

# 4

## REACHING THE PARTS WHERE WE FEAR TO GO

**AG**

**August 18 2004, 9.15pm** After two hours of inspiring films at the Kebele social centre's monthly film night, some 35 people stay on to discuss forming an anti-G8 group in Bristol. The meeting agrees to go for it. Bristol Dissent! is born.

**July 6 2005, 5.30pm** Around 400 people attend the Bristol 'NO G8' protest. Naturally, it's organised without any negotiation with the state, so Bristol's cops are out in force. They can't stop the march, but they thwart other plans. Meanwhile, up in Scotland, Bristolians are making a nuisance of themselves. Six have been nicked whilst locking on under a van on the A9, others are dispersed by the police. Bristol's clown platoon are taking the piss somewhere, while a few Bristolians have remained in the eco-village. Bristolians are also active in various Dissent! support groups. In Auchterarder, after the G8Alternatives march, one of Bristol's legal volunteers gets pulled by the police 'Forward Intelligence Team' (FIT) and their support heavies, and accused of organising the fence trashing. Asks one boiler-suited goon of the concerned legal volunteer: 'What would you say to the farmer whose field you have just ruined?' Officer, we couldn't make it up if we tried!

### **PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT**

Bristol has a proud and bloody history of resistance to capitalism and the state. From the 18th century onwards, the local working class regularly revolted and were

sometimes met with Dragoons and gunfire. In the 1970s and 80s, it was the turn of the oppressed black minority, supported by disadvantaged whites and the alternative scene, to riot back. The latter part of the 20th century saw Bristol's radical milieu provide many willing activists for a huge variety of campaigns, produce a wealth of alternative media, set-up numerous workers' and land and food co-ops, embrace the rave and free party scene, and put on seven Reclaim the Streets events in five years. Many groups continue today, as the listings inside *Bristle* magazine show.

For a city of just 350,000 people, Bristol's activists consistently punch above their weight. This enthusiasm and wealth of local initiatives have given Bristol's groups and networks the strength to act quite independently, not reliant on the alternative nation-wide political scene and movements. This has continued on into the 21st century with local May Day 2000 actions, the 2001 'Vote Nobody' campaign, and more recently the fiercely independent Stop the War group that facilitated up to 5,000 hitting the streets when the war started. But it had been a few years since activists took an explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian message out beyond the activist ghetto: could we do it this time?

## **LET'S GO TO WORK**

Inevitably, at early Bristol Dissent! meetings, most people knew each other. It was more of a network, with individuals from many local campaigns and groups. Over time, this evolved. Some activists already had heavy commitments. Some felt the group was going OK and left it to evolve. Some felt its activities were boring: not enough 'action'. Some were anti-organisation, while others perhaps questioned the whole focus on the G8 and the summits.

But new people got involved. Some (shock! horror!) were new to political activity and/or Bristol; some clearly came from a more liberal, NGO-type background; some were students. Over the ten month period, I'd estimate that 200 to 250 people attended at least one regular organising meeting. Some never returned, but at least we'd made contact. Others came back, again and again, and became integral to the group and its activities. Ace! On average, even when meeting bi-weekly, we attracted 20 to 25 people. Ages ranged from late teens to 50 year olds. There was a good gender mix, but the group was still 99% white. Without doubt, a lot of useful contacts were made, networks were enlarged, and information distributed. The group tried hard to be non-hierarchical, collectivist and autonomous; anyone could come along, have their say, make a proposal, go off and do something, facilitate the meeting, etc. There was no formal membership/affiliation.

From its inception, the Bristol group was clear that it would focus on local out-reach and bringing the G8 home to Bristol. After all, at the first meeting no one was entirely sure who was in the G8, never mind what it did! By its third monthly meeting, the group adopted eleven aims, of which three had a strong



local focus. 1: to educate ourselves, and the wider public, about the G8 – how it works, how it influences the global economy and worldwide events. 2: to identify how the G8 affects us in Bristol on a day-to-day basis – to make it locally relevant. 3: To encourage and promote local resistance and alternatives to the G8, globalisation and capitalism. The remaining eight were more predictable, and the group also adopted the spirit of the PGA hallmarks<sup>1</sup>.

And so to work. Kebele kindly provided a free meeting venue and space to store resources. Meetings were open to all. All meetings, events and info/propaganda produced were widely publicised on various e-lists, on Bristol Indymedia, by poster and flyer, and anywhere else we could think of. Two sub-groups were set up. ‘Events’ worked on benefit gigs (around ten benefit socials were held), outreach activities, producing tat and banners (there was also an ‘artists’ group making stencils and similar). We were self-funded through benefits and collections, raising and spending (or donating) over £3,000 before the end of June. The ‘Info’ sub-group spent several months producing seven ‘Briefing papers’. Each was double-sided A4 and all attempted to make the issues covered relevant in a local context.<sup>2</sup> We produced two generic posters and three basic leaflets for general publicity, with other propaganda for specific events. With access to cheap/free photocopying, we produced thousands of these and the briefing papers for pasting up, handing out, and leaving in pubs, shops, clubs, cafes, etc. Persons unknown used spray paint to help get the message out.

It's time to put a  
limit on Capitalism



ARE YOU THINKING WHAT WE'RE THINKING? VOTING CHANGES NOTHING

## INFO AND ACTION

In recent years, much of Bristol's radical scene has been based in and around northern-central and eastern-central Bristol, and this is where Dissent! drew much of its initial support from. Conscious of this, we tried to go beyond this core, taking street stalls into the town centre and south Bristol, taking info into both Bristol University, in posher Clifton, and to the University of the West of England (UWE) in north Bristol. We also sent propaganda to contacts in Bath (although no active group was formed there), and further afield to the wider South West. These efforts did bear some fruit. However, half-hearted efforts to garner mainstream media attention were unsuccessful.

