

Did We 'Radicalize This'? An Insider's Look At The Quebec Protests

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Activists in Quebec City lead a powerful, creative, and fun grassroots campaign against the Summit of the Americas, the FTAA, and the hated security fence, proving that there's no need for radicals to be boring, marginalized and isolated. Much has been written about the positive response of the local population to demonstrators — black bloc militants and peaceniks alike — it is my opinion that this yearlong grassroots campaign had a lot to do with it.

Autumn 2000: When Anti-Globalization Comes Home

The media started to seriously talk about the Summit of the Americas during the spring and summer of 2000. It was just after Seattle and Quebec City's own little Seattle — the Youth Summit in February 2000, a demo that turned into a 3-hours long stand off between the riot cops and angry protestors — so the news was met with apprehension by the local population. To add to the tension, the neighborhood where the Summit was to be held — Saint-Jean-Baptiste — was smashed to pieces by young rioters twice during the 1990s, and locals, even five years later, are still entertaining vivid memories of the events. The media, then, had an easy job of playing with people's fears to swing public opinion behind the security measures, and against the protestors who were depicted as 'anarchist hooligans.' Starting in September, every 'violent' demonstration anywhere in the world made front page news with a title along the lines of: "Foretaste of the Summit of the Americas?" The media also reported any and every move of the police (and there where many!). It's not surprising, in this context, that the main local anti-FTAA coalition, OQP-2001, did every thing possible to dissociate itself from 'violence,' however, by doing this they just added more of a spotlight to what they wanted to 'combat.'

On the other hand, all this media attention sparked a lot of curiosity among people as to what it was all about. People had a lot of questions about the Summit, the FTAA and globalization in general. After all, if these 34 heads of state were to meet behind fences and closed doors, it may mean they have something to hide, no? Here, we must say that the means at the disposal of the activists — flyers, web sites, workshops, the occasional leftist booktable — seemed insignificant compared to the propaganda campaign of the mainstream media. We had no other choice than to embark on a huge popular education campaign using all of those 'insignificant means.' I won't describe all of this, but suffice to say, as early as November 2000, there were series of packed lectures on the FTAA and globalization, with more than 100 people at each. In February and March, there was more than one event scheduled a day. Workshops were given in all sorts of networks and social groups, reaching several thousands of people, from all walks of life in the Quebec City region.

However, workshops have limited appeal. People interested in these kinds of things tend to be somewhat active beforehand. We needed to reach everyone with our message. One of the first groups to try to go beyond already conscientious circles was the womens committee of OQP-2001. They formed an activist choir, 'Les Amères Noël,' mixing two old traditions: that of agit-prop street theater and that of changing the words of well-known Christmas songs. They went everywhere — shopping malls, street corners, parties, demos — to sing their radical anti-FTAA, anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist songs, and to distribute their own small informational flyers mocking the US dollar. They were also the first non-sectarian affinity group to emerge, as they wanted to bring a feminist perspective to the struggle and didn't care very much about

the rift between ‘non-violence’ and ‘diversity of tactics.’ They were met with almost immediate success.

The Campaign Against the Security Perimeter

For various historical, social and political reasons, St-Jean-Baptiste — the last ‘working class’ neighborhood of the uppertown — has been for the last 30 years a hotbed of radical activism. Some local anarchists and radicals have been active for a few years in the organization that is responsible for most of this local activism: the Comité Populaire Saint-Jean-Baptiste. The Comité Populaire is a 25-year-old community group that is part anti-poverty group, part citizens committee, and part popular education group. Although it is by no means ‘well funded,’ the organization still has a few valuable resources, including a widely read free quarterly newspaper, l’Infobourg, a weekly lecture program, l’Université Populaire, an office in the middle of the neighborhood with computers, fax and telephone, and a little bit of money.

In November, the members of the Comité Populaire decided at their general assembly to devote time, energy and resources to the struggle against the Summit of the Americas. In fact, it was decided to organize a campaign against the security measures of the Summit, to not take part in the ‘non-violence’ and ‘diversity of tactics’ rift, and take part in the struggle during the Summit itself. The Comité Populaire chose to approach the struggle against the Summit of the Americas via a struggle against the security measures because we analyzed that that was where the Summit clashed with the interests of local people. In the beginning, the issue of the fence didn’t seem to gather much attention from activists circles — many thought it was a secondary issue — however, we saw it as the main point of friction for ordinary people. Also, we saw the question of meaningless democracy and repression of political and social rights as a central issue of capitalist globalization.

