

# A RECIPE FOR REPRESSION

## THE GOTHENBURG RIOTS OF 2001

**T**HE Swedish EU Presidency ended in mid-June 2001 with a Summit in the city of Gothenburg. The Heads of State of all the EU countries were present and there was a special visit by George W. Bush. As the world's elite gathered once more behind fences and lines of riot police, a diversity of activists with many backgrounds descended on the city. By the end of the week, three people had been shot, hundreds of people had been arrested and the general attitude towards activists in the media and in public was very hostile. Some commented that the police should have had better training so that they could shoot activists in the head instead of through the stomach.

During these days and their aftermath I lived in central Gothenburg. I have been asked to summarise some of the experiences of that time.

In the period leading up to the protests and counter-conferences I was working with a mainstream environmental organisation, planning events for the Free Forum; a tent camp with info tables and stages for debates, speeches and music. After the protests it seemed that there was almost no political representation or organisation in the city. Most of the organisations and people involved in planning the protests had either left or were burnt out. The police were rounding up people, this scared many activists, and a general silence existed from the protesters. Because of this, because some of our friends had been arrested and hurt, and also because we had been in the streets and were very frustrated by the version of reality that was being put together by the police, media and politicians, some friends and I became involved in the work which was necessary after the so-called Gothenburg riots.

### ECOFIN: THE APPETIZER

The Gothenburg Summit was the last summit to take place during Sweden's EU Presidency and it was the site of the biggest protests, but the Ecofin Summit in Malmö is also of importance when



Chief of police Håkan Jaldung and George W. Bush

looking at the events in Gothenburg. On April 21st 2001 there was an informal meeting between the finance ministers of the European Union, and a demonstration was held against this. At this demonstration the black bloc was ambushed and more than 260 people were boxed in by police before being violently arrested. The police claimed that weapons found, such as potatoes punctured by nails, firecrackers, fire extinguishers, eggs and canned vegetables were the reason for the mass arrest. However, there is evidence to suggest that the operation was planned ahead of time and that it was an exercise in preparation for Gothenburg. This type of pre-emptive arrest was exactly what we were to experience a few months later in Gothenburg.

### THE MAIN COURSE: GOTHENBURG SUMMIT, THURSDAY 14TH JUNE

Many activists had arrived in Gothenburg on the Wednesday and were staying in different schools that the city was renting out cheaply for accommodation. One of these schools was Hvitfeldska, which was also used for talks and workshops by a coalition of groups that I will refer to as Ya Basta! This group was involved in organising a White Overalls action against the EU Summit where they publicly announced that they were going to march towards the fences around the Summit and non-violently try to breach the security perimeter in white overalls and padding. They consisted mostly of members from the Swedish group Globalisation from Below ([www.globaliseringunderifrån.org](http://www.globaliseringunderifrån.org)), but also a number of Finnish activists and members from the original Italian white overalls.

At around 11am on Thursday, at the same time as President Bush landed at the airport outside Gothenburg, the Hvitfeldska School was surrounded by a large wall of shipping containers, trapping 650 people inside. Just before 5pm negotiations had reached a compromise, but then all negotiations were broken off by the police who decided that everyone in the school was to be arrested for 'violent rioting'. Some people had managed to leave the school during the day by identifying themselves or escaping over the top of the containers, but around 450 people still remained in the school. Ya Basta! tried to break out using their padding, but the police fought back and attacked the school grounds using horses, dogs and riot police on foot. In response some people barricaded themselves in the school, but those who did not make it were beaten and harassed. The police also smashed the windows of cars parked on the school grounds, threw the contents of the cars out on the ground and sabotaged the soup kitchen.

The anti-Bush demo proceeded without the Hvitfeldska activists being able to participate. The inhabitants of the school were eventually arrested and put in custody overnight. They were given only small amounts of food and many had to share cells and were held for longer than is legally allowed. Most were released early the next day and only a few were questioned.

### FRIDAY 15TH JUNE

Early on Friday many people gathered by Gotaplatsen, a square located very close to the 'Red Zone' surrounding the Summit, for a demonstration and speeches. After this there was an anti-capitalist march, which moved down a small street towards the fences surrounding the Red Zone. The march did not have a permit, though this did not make it illegal according to Swedish law, and a few thousand people participated. The demonstration was supposed to have been coordinated alongside actions by Ya Basta! and Anti-Fascist Action (AFA). However, the raid at the Hvitfeldska School had prevented any organised actions by these groups.



