

PROTEST IS NOT ENOUGH



THE RIGHT TO PROTEST

The right to protest is a key right within our political system, and the suppression of protest is a sign that a government has become oppressive and authoritarian. Protest is seen as the voice of the people, and an important tactic to raise issues and push for changes that the political system would otherwise ignore.

However, protest has also had a very uneven record of bringing about such changes, especially on its own without other forms of political action. This pamphlet will argue that this is due to the limited ability of passive protest to effect politics, and will discuss other tactics outside of the formal political system that are needed in order for people to assert their interests against a government that often does not care about them.

WHEN GOVERNMENT FAILS

Protest is seen as a necessary part of a healthy society because our political system often fails to represent the interests of the people living under it. This is clear within an absolute dictatorship, in which a dictator has no formal responsibility to care about the wants and needs of their subjects, and can exploit and oppress them at will. The current “democracies” of the world are also far from perfect. Those of us who live under these democracies have no ability to veto any decision our government makes, no matter how unpopular that decision might be. Instead, we must wait for the next election, and even then there is no guarantee that any of the parties running for election will represent our views. Even within a theoretical perfect democracy, minorities can be ignored by the government.

This means that often we need to take action outside of the formal political system to make ourselves heard and put pressure on that system when it starts to behave in ways that are oppressive, exploitative, or negligent. Without such action, there is a risk that the political system will stop serving its subjects at all, and will become more and more insular, detached, and corrupt.

In our current society, protest is often the go-to tactic for trying to push against the political system when it starts to go off the rails. A mass of people on the streets is seen as a message to the government that people are unhappy with their policies, and that they should change their ways in order to maintain popular support. On almost all issues, the organisation of protest is the main tactic of political movements aside from running in elections.

A RIGHT WITHOUT TEETH

However, the reasons why protest is necessary and the legal and cultural ideas around what constitutes a legitimate use of protest are at odds with each other. Protest is necessary to restrain state corruption, malice, and negligence, yet acceptable and respectable protest tactics are often defined by being as peaceful and as non-disruptive as possible. The standard framework for such a protest is that everyone masses at point A, marches to point B

in accordance with the instructions and limitations put on them by agents of the same government they are protesting, and then goes home.

The great flaw in such acceptable forms of protest is that they are just statements of discontent and do not put any immediate pressure on the government to change its behaviour. While a sufficiently large peaceful protest may make the current government worry about how people will vote in the next election, it does not do anything to force them to stop what they are doing right now. This is even more true when the issue is one that only affects a minority and so can be easily ignored in an election. Such pressure also has little effect on issues in which all the main political parties are in agreement; in such a situation there is no alternative for disgruntled voters to turn to.

DISRUPTIVE PROTEST

The alternatives to the acceptable protest, in which we are allowed to protest only in so far as we do not actually put any pressure on the government, are more active and disruptive forms of protest that attempt to impose costs on the government if it continues with a harmful policy. This can range from non-violent civil disobedience, to refusal to cooperate or pay tax, to more active and lively blockades, and up to vandalism and riots.

It is not the place of such a short pamphlet to discuss the practical or ethical pros and cons of the tactics within the umbrella of “disruptive protest” or advocate for any particular approach. However, it is important to move beyond a model of protest as a way of showing discontent to a model of protest that imposes costs on oppressive and exploitative behaviour and pressures governments to avoid such behaviour. Without a willingness to do so, protest has no ability to restrain a government, as they can simply ignore protests without any fear of consequences. The right to protest is worthless if it is only a right to ineffective protest.

AT HOME, AT WORK

To be truly effective, our protests must also move away from a focus on the formal political system. While the government often enables and supports institutions that profit off of human misery, such institutions can still be confronted directly without having to rely on government action. For example, companies that profit from and support harmful state policies, such as arms manufacturers, oil companies, or corrupt service providers, can be directly targeted by disruptive protests or boycotts that put pressure on them to change their behaviour.

Many of the problems that we face are also not just political but more broadly social and economic in nature. Often our landlord or employer has a more direct influence on our lives than the government does, and things like high rents, low wages, and bigotry and abuse by petty authorities are the base cause of a series of other social ills. These problems can be confronted by labour strikes, rent strikes, boycotts, and other disruptive action.

Such organisation and protest around local economic and social issues has advantages over purely political protest. It allows for movements to be effective even when they are too small to directly confront the state. For example; It may take millions of people to force a government to take action on low wages, but we only need our co-workers to strike for higher wages in our specific workplaces, or some local allies to picket a local business that is behaving in a racist or sexist manner.

Starting with local bottom up organising and building up from there also creates more durable a capable movements. A protest movement that is built from the top down around a single pressing political issue will start to demobilise and disintegrate after that campaign is over, and any new campaign over a new issue will have to start again almost from scratch. Bottom

up movements can continue to operate locally and maintain knowledge, relationships, and infrastructure in-between big unifying campaigns. They do not just create one off protest movements, but also build long term capacity within society to organise and to protest.

