners occupied and shut down a new drilling site operated by Rathlin Energy.

4. Blockade of construction site for new fracking research institute at Swansea University: Swansea University's new Energy Safety Research Institute is being built on land gifted to the university by BP. Research will be focused on long-term 'strengths' in petroleum and chemical processing – particularly fracking, with BP as the primary collaborator.

5. Occupation of Cuadrilla's northern headquarters: A group of activists occupied the foyer of the office while outside a demonstration occurred with local community activists including the Nanas from Nanagate supporting the occupation, alongside a giant "Cuadzilla" puppet. There was also a fake visit from Cuadrilla's "Communications Manager" which managed to convince some of the local media.

6. Radioactive Response: A number of families and their children placed 88 'atoms' of radium around Lytham as a temporary art installation to highlight concerns about negative impacts of fracking on public health and the environment from radioactive discharge.

7 + 8. Banner hanging in Salford and Blackpool College: Anti-fracking campaigners from Salford hung a banner from a bridge at Salford Media City. The banner stated that 884,000 gallons of radioactive fracking water has been dumped into the Manchester Ship Canal. A banner was also hung at Blackpool College who have accepted donations from Cuadrilla.

9. Visits to local councillors: Campaigners visited the homes of local councillors with vested interests in supporting fracking in Lancashire.

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4 A round up of actions at Reclaim the Power 2014:  
<http://www.nodashforgas.org.uk/news/monday-18th-august-2014/>

10. Fraxtons: Activists posed as a spoof fracking insurance company – ‘the only company promising to offer insurance to homes in a fracking area.’

11. Superglue action at Total Environment Technology: A haulage company used by Cuadrilla and the fracking industry, Total Environmental Technology lorries are currently being used to remove waste and used fracking chemicals – “frack fluids” – from live sites. Approximately 2-300 lorry-loads of waste are created per frack from each well. The activists, including Yorkshire locals, glued the doors closed in order to shut down the site.

12. HSBC die-in: At 14:30, thirteen activists staged a “die-in” at the Birley Street branch of HSBC in Blackpool, where they raised banners displaying the phrases “Fracker’s Bank” and “Toxic Investors”. Demonstrators played drilling sounds to represent the hydraulic fracturing process of fracking, and spoke to both customers and passers-by about the dangers of extreme energy extraction. Their t-shirts were emblazoned with their very own “HSBC” slogan: “Helping Shaft Blackpool’s Community”. Public response to the action was overwhelmingly positive, with many people expressing agreement about the need to stop fracking.

13. Blockade at PPS, Cuadrilla’s PR company: PPS have been accused of bugging private council meetings, forging letters from residents in support of developments and using “trickery, deceit and manipulation” to secure planning permissions. PPS was awarded the PR Week award for Issues and Crisis management for supporting Cuadrilla following the earthquakes caused by their exploratory shale gas drilling in the Blackpool area in 2011.

## **Reflections on the process**

In working on this article I sought thoughts from participants. These responses are all from people I know personally, which may skew them in some way. However I felt that these reflections were useful and worth including here in full as personal stories are always more interesting than dry analysis. This is certainly not evidence-based empirical research. As far as I am aware there wasn't a formal evaluation of the process at the camps.

D\_\_\_:

My main feeling about the speed-dating was that it was significantly more empowering than certain Climate Camps, where people with confidence/experience/connections could easily form affinity groups to go off and do cool stuff, while newbies had to join the morass of the mass organising meetings and either choose to join a fluffy march or run across a field at lines of

riot police. I've had only positive feedback from first-timers at Reclaim the Power about the speed-dating model - yes, it relies on some centralised organising but that's kind of inevitable when we need to combine secrecy with a bit of necessary advance research. The important thing is that groups are given enough autonomy in how they carry out their "missions", including the freedom to change them significantly if they decide that would be more effective.

Which is not to say that the speed-dating doesn't have problems of its own and reinforce invisible hierarchies of experience etc. but it has definite advantages over the "open mass meeting" model, where those same hierarchies still inevitably emerge anyway.

K\_\_\_\_\_:

It worked ok for me in terms of being with people on a similar level, and it was pure chance that i knew many of the people in my group previously. but there was a major failing in us not knowing what our 'mission' was until the saturday night. this shortage of time meant that we all felt really rushed and majorly compromised the effectiveness of the action as

1. we had to plan everything in 1 night and a morning, as our group was then going to London.
2. This meant that all the shops were closed. had we had another day, we would have bought charity shop suits/ smart clothes and banner material and actually had decent signage as well as a chance of getting inside the building instead of being spotted a mile off.
3. Due to all night planning session and long bus journey, all group members were extremely tired which led to tempers fraying and people not being as alert or having their usual capacity to withstand stressful circumstances.