Out-of-control police dogs

A line of police quickly blocked the march and after a short time around 20 police with dogs charged at the front of the demonstration.

The dogs were very worked up and attacked everything in their way, including police officers and other police dogs. The police tried to single out the black bloc part of the demo and beat people randomly. Amidst the panic that was quickly created by the sudden excessive violence from the police, an attack from a side street scattered the demonstrators who fled up to the square where the speeches had been held a little bit earlier. By this point several people had broken up cobblestones and the police were surprised to be attacked strongly by hundreds of stone-throwing protesters who forced the police into a retreat. The protesters found themselves in a square that is at the end of Gothenburg's main shopping street. Since the police had retreated, and seemed to be re-grouping or trying to find somewhere else to attack from, the shopping street was left completely unprotected. Windows were smashed and burning barricades were built as the riot roamed freely down the street. In the end the police did attack from a side street and started hurling stones back at protesters, but the riot was mostly over and the police tried in vain to round up the scattering protesters.



After this the sunny day passed calmly until the evening. A big anti-EU demo gathered at around 6pm and was attacked by Nazis without the police interfering. The Nazis were chased away but appeared later at the Reclaim the City party that was planned for

8pm. As the big anti-EU demo passed Vasaplatsen, two cars with sound systems pulled up and as the music started, people gathered. People were dancing but also breaking up cobblestones for defence. At first there were no police, but suddenly the lines started approaching, cutting off street after street.

Suddenly someone screamed "Nazis!", and people started masking up as a bunch of Nazis randomly attacked people and did the 'siege heil' salute. The Nazis had to flee the scene quickly. They ran towards the police lines and then straight through them. Then they ran back through the police lines and attacked protesters again, throwing stuff over the police lines towards the street party and the anti-fascists who had been chasing them. The police made no attempt to stop the Nazis or arrest them and instead also began attacking the party. The people dancing got boxed in but many people had gathered in a park next to the square and down various roads and the police were attacked from several angles.

A group of six police who had arrested some protesters in the area earlier returned alone and were attacked by a lone protester at a street corner. Then a huge mob came out of the nearby park and forced the police down a street where they were suddenly attacked from behind. At this point they pulled their

guns and started shooting into the mass of people. One person was shot in the leg and another, a photographer, in the thigh. People fled as the bullets flew into the crowd. When the area cleared, and between 40 and 60 police had

arrived at the scene, one young protester remained. He picked up a stone and threw it, missing completely, then another one, a very small one, which also missed – the police shot. The bullet went straight through his stomach, exiting through his back. He was in a coma for two weeks and doctors put 100 litres of blood through his body. After they had removed his spleen, one kidney and parts of his liver, he made a full recovery – against all odds.

## SATURDAY 16TH JUNE

The big demonstration was planned for Saturday 16th at 11am. It is estimated that around 20,000 people participated. The rumours about the death of the injured activist were heard everywhere and many people I met were angry and ready to fight if the police attacked again. A decision was made to move the black bloc in front of the syndicalist union SAC instead of behind as previously planned. This turned out to be very valuable, as the police had been preparing to box in the black bloc as they had done in Malmö. The black bloc was only a few hundred activists and passed by the road where the police were preparing the ambush very quickly. The sea of red and black flags that followed as the SAC marched down the street in their thousands prevented the police from taking any offensive action. All of a sudden, they were on the defensive. The demonstration carried on without incident and marked the end of the planned activities of the opposition to the EU Summit and the Bush visit.

## SATURDAY DEMO

Late on Saturday afternoon, I was told that there was to be a demonstration against police brutality at 7pm. As I was approaching the square where it was to be held, I saw lots of police down side streets and before I could reach the square they passed me, boxing in those who had gathered to demonstrate. Everyone was rounded up and forced to sit in the middle of the square in a big group. Several busloads of people were driven away and kept in cages in an old military complex until the morning. The majority of the people in the square were finally let out after five hours. The police who let them go did so against orders because they could not understand why they were keeping the people there and had been without a break for a long time.

The reason for the police action against this demonstration is unclear.



Nobody knew who called the demonstration and we found it strange that they were talking about it on the state radio whilst there was no mention of it on alternative media or through activist sources. Many believe that the police organised it, not only to try to catch some of the participants from the Friday riots, but also to direct attention away from another police action that took place close by. The police claimed that an armed German terrorist was staying at the Schillerska school (close to the Hvitfeldksa school). According to the police, this German was going to shoot a cop. However, most people think that the police action against the school was just revenge for the riots of the previous day. At about 10pm, when hundreds of protesters were boxed in the square, masked police in black clothes, carrying automatic weapons with mounted flashlights, stormed the school. Seventy-eight people were brutally dragged out of the school and forced to lie face down on the asphalt of the schoolyard for between 45 minutes and several hours. The police terrorised them and beat them and said things like, "Yesterday you had your fun, tonight we'll have ours". Seven foreigners were deported but no one was charged with a crime.