The campaign against the fence began in January, when the Comité Populaire called the first meeting to organize around this issue. About 25 activists came: local people, activists from l’ADDS (a welfare rights union), and youth activists from CASA and OQP-2001. One of the most interesting things about these meetings is that organizationally everything was done collectively and democratically: sub-committees were formed and given general guide lines, and the results of their work was then adopted in general meetings which were open to all. This directly democratic process was much like what was happening in CASA, but it’s interesting that it was possible in a coalition where both “activists” and “normal people” were present.

The first thing the coalition did was to collectively decide on a plan of action. We cannot overestimate how important this was, as it gave everyone a sense of direction. In our case, while we could have been drawn into a flurry of little actions, we chose instead to focus on two big events: a public assembly and a mass action. We spent a few meetings discussing these plans of action and the political angle of the campaign. There was debate over whether we should explain the Summit and FTAA to the people we wanted to reach, or to focus on our opposition to the fence and security measures that affected the neighborhood. We finally chose to focus on the fence and to oppose it on the ground that it was an attack on basic civil rights such as freedom of expression and movement and the right to peaceful assembly and demonstrate. All of this was explained in a pamphlet that was produced by a group of activists living in the neighborhood, but of different tendencies (one from the Comité Populaire, one from OQP-2001 and one from CASA). As the

targeted audience of this pamphlet was the whole neighborhood, we decided to first print 4,500 copies, which is just slightly more than the number of doors in Saint-Jean-Baptiste...

February 2001: The Campaign Took Off

Our first target was the office where the RCMP was registering the residents and workers inside of the security perimeter. We were there distributing our leaflets and chatting with people. Different groups started to pick up the campaign and do actions around it. One night it was 'les Amères Noël', another night it was the action committee of OQP-2001, who brought banners and leaflets downtown. The different student groups also did theater in their colleges and distributed leaflets. The biggest action was by the CASA 'action committee' who organized half a dozen different teams of activists to perform street theater against the fence. They had built some 'personal perimeters' for everyone, using chicken wire, and there were fake cops trying to protect the people behind the perimeter from those who wanted to give leaflets.

Undercover cops arrested one of the teams because they didn't identify themselves when questioned. This proved to be a stupid move on the cop's behalf, as the arrest was illegal and the Comité Populaire generated a lot of media coverage. Many locals asked: "if this is how they treat activists two months before the Summit, what will it look like during the Summit?" We also made a strong point about 'freedom of expression'. After that event, everyone in downtown knew that we were distributing leaflets, and many people wanted copies (there was probably a "subversive" attraction to possessing a leaflet that the cops didn't want you to read...). Also, when we chose to go door-to-door explaining our campaign, everyone knew what we were talking about, so the reception was good.

We must say that the attitude of the authorities, especially the cops, helped us a lot. They didn't want to meet with people, or give information on the security perimeter. People were forced to turn to us for information. We just had the information that was in the news, but since we contextualized it, we looked like we were providing more information than the cops were willing to give! As for the political authorities, they didn't give a damn and basically thought we were just a bunch of troublemakers. They said it wasn't that important, and it was basically in the interest of the locals to protect them from 'anarchist hooligans'. However, since they reduced the fence size and left most of the local shops out of the perimeter, people were forced to acknowledge that it wasn't to protect 'them' but instead to protect the image of the ruling class. The arrogance of the authorities, who just didn't want to answer legitimate questions, did the rest.

On the other hand, the fact that CLAC and CASA (who were supposed to be the 'anarchist hooligans') organized a public activist tour with someone from the Comité Populaire explaining to outside activists what the neighborhood was all about, helped a lot. People saw us in the news touring the city and explaining the issues, and realized that these radical activists must not be that bad after all. Even the mayor had to acknowledge it, and change his strategy (instead of talking 'security,' he started to talk about the 'Peoples' Summit' and so on).

