

J18 1999

OUR RESISTANCE IS AS TRANSNATIONAL AS CAPITAL



Liverpool Street Station, London. 12:30pm, June 18th 1999

JUNE 18th 1999 was an international day of protest, action and carnival, timed to coincide with the meeting of the G8 (Group of Eight, most industrialised nations) Summit in Köln, Germany. Organised under the slogan “Our Resistance is as Transnational as Capital”, there was a massive build up to the day, starting with a call to action “aimed at the heart of the global economy: the financial centres and banking districts”.

On the day there were protests in over 40 countries. Over 10,000 people took to the streets of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, at the same time as over 10,000 people occupied the City of London in the UK. The heart of the beast was transformed into a carnival and a riot, which caused millions of pounds worth of physical damage (though apparently financial trading did not miss a beat). It was a fantastic day...

I was involved in mobilising for June 18th from October 1998 onwards and these are my recollections of that process. It's just one person's perspective. There are many others to read, and thousands unwritten. The pamphlet *Reflections on June 18th* is a good place to start. It was written soon after the event and contains some interesting comment and analysis.

THE IDEA

The idea began in the UK, ten months before the event, with the Global Street Party (Birmingham G8 Summit in 1998, coinciding also with the World Trade Organisation Meeting in Geneva). There were street parties and actions in more than 70 cities across the globe.

The main objective behind the J18 mobilisation was to bring together many diverse groups and movements around the world, to recognise that their issues and campaigns are global: whether you are campaigning for workers rights, wilderness defence, the environment, or animal rights; or against the arms trade, sweatshops, third world debt, or whatever; your fight is against global capitalism and neo-liberalism.

This objective was reflected in the name “June 18th 1999” which was chosen to be as neutral as possible: not restricting the mobilisation to any one political position or geographical location. The G8 wasn't really the issue. Though it was timed to coincide with the Summit, I don't remember really thinking about them much. Our battle was with global finance.

The excitement created by the J18 idea reflected a real change in people's political approach in the UK. To put it very, very crudely, it was part of a switch

from ‘anti-roads’ to ‘anti-capitalism and anti-globalisation’, inspired by the People's Global Action Network, the Zapatistas, and the experiences of the anti-MAI (Multilateral Agreement on Investment) campaign and the Global Street Party.

THE STRUCTURES

The main organising for June 18th was done in open monthly meetings that happened in London, and in the weekly London Reclaim the Streets (RTS) meetings. There were usually between 30 and 100 people at these meetings. The work was done in ‘working groups’. A list of working groups produced for feedback to a RTS meeting in April 1999 included:

- International Networking
- National Networking
- Accommodation
- Legal
- Media
- Website
- Radio
- Publicity/Agit-Prop
- Handbook
- Critical Mass
- Post-Action Party
- Follow on



In front of the LIFFE building

It is interesting that 'Finance' is not on this list. There must have been a lot of money behind June 18th just to cover all that printing! Some funds (though not nearly enough) came from benefit gigs and fundraising, but there were also substantial, anonymous donations and the whole financial process was shrouded in secrecy. This was partly necessary, to protect the groups that gave us money, especially as we did not know what repression might follow the event. But I think it was a problem because there was a lack of transparency, which created a *de facto* 'inner circle'.

I would also add 'Logistics' to this list. The logistics group was the only central J18 working group that was closed. I wasn't in it, so I can't say very much about it, but it was the group that dealt with the big carnival: where to hold it, and how to move the crowd to get there. This group was closed for security reasons. The state and the police always try to stop RTS actions from happening, and we knew they were very sensitive about the 'Square Mile' (the nickname given to London's financial district), so it was accepted that the logistics of how the action would happen had to remain a well kept secret.

BELIEVING OUR OWN HYPE...

June 18th wouldn't have happened if we hadn't believed our own hype. There was so much creativity; such ambition. I remember someone suggested that the signal to move so many thousands of people should be projected onto the clouds - it was rejected because "it's never cloudy on a Reclaim the Streets". There were even plans to do a fly-by

leaflet drop on the City, to damage their morale and link the financial centre to the Kosova war. We almost had the pilot and the plane sorted, but we heard that airspace over the city is restricted (because it's so near the City airport) so we couldn't do it. We were insane really!