Although in the end it went ok, it felt very much like we were being pushed into something that none of us were really ready for. the lack of preparation time led to us appearing amateur, disorganised, scruffy- in short, it was not the action that any of us really wanted to carry out. The action was effective as part of the wider image event, but not as a stand-alone event.

Given even 2 more days planning this could have been something pretty awesome, instead it was shoddy and only partially effective. I have never organised like that before, and did so partly out of lack of self-organisation, and partially out of curiosity. I won't ever do it again though.

There was also a bit too much of a feeling of "Yay! It's so fun to do an action and maybe get arrested!" and not as much consideration for the fact that many of the

things that make it easy to participate in stuff like this are class and money privilege. Stuff like - having to repeatedly ask about funding for transport back from london, and nobody really knowing the answer, instead of it being explicitly mentioned on the mission card so people don't feel like they're the ones with the problem.

R\_\_\_\_\_:

Basically I LOVED LOVED LOVED LOVED the speed dating. my history with actions at big camps was Drax - being asked to be an arrest bunny. Heathrow - being asked by someone else to go on an action. both times i got to do an action not on the mass action day, and then feel like it was okay just to stay on camp on the mass action day and do some support role. Kingsnorth i think i just didn't do any action. Balcombe, it began to dawn on me i just had a bit of a mental block about mass action days cos i'm not sure where to put myself or feel useful. And at Balcombe lots of my buddies had gone off site for an action or had kids or whatever. And so it [the process] was brilliant for finding a team and do a role i was comfortable with. really, really brilliant. And I LOVED that there weren't a million meetings where the people who had the vision had to put it to the masses to be picked apart and tweaked in frustrating ways. Lots of time was saved. I never went to those meetings at climate camps, but I remember lots of ppl walking round being annoyed about them going round in circles. And it was brilliant how this restricted the info available to everyone.

I remember our group (bicycles) getting changing/conflicting information as time progressed, and our plans had to change as more info got through to us about what was needed and timings, but I don't remember anyone getting that upset about it. Maybe they did a bit. Not sure.

But we totally did a grand job and I felt loads of affinity with everyone. Not sure anyone really knew each other before, but it worked really well. And it meant that later on the action after official bit was done, whenever the cops were about to move in and we spied them, we could call on each other and work together and get ready and get other people ready, and not be that mass of people not-being-on-the-case. in the way affinity groups are meant to work because people listen to each other and have each other's backs.

Really, I hadn't done an action like that for years, and I'm getting excited again remembering how I loved it.

What was also clever was how if I'm feeling cynical/more comfortable with an outsider role, and I was in a massive meeting about a mass action, it was always too easy for me to leave. But while I would have felt comfortable leaving if I genuinely didn't want in, having the initial conversation at the speed dating, kind

of committed me in a way that was really good for me.

After the action I basically wanted to find everyone involved in the organising and have that enthusiastic rant in their face.

H\_\_\_\_\_:

It was slightly over-complicated and not quite organised enough, [because of the issue of] people not wanting to look like organisers.

Getting everyone together to fill in another form - the group one [after people had already filled out the individual form], seemed a bit like a waste of the energy getting everyone together just to fill in info that was pretty much already known.

I think it's a really nice way for people who are up for doing something but haven't done the research/don't know where to start looking for targets, but leaves some people wanting to know more info than they have available.

It's a good way to get a LOT of actions planned in a short time, and to try and keep a common media message throughout.

## **My reflections on the process**

### **Secret groups and hierarchy**

Having a process organised by a select, secret group of people clearly has issues in terms of creating a hierarchy that is inaccessible to people and which has a LOT of power in terms of deciding on the targets and strategy for the action. This is especially important in this case where the group is essentially telling people what to do, based on only a small amount of information on what those people want. A lot of people are putting a lot of trust in a small group of people and they don't even know who they are. This is problematic and principles of non-hierarchy are being traded off against the need for security around targets, strategy and tactics.

An idealised, non-hierarchical model would have established affinity groups discuss their collective aims. Representatives from each affinity group would then come together to decide an overarching plan and roles for each group within that, and the groups would then work autonomously on the fine details. In an open public action with a high risk of infiltration and most people coming along having done little self preparation, this is not really a workable model.

The existence of a secret organising group is at least explicit whereas in other



mass action situations it is often not explicit. And this model does at least attempt to give as much autonomy to the affinity groups as possible.

