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GETTING OFF THE ACTIVIST BEATEN TRACK

Members of the Trapeze Collective

The government says we have weapons here and they are not wrong. Education is a very dangerous weapon; it wakes up minds and consciences.

Zapatista teacher from a school in an autonomous community

WHY WE DID IT

The anti-capitalist movement which has emerged over the past decade is not a sub-cultural one-off or passing phase. It has become part of mainstream awareness and the subject of political rhetoric. Be it the demise of the local shop, the privatisation of essential services, the war in Iraq, 'human rights' suspended for the 'war on terror' or the effects of climate change, the arguments made by those 'in the movement' should resonate more widely with the lived experiences of the 'general public'. However, whether we manage to engage with and relate to this 'general public' is another question. People who are actively resisting the madness around us and building alternatives are still marginalised, vilified and repressed. What this makes clear is that the leap from general agreement about the ills of this world to taking positive action towards radical social change remains a tough one to take. So, where are the possible bridges and connections? How can we escape the cynicism that the overwhelming range of problems and injustices tends to force us into? How do we really achieve social change? And with the G8 summit being hosted in the UK, could we use this moment as a platform for



bringing our politics to a much wider audience rather than being further marked as ‘extremists’?

These were some of the issues and questions that we discussed in the first meeting of the Dissent! network’s Educate the G8 working group in the summer of 2004. Like many others, we believed that for a successful mobilisation against the G8 summit, we needed to expand our usual circles and tactics and explore ways of developing our political networks. Our motives for educating, information-sharing and outreaching to people went beyond getting the ‘masses’ up to Scotland in July. The aims of developing the Educate the G8 project were to not only raise awareness about what the G8 is but also to question what that means to people in their daily lives and to provide the space for such debates to take place. Another motivation was to attempt to counteract the (mis-) information from the mainstream media about the issues, the protests and protesters.

WHY POPULAR EDUCATION?

Formal state education presents itself as objective while actually it is designed to socialise us from a young age to accept certain power relations. In contrast, popular education is upfront about its political motivations. It is usually associated with social movements and is traditionally aimed at groups of people excluded from full participation in the political process. Examples abound throughout history, from the Workers’ Educational Associations and Labour Colleges of early twen-

tieth century Britain, Civil Rights education in the 1960s in the US, community empowerment groups in the 1970s in the UK and the *Rondas del Pensamiento Autónomo* ['roundtables for autonomous discussion'] in contemporary Argentina, to name a few. Histories of resistance and civil disobedience are hidden from us, and an important part of building popular power to challenge the status quo is to relearn the histories and successes of previous struggles.

One influential theorist of popular education is Paulo Freire. Under Brazil's progressive government of the early 1960s, his methods were used in thousands of cultural circles across the country. These national literacy programmes taught everyone, including those who lived in the *favelas* [slums]. However, reading and writing for the masses was perceived as a communist threat; indeed the government was ousted in 1964 by a CIA-backed military coup and Freire was imprisoned for 70 days as a traitor. Freire's writings, most famously *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, have inspired many to use education as a 'practice of freedom'. He saw education as a tool with which people could begin to understand the context of their own oppression and to organise to liberate themselves. The focus was on empowerment and starting from people's lived experiences as a basis from which to question their positions in society.

WHAT WE DID

One group that emerged from the Educate the G8 group was Trapese – Take Radical Action through Popular Education and Sustainable Everything – a name which caused some confusion about our lack of circus skills. Trapese's aim was to tour Britain to inform, mobilise and inspire people to take action about the issues related to the G8. The idea of the project was to go beyond talking to the established activist population and offer workshops at an 'introductory' level, on issues such as the G8 and the global economy, climate change, debt, resistance and what we called 'living alternatives' (autonomous spaces, independent media, etc). We aimed to share the information that had inspired us to resist the G8, demystify the protests that were causing so much hysteria and to be open and upfront about our motivations. Despite having 'popular education' in our name we weren't driven by any academic interest in education. When we started, we were responding to a direct need for people to group together for inspiration, motivation and to plan in the run-up to the G8. Perhaps it is in fulfilling this need that our project was so successful.

