

Birmingham G8 Street Party 1998

Contents

- **Introduction** –Why this booklet has been put together and what we hope to achieve.
- **From a Good idea.... to a nightmare** – A brief run down of the events leading up to the decision to a G8 street party.
- **Listen Carefully** – The bit where we try to bring together points and ideas which may be useful to others mad enough to do something similar.
- **The State of G8** – A look at police activity at the party
- **Party Politics** – A longer-term perspective on the role of street parties and their relevance to political and social change.
- **Ranting and Raving** – People getting things off their chest...

Introduction

May 1998 saw a global street party take place in Birmingham to coincide with the G8 summit being hosted in the city. This document has been put together by a group of people involved in making the party happen to try and do several things:

- Help other people learn from our mistakes and set backs
- Stop the need for people putting on street parties to keep re-inventing the wheel
- Help street parties be a relevant and effective part of the political process
- Stop parties disappearing up their own fundamentals and instead move forward boldly and heroically towards glorious eco-anarcho utopia

The general public still don't know what street parties are about. As reported in the Birmingham press the G8 event was put on by sinister anarchists who hate cars and like trouble – end of story. Most 'normal' people either don't know street parties exist or are alienated by a crowd of dodgy looking characters swigging cans in the middle of the day in the middle of a road. Smaller, local street parties show that it doesn't always have to be that way – we need to do more than just perpetuate our exciting sub-culture. This document is intended to provoke discussion. [In many ways we are lucky because we have created a medium in which to convey our thoughts. A right to reply is perhaps essential and any comments on what we have written may perhaps be best channelled either through EF! Action Update or Reclaim the Street in London]

From a Good idea.... to a nightmare

In the autumn of 1997 a handful of activists started to talk about the May 1998 G8 Summit. It seemed an opportunity not to be missed – world leaders meeting in the UK and the chance to kick start the debate on globalisation. Our aim at this stage was simply to do 'something', with a clear idea that the 'something' had to involve and inspire a wide range of people and had to be very political, sending out a clear message of discontent to the G8 leaders. There was also a consensus that we did not want to organise a conference/gathering as the People's Summit fulfilled that role extremely well. Our experience and that of others was that activist go to events organised as alternatives to global summits and leave feeling frustrated and disempowered. We wanted some action, and action that involved large numbers of people.

As a result of meeting with activists in Birmingham, other groups working around the G8 Summit, and speaking at length to campaigners we knew and respected some clear ideas

emerged and the 'something' began to take shape. We decided at this stage to do two things:

- Co-ordinate a mass event in which anyone could be involved and which would be a huge show of popular support for the anti-G8/globalisation/MAI agenda.
- Facilitate lots of smaller discrete and discreet actions to disrupt the G8 Summit

Until very late in the day we continued to try and fulfil both these aims but, ultimately, meeting the first jeopardised being able to carry out the second. As an affinity group we were inexperienced at organising big national actions and found it difficult to come up with an 'idea' that met all our criteria. It was extremely important to us that a wide range of people be involved in the event, it had to be positive and creative, we wanted to take direct action and above all we wanted to be BIG. All the arrows seemed to point towards a street party and this had a dramatic effect on our group.

The first step was to bring on board activists with more experience of working on large-scale actions. This meant a bigger affinity group and approaching the people who we felt knew most about street parties – Reclaim the Streets (RTS) in London.

This last move triggered a chain of events that was hugely stressful and a steep learning curve. Above all the security implications of working with RTS in London meant that one of our affinity group withdrew and we adopted ways of working that were closed and secretive.

It was not until mid-April that the decision was finally taken by all involved to go all out for a street party. The decision had been delayed by, among other things, us feeling very strongly that we needed practical support from London RTS and them having difficulties meeting that need. Ultimately decisions were taken across three cities with one co-ordinating group that shouldered most of the responsibility. Other affinity groups were set up to deal with different aspects of the party, many of these having to drop plans for smaller covert actions on the summit in order to help out at the party. It was this 'swallowing' of activists that was the most detrimental to our initial plans for the G8 summit. The logistical nightmare that is a street party effectively precluded many other actions from taking place and thus prevented more effective disruption of the G8 event.