## THE AFTERMATH

The days after the Summit were strange. All the activities, the forum and the people were gone. The mass media had constructed a picture of a city raped by the violence brought forth by professional international troublemakers. At workplaces and in public, one could hear people talking about how they wished the critically injured protester would die. The Social Democrats (the strongest party in Sweden) gave roses to the police. If you talked about the police brutality and the absurdity of the mass arrests people just said that it was

wrong to throw stones. Many activists I know fled the city because they could not handle the way people looked at the events that had happened. As the days progressed, we realised that the mainstream media was creating a picture of the events that was dangerous for people who had been involved. Some friends and I decided to contact the media and try to show our side of the events. We were very lucky in that one of our parents' old friends was a leading investigative journalist in Sweden. We called this person and met a colleague of his to talk about what had happened. This led to a series of TV programmes about the riots that autumn and the following spring. Through the programmes we were able to show footage that had not been shown earlier and the reporters investigated the actions of the police and found both manipulation of evidence and false testimonies. Though the programmes covered many things, one of the most important themes was about the man who was shot through the stomach. The reporters managed to show that when the man was shot, there were between 40 to 60 police on the scene and that the man was alone as all the other demonstrators had fled after the first shots had been fired. A Belgian cameraman had footage of the man as he stood by himself and picked up two small stones and threw them badly towards the police. The camera then pans 180 degrees and one can see police all down the street and hardly anyone behind him. Then the police shoot and he stumbles away from the scene and falls down. In the trial against the young man, the police did not show the footage of the wider area and added sounds over the footage. They added a chorus of people chanting "Ein,

wrong to throw stones. Many activists I know fled the city because they could not handle the way people looked at the events that had happened.

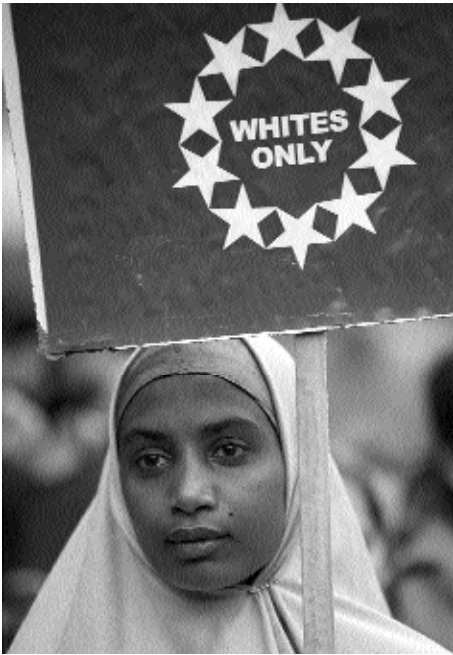
As the days progressed, we realised that the mainstream media was creating a picture

zwei, drei, Nazi polizei!" ("One, two, three, Nazi cops!"), which made it seem as if there were lots of people behind him cheering him on. These chants were taken from a later point in the evening after people realised that he had been shot.

Through these TV shows we managed to counter the one-sided propaganda of the mainstream press, it opened up space for a debate and people did start to question the role of the police. This was beyond our wildest dreams and we really thought that it would change the legal processes that were going on at the time. To our surprise, nothing much happened on the legal front. The trials continued in much the same manner as they had from the beginning. They were fuelled by political motivations and many trials seemed to be about explaining the brutal police behaviour, rather than objectively deciding if people were guilty or not. Most people were charged with 'violent rioting', a crime that usually does not carry a sentence of more than a month. Activists were receiving very long sentences based on contradictory or poor evidence and suddenly the norm for violent rioting became one year in jail.

However, many have received longer sentences. An Italian, for instance, received a sentence of two years for 'violent rioting' for throwing a branch that did not actually hit anything. A contact person for the Ya Basta! group received two years and six months for 'instigating a riot'. The evidence against him is that he waved his arms towards a mass of people and that he had held a press conference several weeks before the Summit. The man who was critically injured recovered fully and received a sentence of eight months. His trial was completely dominated by trying to show how the lives of the police had been in danger. Eight Swedish youths received sentences from one year and four





months to two years and four months for collecting and sending out information to activists from an 'information central' that consisted of some computers and police radios. Some people were kept in isolation cells for several months, their testimonies were falsified and they were given drugs to help them cope with the stress but also to break them down.