There is no getting around this major flaw in the process but there are ways that the impacts of this flaw can be minimised, eg:

- The secret group should be given a clear mandate by the wider group outlining as far as possible the political and strategic aims of the action, messaging, guidelines as to tactics etc. This should help to minimise the amount of control an unaccountable group has over the way the wider world sees the action.
- The secret group should incorporate new people to ensure that skills are being passed on and try to reflect the diversity of the wider group as much as possible.
- It should be clear that groups are welcome to reject/change/improve their mission, or to develop their own action autonomously in advance.

### **How does the secret group get appointed?**

Should an openly organised group in future decide to organise a mass action using this process, how would they appoint the secret group? Any infiltrator in the group is sure to be trying to get onto the secret group. Not protecting the identities of the secret group opens those people up to surveillance and potential conspiracy charges and makes their job more complicated in terms of trying to organise securely.

### **Security**

While the process seeks to minimise the amount of strategic information that is available to the police, there is clearly a risk of the secret group including a trusted person who is, in fact, an infiltrator. Both Mark Kennedy and Lynn Watson, the undercover cops that were known to have infiltrated the Climate Camp, were party to this type of information and part of secret groups.

One way in which the process tries to increase security is to keep the identity of the groups most likely to be doing more arrestable roles in the action secret. One way of forming groups might be to ask everyone to stand in a line according to how up for arrest they are but that would clearly give away to any infiltrators information about the groups and people to watch. The use of forms meant that this information about people's preferences was entirely anonymised (people were invited to give fake names on their forms), however it did create other

issues (see below).

Security can be increased by:

- Having an explicit process by which the secret group co-opts people, e.g. asking if you know people who have been to their place of work, met their family etc. A lot of people are putting their trust in this group and it's important to do your homework and make sure you minimise the risk of infiltration.
- Ensuring that, whatever process is used for 'speed-dating' people into affinity groups, as little information as possible is given away about who is potentially up for arrestable roles.

### **Efficiency**

While the process limited whole group meetings and devolved decision making to small groups, it would have been more effective and empowering if the affinity groups had more time to plan their missions.

The process of using forms added a lot of complication and bureaucracy. The aim of the forms was to totally anonymise the information people were giving about their preferences. However, in 2014, it meant that people attended a meeting to fill in a form, were sorted into groups overnight and had the groups announced at the morning meeting which many people who filled in the forms inevitably failed to attend – leading to a lot of confusion amongst groups and individuals especially as people used fake names. The groups were then asked to fill out another form and had to wait until a later meeting to be given their mission.

If the group forming was done by people talking to each other, then a group could be formed by the end of the meeting and discuss their aims and feed that information to the secret group who could give them their missions at the next meeting. This would however mean that people would have to reveal information about their arrestability to other people they speak to in the speed dating process – though ideally not in a way that is visible to the whole group. A process for this would need working on.

One idea for a process that doesn't use forms uses the model of conventional speed dating. People either individually or with a 'buddy' (someone they want to work with on the day of action) form two circles, one inside the other, facing each other. The person/pair on the inside chats to the person/pair next to them on the outside and if they have a similar idea of what they want to do on the action they join up. One circle then moves on a place and gradually groups of

people with similar aims will form. Once a group has reached an optimum size they then separate off and discuss their joint aims and preferences and fill out a form to pass to the secret group who then assigns them a mission. Another advantage of this is that it is more real – getting people to talk to each other is always more fun than filling in forms! Early brainstorming on this process also had groups communicating with the secret group through a confessional booth. This has not been tried.

### **One target/many targets**

The process was initially designed for a mass action targeting a single target but ended up being used in a hybrid process where most groups were involved in an action at a single target (Balcombe drilling site in 2013 and Cuadrillas Northern HQ in 2014) but many of the missions, especially in 2014, hit other targets and were able to do so in a way that has a coherent narrative. The process should be flexible enough to deliver an mass action at either one or many targets, and also adds the dimension that the police don't know if all the groups will be hitting one place, or if they are all going to different places, or a hybrid of the two.

### **Other concerns**

One of the commentators raises a lot of useful concerns about the way the process was run in 2014. With more time, careful planning and capacity it should be possible to deal with these concerns. For example:

- Ask on the forms how far people would be willing to travel for an action and agree in advance a budget for travel and make it explicit if that is available.
- Have a stock of resources – e.g. banner materials, clothes for office occupations, lock on materials etc. – available at the camp.
- Do more to encourage the formation of affinity groups and self organisation in advance of the speed dating process.

### **About the author**

Claire de la Lune is an activist in UK direct action networks.