With only a month to go we were a small affinity group with the following credentials:

- No experience of planning a nation action
- None of us lived in Birmingham, the venue for the summit/party
- Many of us were busy with other things and unable to devote ourselves to the project 100%
- We had no money, office or resources
- We had never worked together as a group before

This core group had come together because of a bizarre combination of chance, personal friendship, shared political goals and perhaps misfortune! And we had one big fuck off event to get together in five weeks.

Listen Carefully

Security

We were convinced of the existence of a large and well co-ordinated counter party operation. We believed and were led to believe by others that a street party in the same city as a meeting between eight of the world's most 'powerful' men would be sabotaged by the states. We all accepted this and acted as if we were under 24hr surveillance, prepared to be 'picked off' at any moment. A few days before the event this was indeed happening to the 'organisers' of other street parties and one of our sound systems was busted the night before the party. What is unclear however is whether the police were on to the sound system or took a lucky guess. There was one confirmed report of the police watching a property linked to the

street party by the house is a base for many political campaigns and the relevance of the surveillance is dubious.

As a group we employed a number of security tactics which may or may not have had an impact on the success of state operations. Measures which we employed and are highly recommended include using 'shadows' for all the key individuals who remained anonymous unless needed; codenames for all equipment, crews, locations and certain people; separate travel arrangements for key individual; safe houses to work from and accommodation nearer the time which were unused by campaigners; monitoring police activity; rumour spreading; disguises; not communication over private/known phones; closed meetings and more.

Structure

The party was coordinated by a team of people representing three cities, with people in one city carrying out the majority of the work. We had never worked together before, and most of us had not even met before the street party planning got underway. This meant that we did not know what we could realistically expect of each other. We should have defined what everyone was going to do right at the beginning (of course, working verbally and not writing things down for security reasons leads to unavoidable occurrences of misinterpretation or selective memory loss) and formed some way of holding one another accountable.

We had asked for the backing of London RTS as a whole but until close to the day only had help from a few individuals who were, in any case, up to their necks in other global street party stuff. It was difficult to motivate people so late in the day, particularly when the geographical distances involved between the three cities meant that meetings were regular but infrequent, unwieldy and more about reporting than creative input.

The timescale of the planning meant that we were always rushed and this meant that we made no space for time to sit down and assess our individual and group strengths and weaknesses. If this had been done we would have dealt better with times of stress and perhaps allocated roles and responsibilities. Someone with responsibility for press, publicity, money, outreach etc would have worked more effectively, particularly with a well-defined time table of what needed doing in that area. By taking on so many roles within our small group we were forced to sacrifice things close to our hearts such as visual stuff and more local oriented press work.

Although working across three cities was beset with problems it was also a valuable learning experience. Several of the key people involved were relatively new to activism and entered upon a steep learning curve... there's nothing like being thrown in at the deep end. Working with London RTS was illuminating in that it is very easy to assume they know everything there is to know about putting on a party. When we first approached them they were very firm about their experience and skills being local i.e. relevant to London. Although their help in specific areas was invaluable it was empowering to learn that they couldn't pull rabbits out of hats and actually anyone can pull off a party if they want to badly enough.

Publicity

Some excellent artwork and design made for memorable publicity but coordinating its distribution is probably best forgotten. The three-city split meant that posters and fliers needed to be couriered and this relied on messages and request being passed on...after a week of leaving messages we received 2,000 posters the day before the party! One group took responsibility for networking the event to activists; another for wider networking to e.g. free party types, and another was responsible for local publicity. This system broke down essentially because of lack of communication - is Birmingham Friends of the Earth a local contact or activist contact? Is talking to music press part of wider networking or should it be done by someone with general press experience?

Publicity to the local community and their active involvement in the event was something we were committed to from the outset. A series of hiccups, lunched commitments and so on meant this did not happen - it would be interesting to know what proportion of party goers on the day were local people. The failure to interact with the local community was perhaps the greatest missed opportunity of the whole comedy of errors!