DIRECT ACTION

The next step to improve the effectiveness of our movements is to operate beyond the logic of protest and incorporate the principal of direct action. Direct action is the idea that instead of putting pressure on an institution to implement a change that we desire, we organise to achieve that change directly. This can be constructive, such as organising a food cooperative or a mutual aid network to directly provide services that the state or capitalism will not, or it can be obstructive and focus on protecting us from harm, such as organising anti-raids or anti-fascist groups to directly prevent nationalist and racist thugs from threatening our communities, whether those thugs are state sponsored or not.

Direct action is important because protest, even when successful in pushing an institution to change, still leaves the implementation of that change in the hands of the very leaders who had to be forced into adopting it. Such leaders cannot be trusted to act in good faith, and they will often implement reforms in the weakest way possible, backslide later, or simply lie about their intentions and fail to implement any reform at all. Sometimes the best way to achieve something is to do it ourselves.

ORGANISING AS EQUALS

Many previous movements for social justice have been channelled into serving the interests of their leaders instead of the interests of the people they claimed to help or represent. Many formal, top down charities have become more about keeping their executives well paid than about helping people. Workers' movements like the trade union movement and the cooperative movement have drifted from their original objective of empowering workers to becoming more and more similar to the capitalist businesses they were created to oppose.

To avoid this kind of failure and build more reliable movements we need to avoid creating structures in which one person or group of people, even if they are elected, sits at the top of an organisation and dictates what to do to everyone else. We need to build these organisations on mutual agreement and consensus so that no one can be ignored. We also need to build them from the bottom up, with each local organisation running its own affairs according to the knowledge and insight of those who actually work and live within that local area, so that we avoid creating a new unaccountable hierarchy.

Hierarchies in which those at the top can command and ignore those below them are the problem that causes the need for protest and resistance in the first place. Our political leaders can act without any real accountability to those below them, and this is why movements outside of the formal political system are necessary to keep them in check. If we simply recreate such hierarchical structures within our movements then we will recreate the same kind of problems we are struggling against.

The principles behind protest and direct action themselves are incompatible with blind obedience to leadership, as they are founded on the idea that people have the right and the ability to look at society, decide what needs to change, organise with like minded allies, and take action to create that change regardless of what those above them think. Indeed, previous movements that became more hierarchical often had to abandon disruptive protest and direct action because such tactics undermined the obedience that the leadership relied on to control those movements.

DUAL POWER

As bottom up organisations grow, they can network, form alliances, and even form federations that allow them to cooperate with each other and achieve more than they could alone. A small group might only be able to deal with very specific local issues, but an alliance of such groups across a country can deal with nationwide issues. They can form a system of popular power that is completely independent from the state and capitalism and is not reliant on the whims of politicians or property owners to ensure that peoples' desires are met.

A network of peoples' councils spread throughout communities and workplaces, that is organised from the bottom up to truly empower its membership, would have effective control over much of the real infrastructure of the area it operates in. Workers could refuse to manufacture dangerous goods or implement unfair management decisions. Evictions, immigration raids, and arrests could be prevented. Exploitative rents, taxes, charges, and prices could be ignored. Unpopular laws could be made completely unenforceable. Important resources and infrastructure could be seized and run by workers and service users in the interests of all those involved instead of to enrich capitalists and empower politicians.

All of the above has been achieved by past mass movements willing to take up disruption and direct action to achieve their aims. Corrupt or incompetent governments and exploitative capitalist businesses can be marginalised and ignored to the point that it is impossible for them to impose anything upon the people theoretically under them. The full development of such an alliance of local organisations for protest and direct action could not only provide us with far more potent tools to prevent the abuse of power by politicians or capitalists, but also give us the basis to abolish them entirely and run society in the interests of everyone.

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

The fact that protest is seen as so vital to a free society in order to keep political power in check indicates that our current political system does not in fact serve the desires of its subject without outside pressure. If we can build a movement that can articulate and further those desires in spite of, or against, an uncooperative government, then we will have built structures that are both more powerful than the state and more capable of serving our needs. At that point, it would only be sensible for that movement to do away with the state and organise society directly on its own. This would be a revolution that truly empowered and protected people instead of simply subordinating us to a new set of rulers.

This approach to building movements has a name. Because it is critical of hierarchies and all other forms of rulership and seeks to organise without resorting to that rulership, it is anarchist, which literally means without (an) rulers (archy). Because it seeks to build working class power through organisations in the workplace and the community, it is syndicalist, which comes from the French word for a workers' union. Together, these two ideas form Anarcho-Syndicalism.



WEBSITE: SOLFEDNL.NOBLOGS.ORG

EMAIL: SOLFEDNL@RISEUP.NET