At the end of February, it was clear we had succeeded in making a political issue out of something that was at best an annoyance, or, at worst, a danger to the local people. At about that time the cops chose to hire a 'public relations firm', saying that they had never before encountered so much opposition. However, we didn't know at the time if, outside of the huge media impact, there was a real impact on the local population. The weekend prior to our public assembly, we

published a new leaflet specifically on the event, and started distributing it on the street (we distributed 2,000 of these). The response was good, but we definitely knew we had struck a chord on March 5th, when more than 150 locals came to our assembly. This assembly was a bit weird. Even though we had invited the cops, the Summit officials, the Human Rights League and local politicians, no ‘authorities’ came. So the panel was basically made up of five local anarchist activists from the Comité Populaire and the campaign. People in the room felt that the attitude of the authorities was a slap in the face. It ended up being a dialogue between the campaigners and the locals, exchanging points of views and analysis on repression, civil rights and globalization. The week after, the same thing happened in lower town at another public assembly called by the welfare rights’ union and another citizens committee. At this event, a hundred people showed up, and again, the ‘authorities’ didn’t. So once again, it was an activist-population dialogue about the campaign, globalization and the Summit of the Americas.

March 2001: The Burial of Civil Rights

When the campaign voted in favor of the mass action, it wasn’t clear exactly what we wanted. Obviously we wanted an action that would show opposition to the fence, but there hadn’t been a decision made between specialized direct action, huge street theater or a more traditional demo. The fact is, at the time we didn’t really know what kind of impact we would have, and so didn’t know if the action would be an opportunity for the population to show opposition, or an opportunity for the activists to do some more agit-prop. Just like other aspects of the campaign, a committee was formed of people interested in organizing the action. After much discussion, the people came back with the idea of a fake funeral. The advantage was that it was a mix between street theater and a demonstration. Also, it didn’t really matter how many people showed up, since the symbol and image would be the same whether we were 50 in the street or 200. The thing we didn’t want was another angry demonstration because we felt it would play directly into the media stereotype of activists (boring, old and cliché). So we ended up with the idea of a funeral march and the burial of civil rights.

On March 17th, people started to gather at the Parc de l’Amérique Française. There was ‘Les Amères Noël’, who were supposed to cry at the front, and sing special radical funeral songs; there were twelve special coffin bearers; there was a fake priest and so on. The CLAC had brought a bus of Montreal activists, people from various groups that worked on the campaign were there, and there ended up being some 400 locals... This was far beyond our wildest expectations (we only made 100 placards!). With about two dozen dedicated activists we managed to mobilize 400 people! This alone made it the largest local demonstration in the 25-years history of the Comité Populaire, and among the strongest of the local popular movement, past and present. The crowd was really diverse with moms and kids, older people, and a vast majority of ‘normal people’ (plus the usual ‘activists’). The march proceeded to Rue St-Jean, and then up to the Place d’Youville, where the mock funeral took place in front of the office of the Summit of the Americas. Instead of having the usual suspects from the Comité Populaire, we chose to give the microphone for the main speech to a radical feminist activist who lives in the perimeter. This way, the links between the fence, globalization, capitalism and patriarchy were made.

During the night of March 17, an affinity group applied some direct action upon the fence and tore sections down. In the snow, the group wrote with red juice the simple word “démocratie”

and left. A communiqué saying that the action was in solidarity with the march was posted to CMAQ (Quebec Indymedia) and then made it to the mainstream media. The police tried to paint this as ‘vandalism’. For those who did it, it was a way to show a ‘diversity of tactics’.

April 2001: On to the Carnival of Resistance Against Capitalism

It was during the first week of April that the fence was erected in downtown Quebec City. The people and media spontaneously called it the “Wall of Shame.” It was a shock for many people who didn’t bother much about it before. The fence in itself probably did much more than our campaign to radicalize people. From that point on there was no need for further agitation against the fence. New graffiti appeared every day. People and groups in Saint-Jean-Baptiste took it on themselves to redecorate the fence and put all kind of objects on it.