Another aspect of our tour was to go to social places such as pubs or open mic nights to try and inject some politics into the evening entertainment. By incorporating information on the G8 into a pub quiz format we further widened our net. So on September 16 2004, we nervously hosted our first anti-G8 pub quiz in front of a bemused audience at the Forest Café in Edinburgh. All four of us who took part still cringe at the thought of it. Quite possibly it had no redeeming features whatsoever. But despite the heckling and our immediate thoughts of

‘what on earth are we doing?’, we ploughed on. From these humble beginnings, by June 2005 Trapese had become a fairly experienced group with over 100 different events under its belt. We realised that very few people were doing this sort of thing and that there was a surprisingly high demand.

Our events ranged from all sorts of venues and from three to 300 participants. We worked with a lot of existing groups, such as university student unions, support groups, theatre groups, or in community centres. We found that working with already established groups was much easier as there was already trust between people and also a greater chance of further workshops and meetings with the groups. Because we usually only had a couple of hours we tried to cram a lot in while we had people as a captive audience, and looked at problems, causes and tried to think about actions and solutions. But we also left leaflets, posters, stickers, films, books and pamphlets.

At times the roadshow provided an excuse for people to get together and talk about what their local response to the G8 summit would be; in some places it acted as a catalyst or launch for forming a local Dissent! group. People told us that it also made going to Scotland seem much more realistic.

The roadshow itself, whilst not always on the road, became our lives full time – something we had not fully anticipated. Two people, who formed a core group, were more or less permanently on tour with about ten other people involved at some point or another. Although it was very rewarding, life on the road was often stressful and distinctly non-glamorous as well as mentally exhausting. But there were many inspiring moments which kept us going. There are always so many websites to click through and emails to send, but it doesn’t compare with actually meeting people face-to-face. Reflecting, discussing climate change and other fears, making links between their lives, our lives and how the global economy affects us all, began to generate a sense of solidarity and community against the G8, and for us to really see the diversity of people who share this common belief. Whether or not this sense of community can be maintained when there is no G8 summit in the UK to unite against remains to be seen.

OUR APPROACH TO THE WORKSHOPS

To build a non-hierarchical society, the way we learn is as important as what we learn. We tried to design workshops which would build collective knowledge and try to break down the distinction between teacher and learner. To bring out the knowledge from the groups, the workshops were based on a participatory, interactive methodology and we used lots of activities and games. We always pointed out that we weren’t experts and tried to make everyone feel comfortable to contribute. Understanding issues like the G8 and climate change are far too important to remain the concern of the people who read books about them.

We used methods of learning that engage with participants and their ideas – brain-storms, role plays, articulate games, debates and so on. For example, we



shared information about the history of neoliberalism and key moments in the resistance to it by sticking cards up on to a time-line. We used a game with ten chairs to show the inequality of wealth distribution in favour of the G8 countries. Simple but very visual demonstrations can sometimes have more impact than listening to a list of shocking statistics that you can't take in.

TAKING ACTION

Popular education involves a non-dogmatic approach: it does not aim to determine the political action that a person takes, but builds on what emerges from the experiences of the participants. At the same time we didn't want to be a one-off event, but wanted to facilitate action plans, local organising and networking so that we linked people to an ongoing process of resistance. At times people would call us the Dissent! Roadshow. But although we definitely considered ourselves part of the network, we were not a recruitment drive for Dissent! In many of the places we visited, it would have been unrealistic to do anything other than impart the information we knew about the mobilisations against the G8 as a whole. We became aware of the exclusiveness of a 'direct action' focused mobilisation. For refugee groups and others of an insecure legal status, for example, attending the Make Poverty History demonstration was a much more relevant option than forming an affinity group and attempting to blockade the G8, even if they shared our criticisms of the big NGOs.