The very idea of an international day of action in financial centres was extremely ambitious. To pull it off in London we needed to mobilise thousands of people on a weekday. Even at 11am on June 18th we still thought that the police would close the 'ring of steel' (the name given to the security check points that encircle the City of London) and no one would get anywhere near the Square Mile. But we just went for it anyway. The theory was, if we hyped it enough, it would work, and we made it into an historical event before it had even happened. There was even a movie trailer, with Hollywood special effects cut together with activist video footage: "June 18th 1999 - you'll wish you were there..."

PUBLICITY AND EDUCATION WORK

Over a quarter of a million flyers, stickers and posters were produced by the central organising group in London alone in the run up to the event. Local groups and single issue campaigns produced their own publicity too: "Animal Abuse is as Transnational As Capital" and "Smash the Arms Trade!! June 18th 1999, City of London".

There was also a lot of time and effort put into education work, making the links between global finance and the world's wrongs. Corporate Watch and RTS worked together to produce *Squaring Up to the Square Mile*, a small booklet explaining global finance in

simple terms: why it should be targeted and where those targets might be found, with a colourful map insert of the City of London. There was also a list of institutions providing finance to corporations that might already be the target of campaigns. Talks and video showings were held around the country.

30,000 copies of *Evading Standards* were also made for the day. Based on a newspaper produced for an RTS action in 1997, this was a spoof of the *Evening Standard*, designed to catch people out, thinking it was the real newspaper. On the inside it was freeform agit-prop.

THE INTERNET

At the time there was a lot of mainstream media crap about the new 'internet activists'. It was even alleged that the whole J18 process was organised via the net by people in Köln, while people in London organised the Köln demonstrations. Of course, this is quite ridiculous. The vast bulk of the work done to prepare for J18 was good old-fashioned legwork. There were hundreds of thousands of leaflets to distribute and hours of face-to-face meetings. The international and national networking groups spent hours stuffing envelopes and posting snail mail letters to groups around the country and around the world, to get them involved.

That said, we did make considerable use of the internet and it was - and is - vital to international networking as we know it. (There's been a lot written about this, so I'll spare you). The central organising group met only once a month, so e-mail was used extensively to communicate between meetings. Texts for publications such as *Squaring Up to the Square Mile* and *Evading Standards* were all co-edited by groups of people, passing the texts back and forward via e-mail, with changes and suggestions.

There was also an international e-mail discussion list, which was a total nightmare! It was dominated by individuals from the global North who seemed to have nothing better to do than sit at their PCs flooding our inboxes with utter garbage political debate. Frankly we should have been much clearer about what the list was for and then just kicked anyone off who didn't stick to that. I think we were uncomfortable about being authoritarian and out of order, but the reality is that some positive discrimination in favour of groups with less internet access (for example those in the global South)

would have made the list far more egalitarian and constructive.

Perhaps the most exciting use of the internet was the media working group's Indymedia project.

MEDIA

'The Media Debate' is a perennial thorn in the side of activist movements, at least in the UK. There is a fierce contradiction between the desire to get our message out and a total hatred of working with the scum capitalist press, who twist our words, ignore the issues and publish names and photos that could get people sent to jail.

A group of people wanted to work on media stuff: others wanted to have nothing to do with the media. I remember the debates got quite tedious and entrenched very quickly. In the end it was sort of accepted that some people were going to do media (and other people were going to disapprove) so there wasn't much point arguing about it: a media working group was formed. This isn't a very satisfactory resolution of the issue, but it was a quick fix that wasn't too much of a disaster.

The main thing the media group did was a web-based video streaming project. There was a media centre in London, working together with groups in Australia. For the first time, reports of global events were transmitted over the internet. Street reporters on bikes and motorbikes roved the City, taking footage and couriering it back to be put straight out on the net, using innovative software that later became the backbone of the Indymedia network.

We also made considerable use of the borderline alternative/mainstream magazine *The Big Issue* in the run up to the event. It was sort of a trade off: we gave interviews and information, and they published a feature edition on the protests. It included a lot of total crap, but it got the important information (meet-up times and places, basic issues and website address for more information) out to their estimated four million readership.