On our side, at the Comité Populaire, we were moving on to the mobilization for the Carnival of Resistance Against Capitalism itself. Most of us were active in CASA, and it never crossed our minds that the Comité Populaire could organize something during the Summit itself. To us the job of the Comité Populaire was more or less over. However, that’s not how the folks in the neighborhood saw it. For them it seemed our job was just beginning... They wanted us to organize something during the Summit on the main street of the neighborhood. They wanted a ‘green zone’ demonstration/street party directly at the edge of the fence on St-Jean! Frankly, we didn’t even think it was possible. That’s probably where we stopped trying to radicalize people, and started getting radicalized ourselves. Our own idea of what was, and was not, possible to do as a ‘community group’ changed dramatically when we realized that a sizable number of people wanted us to organize our own part of the Carnival with them. That’s also when, personally, I realized that it was maybe more radical for me to be in the middle of the neighborhood, with locals, then in the ‘red zone’ (a shock in itself!).

The problem was that most of the people with whom we worked with during the campaign against the fence had other engagements. We had to change the team a bit. That’s where years of involvement in the neighborhood, working around various issues with all kinds of people — single moms, working poor, artists, youths, merchants, etc. — proved to be essential. In less than two weeks, we mobilized a new group to organize our ‘green zone’ activities. The response was inspiring: dozens of people took it upon themselves to organize and staff a free food table, an infoshop, a place for kids, different musical events, and so on. On the other hand we were able to produce a special 16-page issue of the Comité’s newspaper, and distribute 9,000 copies of it door-to-door the weekend before the Summit. In this newspaper we tried to explain everything we thought was important to understand the opposition to the Summit. We had articles explaining ‘diversity of tactics’ and the system of three color zones, the non-reformist approach, the links between globalization and welfare reform, the Black Bloc, and so on. And of course a front-page article urging people to take to the streets and “occupy the neighborhood.” Judging from the number of phone calls we received during the week, it was well received.

The ‘green zone’ on Saint-Jean was a smashing success. Thousands of locals showed up, many feeling so safe they even came with their kids. It was also used by at least three different affinity groups to carry non-violent symbolic actions (which probably wouldn’t have happened otherwise). That’s where the ‘women’s action’ took place, that’s also where the toilet paper was thrown by the clown bloc. This said, we did make a few compromises while organizing it. The

biggest is that we felt that, as organizers, we had a responsibility to do whatever was possible to ensure that it was a safe place for everyone. Although we knew that in reality this wouldn't necessarily make the place any safer, we did communicate to the police that this was a 'green zone' where trouble was not expected. We didn't ask for a permit, but they gave us one anyway. We also organized a 'security team' which scouted the whole city to know where the riot squads were all day. One compromise was that, although it was an anti-capitalist day of actions, we did collaborate with the merchants on the street and tried to ensure their collaboration. This way, many boarded storefronts became free expression billboards. The action wasn't 'pure,' but we think all of it was worth the price.

June 2001: Back To The Future

In the past, I've often felt that to many anarchists 'radicalizing social movements' meant organizing a black bloc, doing a direct action, building a 'pure' anarchist mobilization, or having a lot of black flags at the end of the demo. This is not what we did in Quebec City, in fact we made a lot of compromises, but I still think we helped to radicalize a lot of people. Of course, the events in themselves radicalized people, but I think our campaign and involvement explaining the issues at hand had a lot to do with it.

This experience however brings a lot of questions with it. As a federation, NEFAC's strategy is based on involvement in the class struggle, to push for the autonomy of the class, and to radicalize — in the sense of going to the root of problems — social movements. We say that this involvement can be autonomous, like in a black bloc, or as direct participants in a movement. In this case we chose the latter. Our involvement in CASA and Comité Populaire helped to popularize anarchist principles and methods, however, since we are not supermen and superwomen, our specifically anarchist intervention suffered. To put it clearly one cannot be at the same time at the forefront of a struggle and at the back in a red and black bloc.

If we are to be successful in what we want to do as a federation, that is influence the struggle of our class, we will be confronted with this more often. Sooner or later we will have to answer the burning question of the day: what is more important, building a mass libertarian movement with all its contradictions, or having a smaller but pure anarchist 'movement' (be it with leaflets, black blocs, direct actions or whatever)? Indeed, what is more important: the movement or its anarchist component.

Of course, both are important. But still, we have to know where our priorities are. And for the moment, unless we grow or get better organized, we cannot always do both.

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