Other groups we worked with were simply less aware of more radical critiques and this raised other difficulties. Imagine: somebody is for the first time reflecting on the G8 and the system it symbolises, and we then suggest that overthrowing the entire capitalist system is the only viable option – this is possibly quite a disempowering experience!

Of course we had our own beliefs, including fundamental premises – that the G8 and the other assorted acronyms should not exist in the first place, for example – so as workshop facilitators we struggled to be positive about people going off to the G8Alternatives march in Aughterarder or pledging to buy energy-saving light bulbs. But we also felt that by immediately criticising such steps as ineffective, and judging the potential of others' actions, we were discouraging people's own legitimate choices and the realities of the lives they live.

A popular education methodology is about finding the connections you have with people and not judging them for their chosen path. We have surely all been on actions while simultaneously wondering whether we really are changing anything, so why should we give the impression that we are privy to some magical formula when talking to other people? It is vital that we remember that very few of us had an epiphany and suddenly ended up on the front line. We each went through a unique and valuable journey to reach our political views. One of the great challenges of projects like Trapese is to convey the sense of urgency and scope of social change we see is needed, without being dismissed as completely utopian and irrelevant to people's lives. This doesn't mean it isn't worth trying, but it's important to allow people time to process information, to not overwhelm them. To really be effective, popular education has to be rooted in local struggles and form ongoing solidarity.

BUILDING FROM THE EXPERIENCE

Of course, many people came to a workshop who already knew all about it, and we hoped that people would feel inspired to go off into their own communities and give similar workshops, where there was more common ground. Distributing a CD-Rom with all the resources we used, we hoped that there would be nodes of people travelling within an area, and not just us. After all, we had started with very little clue and had adapted many of the resources from people doing similar work around a previous G8 summit in Canada.

Although some other groups were doing outreach, by May 2005 we were inundated with requests for workshops and talks and couldn't do them all. Ideally we could have had an info-mobilisation tour, or speakers and popular education more rooted in people's local areas.

We felt that we had raised our heads above the parapet and consequently ended up doing a large number of public events. We never wanted to become mouthpieces, and were surely criticised for this, but it begs another important question: why won't more people do this sort of thing? Perhaps for fear of critic-

ism or lack of confidence. But we have so much to tell, give, and share, and there is so much we can learn from other groups by sharing our arguments with different people. Maybe it's the idea of being the only focus, when we are used to speaking whilst sitting in circles. But it is possible to subvert the occasion, and the opportunity to reach a large audience makes it worth it. We can be pretty brave in the face of police attacks and other repression by the state: surely we can cope with the odd heckler and a few yawns. For sure, some people are worried about becoming 'speech-makers' or claiming to represent a network, but the more of us give it a go, the less this becomes a problem. And the more people there are expressing radical views and explaining our rejection of capitalism, the G8, lobbying NGOs etc, then the more political space we can occupy.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from our experiences within Trapese that popular education has an enormously important role to play in raising awareness, linking campaigns, generating critical thinking and building autonomy. It's an essential tool in helping spontaneous resistance evolve into conscious social movements. As one group we could only reach so many people, but hopefully this was in a way which touched them beyond that of reading a leaflet, and which will encourage them to continue resisting beyond one day of action.

When the summit was over we felt that our project was just beginning, and we will be continuing with Trapese, although we're not clear exactly where, or what topics we'll focus on. We recently co-hosted a popular education seminar in Escanda, Spain, which was attended by around 80 people from projects around Europe and the Middle East, including some planning a tour around the G8 summit in Germany 2007. We would like to continue to share ideas and practise more participatory education that interacts closely with campaign groups and social movements building autonomy. When it develops beyond being a mere mobilising tool we think that this kind of work could become a much more important part of our 'movement'. We are and have been activists and/or campaigners, and we have many useful skills and ideas, but we must not forget that what is right for us won't be right for everyone. Rather than trying to convince people of one course of action or campaign by spewing information, we should all learn to listen. This is popular education, and much more of it is needed.

For more information on Trapese and to access our downloadable material, including a booklet with games and activities, see: www.trapese.org, trapese@riseup.net