After the event, the media impact was phenomenal. The story just didn't drop out of the press for months afterwards. right wing headlines screamed: "Hate Filled Anarchists Destroy City of London". The liberal press lamented, somewhat less accurately, that a few misguided anarchists had hijacked a really rather nice drop the debt demonstration (they never did get it!). After the initial shockwaves had died

down, the term 'anti-capitalist' was wrenched from the realms of the old left and became this exciting new phenomenon discussed in all the broadsheet comment and analysis pages.

Then began a trial by media; the naming and 'shaming' of the 'leaders' of the movement. Some people (foolishly, I believe) agreed to do interviews about their role; these were (unsurprisingly) twisted and used against them and others. Other people were hounded by the press, doorstepped and scrutinised.

It came back again when the press had their own protest, when the police demanded that they hand over their footage of the protests for evidence purposes and they refused. (But remember, they can't be relied on to do this!!!)

Personally I think J18 was pretty painfully misrepresented in the media. They ignored, or misunderstood the "Our Resistance is as Transnational as Capital" bit, and there was little or no mention of the international nature of the event. At the end of November when anti-capitalism was back in the headlines, they failed to make the connection between J18 and the scenes coming out of Seattle.

I think it would be useful for any group working on press for a future mobilisation in the UK to take a close look at the press coverage of J18, and the actual presswork done by the media group. I think that any press release material was ignored. I also believe that the whole event would have received

little or no coverage if it hadn't been for the 'violent' scenes on the day. I believe it was actions and events which kept the issue alive in the media for a very long time, not a 'press effort' in the traditional, activist sense of a press office, press releases etc.

AUTONOMOUS DAY OF ACTIONS

The UK part of J18 was focused on the City of London - calling for people to travel from around the country and do decentralised, autonomous actions on the same day, in the same Square Mile. However, it was felt that there had to be some centralised action for people to take part in if they had come without an affinity group, without knowledge of the area or without experience of action. So, the idea for a mass Carnival Against Capitalism was born. The aim was to have autonomous actions in the morning and then come together at noon for the main event.

One criticism of the day was that the Carnival was such a massive, spectacular project that it took the steam out of the autonomous, decentralised part of the day. This worked in two ways. Firstly, many people did not want to risk arrest in the morning, because they didn't want to miss the afternoon's event. Secondly, an action on that scale required the participation of pretty much all the networked direct action affinity groups in the country to pull it off. Most people with experience of action and keyed into

A fire hydrant is opened, freeing the Walbrook river



the process ended up taking on roles; facilitating the crowd to the destination, providing sound systems etc.

Nonetheless, there was an impressive list of autonomous actions that took place in the morning, with a co-ordinated attempt to shut the City by closing tube lines and bridges at 7:30am to coincide with a Critical Mass bike ride, as well as pickets and occupations of individual financial institutions, street theatre, graffiti and paint bomb actions.

THE CARNIVAL AGAINST CAPITAL

This was a massive logistical project. The plan was to split the crowd into four groups, to confuse the police. Eight thousand carnival masks were produced in advance, 2,000 each in Red, Green, Black and Gold. On the back of the mask was a poetic text about the importance of carnival, rebellion, and masking up. There were also instructions to follow the coloured streamers that matched your mask.

There were several affinity groups with different roles to 'facilitate' the event. I think there were four groups of ten people to guide the crowd, each equipped with coloured streamers, maps and mobile phones, with instructions to find people they knew and trusted in the crowd, brief them and give them streamers. Then there were groups driving sound systems and materials in vehicles.

The night before, at least 50, probably closer to 100 people knew the plan and final destination for the Carnival, yet the police evidently did not. This suggests that, at the time at least, their power to infiltrate our networks was limited.

Of course, on the day the planned military precision of synchronised watches and funky signals was a bit of a flop. The gold masks went out too early.



The City streets are transformed by carnival

The plan to have half the crowd inside and half outside the station concourse was nearly a total disaster because of people's natural tendency to want to hang out in the sun. Half the red group just wandered off, seized by that crowd momentum that sometimes takes over, and roamed without any destination until they were quite brutally attacked by the police. The *Mission Impossible* theme tune that was our signal to move was inaudible above the crowd noise, so we had to resort to old-fashioned blast horns. The two groups that were supposed to make the first leg of their journey by underground were foiled by the police shutting down the tube, and had to navigating a haphazard route to the scene with A-Z maps. As a result the first group arrived at the scene too early and had to keep protesters off the road and traffic flowing so that the materials vans could get in!

