

8

G8 ON OUR DOORSTEP

Sarah

Local political activists in Stirling started organising for the arrival of the G8 a few weeks after G8Alternatives held an open meeting in January 2004.

I booked a room at the local community centre and the word went out via email lists to the local peace activists, Scottish Socialists and People and Planet at the university. A dozen people arrived representing the full cross section of political activism. Participants ranged from those exclusively tied to lobbying style politics right through to long-time anarchists. There was the potential for immediate arguments and even fall-outs, but we found common ground. We agreed not to affiliate to either G8Alternatives or Dissent! but to keep updated with the activities of both groups and then try to be useful as local people on the ground. We knew that Stirling would likely be central to visiting protesters' activities. We also agreed that counter-information would be necessary. If the G8 had been held in Devon, most of us would not have participated. But it was happening on our doorstep, so we would have to get involved.

And so Stirling G8 Network was initiated.

As the year progressed we were subjected to ongoing police harassment, not as G8 activists, but in other circumstances. The police questioned anyone doing anything political and visible on the streets. This included CND members on their stall in the town centre. Local peace campaigners were filmed by the police whilst protesting against weapons of mass destruction – a road convoy trans-

porting Trident nuclear warheads passes through Stirling every few weeks.

We met regularly. Some weeks later, the caretaker of our meeting place told me that the police had been in touch wanting information about us. Our numbers dwindled to half a dozen faces, so we concentrated on producing a counter-information leaflet. We laboured over this, aiming to produce something official-looking, but without watering down the content. Even then, all the leafleters were questioned by police – who went as far as requesting that they show their faces to street security cameras.

But what we were really waiting for was news about the eco-village. Our group wasn't composed of natural Dissent!ers. Most of our personal political activity didn't orientate around autonomous movements (well, there's not a lot of that ilk going on locally!). By and large we are trades unionists, peace campaigners and socialists. But living in a semi-rural area, we're not bound by the politicking that goes on in Edinburgh or Glasgow and the resulting prejudices. We have a lot of experience between us – we have facilitated direct actions in the peace movement and we have seen the police in action during the 1984–85 miners' strike at local pits. We wanted the anti-G8 activities to be successful, and the idea of a campsite nearby was exciting to say the least, so we wanted to help.

When the eco-village site was eventually confirmed I punched the air with happiness. I was delighted that a mobilisation like this would really be happening near my home. There was only two weeks to get it ready. I put the word out that there were people in Stirling who wanted to help and soon practical requests came our way. Did we know where local skips were? Where could oil drums be found? What about a friendly local farmer? A few of us visited the site when it was being set up and brought beer, a giant CND symbol and a money gift from Stirling CND.

I felt frustrated – I knew that as locals we had more to offer than just practical assistance, especially as most of us are not very practical! We had reced the site before it was set up and could see that it was isolated and how the police could easily blockade it. Originally our group had intended to set up a meeting with people from the camp to discuss outreach work and what we could do to help, including tactics. But there was so little time and everyone was busy getting ready for the G8, both in and out of the campsite. I did talk about the problems of the site's geography to individuals, but generally I felt like a spare part when I visited the camp. On the second day of set-up, I was asked if I wanted to help in the kitchen, which gave me little pleasure. I felt that local political activists should have been treated with importance. Then I experienced self-doubt, perhaps I was just being egocentric? But I have spoken with others who felt the same as me. And I also know that there were isolated individuals from small villages, turning up at the camp, seeking solidarity and not being helped to meet up with other like-minded locals.

So looking back, I know that my gut feeling was correct. We, as local people, should have pushed much harder and *insisted* on inclusion at some of the plan-



ning within the eco-village, regardless of the fact that no formal invitation was extended.

The location of the convergence space wasn't finalised 'til the last minute, but the authorities probably knew all along that it would be in Stirling. It is clear now that the low level police harassment we had experienced over the months was just part of a concerted campaign to frighten off local activists and to drive a wedge between local people and protesters. And other tactics were in operation too. Police advised local employers (including my own) that protesters were dangerous aliens from outside that workers required protection from.

As the G8 week progressed, the media fabricated tales of unprovoked violence and the police swarmed around Stirling with their sirens blaring, deliberately creating a false impression that crimes were happening everywhere, all of the time. The atmosphere became hateful and full of fear. Strangely the massive police presence failed to stop a minority of well-known local young men from becoming increasingly aggressive in their behaviour towards protesters, including myself.

The state worked purposefully to ensure minimal participation by ordinary local people in the protests and for good reason. Imagine if we had been better prepared and more locals had participated in the blockades and demonstrations. Imagine if the police lines outside the eco-village had been met by local people coming from the other direction. As it stood, there was so little organisation,



that even sympathetic people didn't know what was going on in their own town. If the police had invaded the camp, there might not have been locals present to even bear witness, never mind provide support.

Outside of the camp, local activists were isolated, alienated and sometimes fearful of the quasi-police state that was mushrooming around them. I realised that we on the outside needed the solidarity and help from the people in the camp too. We were all in it together.

But it wasn't just me who realised all of this. On Thursday, the second day of the summit, we organised a meeting at the nearby Scottish Centre for Non-Violence where campers and local activists met with purpose for the first time. The discussion was positive and mutually supportive. It wasn't about protesters apologising for damaging Burger King, or explaining themselves to the locals. It was about us joining together, in solidarity, to start countering some of the blows dealt out by the state that week. And the process of attempting to do this was an important feat in itself. We planned what we could in the hours that remained of G8 week. It was too little, too late, but we did our best.

We held stalls in Stirling town centre, where CIRCA participated. Here the power of the clowns' activities became apparent as they created the environment where I felt I could take back control. The fear and paranoia that had built up in me, a direct result of the state repression I had witnessed in my home town, dissipated, as we exerted our presence once again on the streets. And I'm sure that

everyone we encountered felt some of this too. A similar response had resulted from Critical Mass's memorable cycle ride through Stirling with the open mic on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, the eco-village had put out an invitation on local radio for all listeners to come to dinner at the camp that night. Some people did come, including members of a local community council. This allowed us to determine the truth about the extent of damage to residents' property and a real dialogue between those affected and protesters took place.

These honest interactions between people were the highlight of the G8 activities for me. The open mic in Stirling, the meeting, the local and visiting activists working together in town, local people eating a meal on the camp. Movements for change are all about people taking action and it was from these small events that I made connections with real people and gained ideas about creative ways of engaging in political activity in the future. For me, that future is in my locality, working to effect changes to the real lives of real people – not the next G8 mobilisation.

The process of mobilising for the G8 was a success in so many ways. The eco-village alone was an impressive and important experiment in self organisation and all the participants, including us locals, have learnt from the experience. But one of the lessons has to be this: change is achieved by ordinary people for themselves. If we don't have the confidence to believe that we (not *they*) can do it, then what are Dissent! mobilisations all about? The good news is that Dissent! is continuing to work and develop as an activists' network. But future mobilisations must include people who live locally and strategies for developing trust and solidarity must be considered as a 'must have', not a 'would like'. Otherwise mobilisations of large numbers of people descending on a small geographical area, for whatever reason, will never be successful.