Decorations

We always knew that with such a big venue located on one of the ugliest roundabouts in one of the ugliest cities in the UK, decorations were going to affect the atmosphere of the party. Banners were designed and made in two cities but with one team less experienced and working on theirs before any decision had been made about the final venue. This meant that they were not ideal for the final location despite being some of the most beautiful and colourful banners ever seen at a street party.

Having banners made was not the end of the story, however, and teams of people to put them up was the next hurdle to overcome. Climbers who were experienced enough and sorted enough to be briefed beforehand were few and far between, especially as our security consciousness meant that we worked only with known and trusted people. As a result a number of stunning banners never made it up including one of my favourites which declared

Gyr8 if you're ir8 about G8

Many of those which did make it up did not have holes to let the wind through, and as a result got ripped. Eyelets did not work either in the wind – much better to fold the banner over top and bottom and sew it, then run a rope right through.

Entertainment

A great deal of effort was put into making this street party not just another techno sound system affair... yet to many people it was and this is a disappointment. The reasons for this failure are many fold and include things being lunched, people dropping out at the last minute, acts being poached by Jubilee 2000 (the cancel the debt campaign staging a protest in Birmingham on the same day), people not being prepared to take responsibility for things, vehicles getting struck in traffic and so on!

However, to set the record straight, and hopefully to inspire others here are some of the things that we nearly pulled off...

A gospel choir, a kids area with clowns, face paints, giant building blocks and so on; a huge Trojan badger (Monty Python style), an acoustic stage complete with PA and several performers, street theatre, a samba band, juggling workshops, information stalls, food stalls, Frisbees, clown costumes, custard pies, a mime artist, and 4 different sound systems.

Many performers turned up and made the party entertaining so a big thank you to them. Maybe we should just trust that will happen and not try to plan anything?

The State of G8

There were some great comic scenes of police incompetence, including them surrounding the small sound system (disguised as a family car) and escorting it into the middle of the party. They never once asked why the 'frightened family' inside wanted to escape by deliberately driving the wrong way around the roundabout *towards* the crowd. By the time they realised their mistake it was all too late... the decks were under the travel blankets, boys. What threw you off the scent? The baby seat or the toys? Or did you not believe a deck could be parked in an NCP car park so blatantly close to the venue? No car parks in Birmingham City Centre were searched on that day to the best of our knowledge, the police perhaps believing that the rig they had successfully nicked the night before was the only one.

Other questions arise. The police could easily have prevented the crows from congregating at the meeting point, but in the end took only limited action and failed totally to prevent us reclaiming the street. We had anticipated the use of crowd control barriers at the meeting point (Birmingham New Street Station) or the invocation of station bylaws – neither were employed.

It does appear that someone high ranking had sanctioned the party in a contained format, yet some officers still insisted on taking the piss and attacking the thinner parts of the crowd. At

one particularly silly moment about 12 coppers, male and female, dressed in short-sleeved uniforms, marched straight into the party and headed for the sound system. Some turned back when the crowd got nasty but 6 of them followed their superior officer into the melee, marched straight past the car with the sound system in it and out through the other side of the party. Why? Two officers that lost their nerve when confronted by a bottle wielding nutter had to be almost carried out by two party goers. The officer who had ordered them in only called off a baton charge to search for the two coppers after a helicopter search. Some one could have been killed. What the fuck were they playing at? Answers on a post card to the police complaints authority, please.

On the whole we probably overestimated the capabilities of the police. Our conviction that any public or private place within a good two mile radius of the G8 venue would attract high security meant we went to elaborate lengths to hid and disguise our sound systems and other party equipment. In fact the rozzers were stunningly unobservant (see tripods- remove?), but did close roads pretty promptly, trapping three sound systems outside the party.

Thinking the way the police might think was certainly very time consuming but it meant we covered most eventualities. The whole G8 experience has certainly convinced us that the boys in blue need to recruit more strategic thinkers....

Party Politics

One of the criticisms I have most heard voiced about the G8 Street Party was its lack of politics and my response has always been 'yes that's true'. When I sat down and started constructively analysing the event, however, I was stuck by how political we HAD been.