Nonetheless, the action was a pretty spectacular success. This probably had a lot to do with the complete collapse of police communications. They had a communications structure going through one central point. This hub could not handle the traffic created when the crowd split into what was actually five groups (counting the split away red group) and police all over the Square Mile radioed in "They're here!"

It is difficult to know how much of this was down to internal police politics (inter-force rivalry between the Met and the City police meaning that actually it probably suited the Met quite nicely if the policing was a disaster). But it does show that it is impossible to underestimate the power of the unexpected. Innovative and imaginative plots to foil police attempts to stop your action happening are absolutely priceless, and really good fun too!

It is fairly typical of Reclaim the Streets events that there was an intricate and complex plan to get people to the Futures Exchange, and that was it. After that everyone (and no-one) was in control. There was no central committee directing people, despite attempts by press, police and courts to suggest there was. Some things may have been

planned by people involved in organising the event: the opening of the fire hydrants, the bricking up of the Futures Exchange doors (not the bricking in - before the place was smashed up there was actually a wall built over the door!).

Squaring Up to the Square Mile was later accused, by press and police, of directing people to destroy things. In fact, it was simply an educational tool, explaining what different institutions did and where they had their offices. But people brought their own creativity and anger.

In fact, the attack on the LIFFE building, which saw protesters getting to within just feet of the actual trading floor came as a (fantastic) surprise. One anonymous writer summed it up:

"We'd failed in our under-ambition. Unprepared, we never imagined we could get so close to occupying a trading floor in one of the City's major exchanges. We'd planned the wall, and built it. We'd planned to free the Walbrook, and done it. But we'd stopped short of planning a full-scale occupation." (*We Are Everywhere*, Verso, 2003)

The myth that spectacular events like the Carnival Against Capital just happen entirely spontaneously is, in the case of J18, just that: a myth. There was a phenomenal amount of planning that went into it. However, there was also a lot of spontaneity and for me it's that combination that made it really special. In a lot of ways I don't think any of us believed how successful it actually was, how many places and different groups took part around the world and how big a deal it became in the media and in helping to change people's thinking.

REPRESSION

We were very scared about what the fallout from J18 could be for the people involved in the organising. There was a lot of hype about finding the 'organisers' of the riot, who were portrayed as men (sic) in suits with mobile phones who instructed the crowd what to smash up. But that's just garbage: it's not what the logistics group or anyone else involved in organising actually did. The police and media did manage to target and harass a few individuals, but the overall repression of people involved in organising was relatively light.

More serious was the hunting down of people who took part in the rioting. Only 16 people were arrested on the day. Another 50 had been arrested by the end of the year. There are more CCTV cameras per square metre in the City of



Attack on the LIFFE building

London than anywhere else in the world, and 60 officers were employed full-time to go through 5,000 hours of video footage. The police set up a website, with 138 pictures, appealing for people to come forward and identify the rioters. Regular checks of the site saw people's faces disappearing and the label "Now Identified" replacing the image. One man was tracked down from DNA left in blood on a riot van.

Several people did serious time for charges linked to J18 in London and the legal and prisoner support for these people was not given the attention it deserved. Our resistance is only as strong as our prisoner support, and the state can really fuck us if we don't stand together, so I hope that any future mobilisations will learn this lesson - the same lesson as must be drawn from the far more serious repression that followed Genoa, Thessaloniki and other subsequent anti-capitalist events.

FOLLOW ON: INTERNATIONAL VS. NATIONAL NETWORKING

On the list of working groups I quoted from above there was a note at the bottom that the 'National Networking' and 'Follow On' groups were desperately in need of more people. This is very significant. Both of these groups

struggled and were kept going by people who were not so close to the *de facto* inner circle I described earlier.

The sexy, exciting part of the J18 mobilisation was the international element, and the organisation of the Carnival in London. Nowhere near as much energy or funding went into the establishing of meaningful networks at a more local level in the UK. People from outside of London were marginalised by the process, especially if they were not prepared to travel regularly to the capital.

I remember there was only *one* person in London working on the 'what next?' aspect of the event - what would happen to the hundreds of people who would hopefully be inspired by their experiences of June 18th and want to go on to do more and 'get involved'? As a result, the main problem with June 18th 1999 was that *it was just a day*.