There is a pattern in the events that took place the summer of 2001 in Gothenburg. All the legal demonstrations were carried out without incident. When the demonstrations were not taking place, the police provoked violence and took away people's right to protest and organise. Every time the police appeared, they surrounded people and attacked and then used any resistance that they met as justification for their violations. The US secret service had 1,000 people in Gothenburg and many believe that they influenced the Swedish police to use tactics that have been effective in the US – such as surrounding locations where many activists are gathered. It felt like there were traps everywhere and no matter what you did you could be arrested and put in jail for something. The trials that followed were hugely political and the sentences people received were much harsher than the norm for the crimes they were convicted of. The trials are almost over now but people are still waiting to go to jail.

The EU Summit in Gothenburg may seem like a horrible story of repression and abuse but many good things did come out of it. Huge demonstrations were held and many people became politicised. We managed to bring an alternative view of what happened into

the mainstream media and in this way criticise the police and the justice system. In the end, after hundreds of people had tried to report the police for crimes committed against them without success, the Chief of Police was put on trial. He was charged with the illegal action against the Hvitfeldska School but was freed from a sentence of between one and 10 years on the 20th of February 2004.

There is a re-trial this autumn but it is not likely that he will be found guilty.

In Gothenburg we learned that it is important never to trust the police. They can do whatever they want and the more they know the more trouble they can create. It is important to have legal groups and to be organised in many places so that the police will be unable to shut you down. After the Summit it was important that there was a solidarity group that assigned good lawyers to those arrested and gave legal advice. This group also raised money for the prisoners and helped organise demonstrations. Also, the media contacts that we made proved incredibly useful, but it would have been good to have had them beforehand.

All over the world there were solidarity demonstrations and many enjoyed the fact that Swedish embassies had to step up their security. A month after the riots in Gothenburg the police fired at protesters again, this time in Genoa at the G8 Summit, and this time they managed to kill someone. They also attacked the Indymedia Centre, and the Diaz School where demonstrators were sleeping, in much the same way as they did in Gothenburg, only with much more brutality. In Gothenburg we held demonstrations against the brutality of the Italian police, as did people all over the world. This kind of international solidarity is important as it becomes more difficult to demonstrate and the police state grows ever stronger.

*Disclaimer: The events described above have been simplified, there are many versions of them and many may disagree with my descriptions. The debate over the use of violence by some groups and individuals is a difficult one that I intentionally do not touch on. It may seem that there were lots of 'nice' demonstrators in Gothenburg who got into trouble and that no one*

*was planning militant actions. This is not the case. But in the end there were really no planned illegal actions that actually occurred as far as I know; everything was in reaction to the tactics of the police who always managed to strike first.*

When this paper was written there had been about 112 court cases connected to the EU Summit. About 60 people were convicted and 40 of them were jailed. All of these people are now free. The Dutch activist Maarten Block was extradited to Sweden on the 1st of September 2004 and his trial was scheduled for the 23rd of September. The Swedish police have also wanted to have activists from Germany and Finland extradited but so far they have not been successful in this.

## RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

For more info and reading check out:

\*Swedish Anarchist Black Cross:

[www.abc-sweden.org](http://www.abc-sweden.org)

\*Support Maarten Website:

[www.steuemaarten.org/englishhome.htm](http://www.steuemaarten.org/englishhome.htm)

\*'What's Really Under Those Cobblestones? Riots as Political Tools, and the Case of Gothenburg 2001': [www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/4-2/4-2mueller.pdf](http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/4-2/4-2mueller.pdf)

\*Another personal account of Gothenburg 2001:

<http://koti.welho.com/thonkasa/Gotis/index.html>

\*AFA Sweden's post-Gothenburg

statement: <http://gbg2001.motkraft.net/>

\*Local Gothenburg newspaper articles:

[www.gp.se/gp/jsp/Crosslink.jsp?d=193](http://www.gp.se/gp/jsp/Crosslink.jsp?d=193)

...and last but not least, try to find the documentary: *Terrorists: The Kids They Sentenced* by Stefan Jarl and Lukas Moodyson:

[www.filmfestival.gr/docfestival/2004a/jarl.html](http://www.filmfestival.gr/docfestival/2004a/jarl.html)

and: [www.imdb.com/title/tt0374272/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0374272/)