The political motives behind the Birmingham Street Party were, I believe, clear. It coincided with the G8 Summit because we wanted to give a big two fingers to everything those G8 leaders epitomise – globalisation, greed, global warming, genocide, growth. Early publicity for the street party sported the line 'Reclaim the Summit', an image which was dropped because it implied a wish to be part of the summit, part of those decision, part of the charade. Rather, the people from across the UK who gathered in Birmingham took control of a space and turned it into something better, and they did this without having to engage with the summit. It was a practical demonstration of our political message. (I have, however, spoken to people who refuse to acknowledge that the street party was anything whatsoever to do with G8 – an extreme case of not letting the state set the agenda!).

The simple act then of reclaiming a street is hugely political, yet somehow I still feel we were not political enough. This feeling comes from wanting to create ways in which the politics are explored, made exciting, explained. Birmingham had an agenda that went beyond simply reclaiming a space.

Our aims included increasing people's understanding of the role of the G8 states and raising awareness of the insidious way trans- national corporations are implicated in every detail of our lives. We painted banners that tried to put across this message (many never went up), a superb piece of agit prop was distributed (although too few found their way into the hands of ordinary Birmingham residents), and we spoke to the press about globalisation and G8 (and inevitably what they reported was traffic jams and bottle throwing). Inane grins were flyposted over Birmingham City Council's sycophantic adverts welcoming the G8 leaders in the week leading up to the party, and hundreds of clowns laughed at the idea of eight men in suits telling us what to do.

Yet to the average person on the streets of Birmingham the party was little more than a bunch of dread-locked, pierced and aggressive nutters taking drugs, making a mess and disrupting their Saturday shopping trip. I am in no doubt that the G8 leaders were acutely aware of the political nature of our actions just as I know they will never acknowledge this (I am also confident we were responsible for their decision to relocate to a country retreat for Saturday's 'discussions' and croquet). The question which must be asked, however, is 'whom do we most want/need to communicate with?' A street party is immensely political and the

politicians understand this because that is the game they play. But change will never come from them. If we are to achieve political change we must communicate effectively with the partygoers, and ever more importantly, those who hide at home.

I think that politicising a street party, or similar event, is something we all need to learn to do more effectively. It is hugely empowering for someone who always walks on the pavement to step into the road, but for most people that is where it ends. To achieve lasting change we must keep that person in the road, keep them dancing and start them thinking. For me, street parties are very much about a formula – bring in a sound system, put up a few banners, sell a few burgers and hey presto you have reclaimed a street. This formula will not work forever – indeed it is already growing stale. We must explore new ways of keeping people in the streets, challenge the idea of single issue politics (a street party is not just about traffic and pollution), and not be afraid of prioritising the politics. Maybe the next street party you go to will have workshops instead of a sound system?

Ranting and Raving

At about 9.30pm on May 16th 1998 I was with a group of friends leaving Birmingham City Centre. I was knackered, confused, elated, pissed off and very much in need of a pint. One of my friends turned to me and said ‘I can’t believe how appallingly that party was organised. There was no co-ordination, people were alienated and basically gave the go-ahead for a riot’. I have a great deal of respect for this person and her views and believe that all her criticisms need addressing. However, at that moment in time all I needed was some support.

This incident summed up for me one of the fundamental problems of our movement – an inability to truly work together. People with a whole spectrum of different agendas, skills, ideas, motivations and beliefs make up the movement for political and social change in this country. This is bound to create difficulties but if we can overcome these difficulties it is also what gives us power. Yet we are unable to co-operate, unable to take people at face value and unable to simply celebrate what we have in common. We will never be effective because we cannot prioritise what we share, but instead focus on where we disagree - be it the use of violence, accountability, or whether we should even discuss anything. And our inability to support one another as people and friends, even if we do not totally agree 100% with what someone is doing, is symbolic of this.

One of the reasons that the idea of a street party is so exciting and radical is that in theory, if not always in practise, it is about bringing everyone together. Yet in so many ways the Birmingham Street Party failed to do this. Any post event analysis, therefore, must look at this failure, and look at it in a way which talks about effectiveness, moving forward and creating real change.