Bristol's out-reach crescendoed in April 2005. On April 9, we held our own heavily publicised 'Info for Action' conference, with speeches, workshops, art and training. One thousand households near the venue were leafleted, as were some local mosques. 130 people came, although 99% were white. Typically, more attended the evening benefit! On April 16, we ran a stall and workshop at a 'Don't agonise, organise' event, put on by a local charity, African Initiatives, that brought us into contact with the local NGO and charitable types. Typical question from us to them: 'Will you make poverty history in 2005?' Answer: 'Probably not.' Next question: 'Why not?' Great fun! On April 30 we ran another stall and workshop at the launch conference for a local Social Forum, again with good discussions.

It was in May, after the elections, that a local Make Poverty History group


became openly active, supported by the NGOs and the left. The left had stayed away from us, and MPH continued the trend. They held a few high profile, photogenic public events, which we went along to leaflet, but the political gap was now enormous. A highlight was their mid-June march and rally on College Green, where they formed a white human wristband, and were greeted by the newly formed South Bristol Anarchists banner 'Make Poverty History – Kill The Rich'. Oh how the liberals tittered... nervously! Our last major out-reach activity was 'Anarchy Bear's Grrr8 picnic', on June 4, on College Green, reclaiming the space outside the town hall in the city centre, without permission of course. A windy day of fun and games, with food from the Kebele Kafe. Well attended, with barely a cop or journo or white wristband in sight, and the first public outing for Bristol's platoon of clowns!

Alongside this out-reach, the group was also turning its attentions to the upcoming summit. Training sessions were publicly organised: direct action training, including a session for UWE's People and Planet group; first aid; legal advice; and a training session for legal volunteers in the South West. After April, propaganda was increasingly centred on calls to action, and in the last month on promoting the late decision to hold a Bristol protest. A few people went off early to help with the pre-summit preparations. The group's funds, always cash-only, were liberally distributed. Beneficiaries were central Dissent! and support groups, the Bristol kitchen and space at the eco-village, a number of locally-based affinity groups.

## **CONSIDERATIONS AND CRITICISMS**

It's debatable whether we ever really got beyond the activist ghetto, although we certainly tried. We did come into contact with a lot of new people, and with groups we may not previously have gone near, but on occasions we seemed to be held back by our old mind-sets and ways of doing things. Certainly we could have been bolder in holding public meetings, approaching other communities, and groups and the labour movement. But we lacked both the time and the willing volunteers to do this – at the end of the day, you do what you can within the limits of your resources, and hope to learn for the next time.

A second criticism is that we never had enough political discussion. Although we adopted some specific political aims, as time progressed they were not discussed with newcomers, and in an effort to be inclusive, political differences were often overlooked. Of course, it's possible that those differences were simply differences in knowledge, experience and understanding, but we never got to find out. The open group meetings had packed business-orientated agendas, leaving any political discussion as largely incidental. The 'Info' sub-group did have some heated discussion, and the 'Info for Action' day saw differences aired. Perhaps the apparent unwillingness to read, think and discuss politically is part of a wider political malaise?



Some people

dream of freedom

others

make it

happen.



Dissident

There were also problems with the make-up of the group. Someone said at one point that we'd formed a non-hierarchical collective, but not really discussed what that phrase means. Undoubtedly, informal hierarchies emerged at times, based on knowledge, experience and an ability or willingness to speak up (not on a specific desire by anyone to be a 'leader'). What is the greater problem? The people who are perceived as leaders, or the apparent willingness to follow? And how do we resolve it? The answer seems to lie in discussion, support, skill- and knowledge-sharing, education, patience and a desire for change. Of course, we also suffered from the related problem of not having enough people prepared to 'get their hands dirty' – to do the unglamorous, day-to-day campaigning and admin. Much of the group's work was done by a small core of 10–15 people, or at least appeared to be – in fact, over time many in that group changed. Maybe we need to consider organisational structures in more depth if we want to involve more people in a group's core work.

In terms of action, the Bristol group organised little obvious 'direct action', beyond the picnic and July 6 protest. But, like national Dissent!, it facilitated the coming together of networks and individuals, who went off and acted independently of the group (this helped keep cops off our backs). There was plenty of obvious direct action going on in Bristol throughout the period, including blockades, solidarity actions, subvertising, anti-election campaigning and much more. Perhaps the problem lies more in the narrow conception of 'direct action': it's often

seen as a (semi)clandestine, usually illegal, activity, when in fact the act of voluntarily coming together to meet and self-organise is direct action too.

Finally, there's a sense that Bristol didn't engage enough nationally. It's a criticism that's true in comparison with some other groups, but Bristol's specific dynamics and its geographical location seemed to mitigate a wider involvement. Perhaps it also relates to how we understand organisations and networks: Dissent! formed nationally and then invited local groups to align themselves autonomously with it... which is exactly what Bristol did. I suspect that, comparatively, more local people were made aware of Dissent!, and the G8, than in many other places.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

Currently, the group continues, with a focus on discussion and support for those arrested during G8 protests and over £1,300 raised for local G8 defendants.

1 *The PGA hallmarks are reproduced in note 3 on page 161.*

2 *They can be found at <http://dissent.org.uk/content/view/181/101/> under 'Information on the G8'.*