There were follow-through projects that grew out of J18. A number of broad-based activist forums for sharing information about local radical activity flourished - The London Underground, Brighton's Rebel Alliance, NASA in Nottingham, Manchester's Riotous Assembly and several others. Some of these forums are still running but most have had a chequered history, and in general I think that the years following

J18 were not a period of strength for radical social movements in the UK.

CONCLUSIONS

There is only so much that can be learned from how J18 was organised. J18 and the many other successful and inspiring anti-capitalist events in recent history were produced by a free flowing convergence of events and political currents combined with sheer luck. The political culture of the time and place were key. To just reproduce these structures and processes, in a different context, won't produce the same results.

As we got ready on the morning of June 18th, a friend turned to me and said "I'm scared. We're intensifying struggle and we're just not ready for this..." and in a lot of ways they were right - we weren't.

It was great and inspiring to do something so momentous and crazy, but, as far as networks in the UK are concerned, it feels to me like it all sort of fizzled and burnt out in the months and years that followed. In some ways this probably wasn't our fault: in the same way that we can't just reproduce the J18 structures and have the same effect today, I'm sure there are many factors that can cause a downturn in

radical activity, most beyond our control. However, I think that if the psychology of J18 had been more focused on building networks of resistance that went *beyond* June 18th 1999, the long-term impact of the event in the UK could have been much greater.

On the other hand, at a global level, J18 was a massive success. The sheer audacity of it was vital to the future of anti-capitalist mobilisation, giving confidence to activists preparing the anti-WTO (World Trade Organisation) demonstrations in Seattle and the anti-IMF (International Monetary Fund) protests in Prague. I think that J18 is also unique in the recent history of anti-summit mobilisations. It was not focused on a single geographical location, attacking a summit: instead it targeted global finance, with decentralised actions. Any group could take part, wherever they were.

The most significant lesson I would take from J18 is the importance of pushing boundaries. It may seem obvious to say it, but one of the main strengths of the anti-capitalist movement has always been its diversity, creativity and originality. When we mobilised for J18, 'anti-capitalism' was a relatively new concept. We pulled it off because it was almost completely unexpected.

Since 1999 there have been many major anti-summit events; but, if the anti-capitalist 'movement' is going anywhere, it has got to keep moving. We have around nine months to mobilise against the G8 Summit in the UK in 2005 and I think we should be looking at where we are politically: how can we interact with the unprecedented international movement against the Iraq war? How can we work with the particular political and geographical situation we have here, in the UK? Where do we want to be a year *after* the G8 have gone? We have the opportunity to push the boundaries and make the 2005 G8 mobilisations a positive, pivotal event in the development of the global anti-capitalist movement.



Traces of Carnival prove difficult to erase. June 19th 1999, City of London

FIVE YEARS ON AND THE REPRESSION CONTINUES...

Five years on, at least two people remain in prison for their actions on J18. Rob Thaxton was sentenced to 88 months in a US jail after throwing a single rock at a cop whilst trying to avoid arrest. James Borek pled guilty in January 2004 to Section 20 Unlawful Wounding (GBH) and two violent disorder charges, plus an additional charge of skipping bail in 2000. He received a four and a half year sentence. Both would appreciate and deserve our solidarity.

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4005 Aumsville Hwy, Salem, OR
97301, USA

Donations to and information from:
AAA, PO Box 50634, Eugene, OR
97405, USA

James Borek, LL6803, HMP
Blundeston, D-108, Lowestoft, Suffolk
NR32 5BG, UK
Info: anarprisonersupp@hotmail.com

Updates about these and other prisoners are available from Brighton Anarchist Black Cross (ABC):
www.brightonabc.org.uk or
mail@brightonabc.org.uk

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

*The *Squaring up to the Square Mile* booklet containing information about how the City works, produced by Corporate Watch

during the run up to J18 is available at:
www.corporatewatch.org.uk/publications/squaringup/intro.html

**Reflections on June 18th* was a pamphlet produced post-J18 with some very interesting reflection on the politics behind the day of action. It can be found online at:
www.infoshop.org/octo/j18_reflections.html

*An excellent collection of articles about June 18th, the process behind it, what took place on the day - in the UK and around the world - can be found in *Do or Die* Issue 8, p.1-34. See:
www.eco-action.org/dod/