I have since spent a great deal of time regretting the violence which I personally felt spoil the street party. I have argued with people about whether non-violent revolution is a contradiction in terms. And I have listened to people I admire and respect arguing that rather than learning about alternatives to violence, activists should be learning how to fight. But above all I have spent a great deal of time feeling very frustrated by the people who claim to be bored of the ‘violence/non-violence debate’. This again is indicative of unwillingness/inability to move forward by focussing on what we have in common, rather than on areas about which we will probably never agree. By essentially stifling debate and refusing to listen to others we become as bad, if not worse than the state we are trying to bring down.

I have been a political activist for almost ten years and I am still learning, still listening and, yes, still getting frustrated about the violence/non-violence debate. But at the heart of my politics is an inherent respect for people. This doesn’t mean that I agree with or even like everyone I come into contact with. But it does mean that I am prepared to listen and this is something I believe we do not do enough of.

Perhaps part of the problem is a lack of appropriate forum within which to have constructive dialog and within which we can trust everyone. Experience has taught us often to be

distrustful, secretive, cliquy, and on the defensive. Yet if we are to achieve real mass political change we need to promote exactly the opposite way of working. So, someone who wants to put the case for non-violent or violent action should feel safe and supported in doing so, and someone who wants to debate the role of accountable or covert action should be able to do so without feeling mocked, marginalized or judged.

Lets face it, if everyone involved fucks up just once during the planning and execution of a street party, that's a lot of fuck ups to iron out.... solution: Never trust a hippy. Other things we knew would happen *and did* has to include the arrival of the merry bottle thrower....

OK so it's inevitable that a party next to a market of little rotten veg is going to get thrown, but the innocent veg throwing obviously wound up the cops. Its OK if you know they are just going to stand there and take it but if you have been pelted with tomatoes for 4 hours wouldn't *you* retaliate? By the time it turned to bottles they didn't think twice about wading in. If people can't resist the temptation to do something that is a time honoured tradition i.e. chucking fruit, they shouldn't be surprised when the police respond with what for them is a time honoured tradition i.e. caving skulls. Umm I thought a society without brutal state control would require a small amount of *self-control*? Or, dare I say it, self-discipline. When do we start living with respect? When we start showing it. When do we take control? When we show it. Now is that at the *fruit* stage or the *glass* stage? Now or, err, maybe later? After one more innocent head is hit, or a million? Anyway, enough, said. The missile throwing meant that the party ended sooner than planned, so well done everyone who contributed to that! Now, I can't be doing with the lecturing tone any longer, I'm off to mindlessly torch someone else's car in the middle of a penned in crowd of party goers. Because I can.

Unfortunately, when people say they're going to do things, this doesn't mean they can be safely left to get on with them. It's necessary to do tedious follow ups, like making them confirm what they're doing, making them say when they will do it, and letting them know that it is essential that they do what they say they will (otherwise known as hassling). Everyone, but everyone, lunched out some of what they took on, sometimes because of simply having too much to do and sometimes as a result of not really understanding the importance of a job. Hassling can help convey this importance and how their reputation will suffer irreparable damage if they don't deliver. However, it is hugely time consuming for the people doing the nagging and often irritating for the people being nagged. Perhaps we need to be more honest about what we are capable of achieving and take responsibility seriously.

JUBILEE 2000

A summer article in Peace News, to which we responded at the time, regretted the lack of communication that went on between Jubilee 2000 and the street party organisers. Jubilee 2000 were organising a huge protest against third world debt in Birmingham on the same day at the party. Here, just to set the record straight is a bit of information:

- The time and location of the street party were changed on more than one occasion so as not to detract from the J2000 event.
- J2000 put undue pressure on one of our bands that was also appearing as part of their event not to play at the party.
- A small number of individual in J2000 risked their jobs to convey information to us, recognising that we were on the same side. Others, however, had fallen hook line and sinker for the police story that we were intent on sabotaging their event and causing a public safety crisis.
- Many party folk took part in J2000 chain of debt and we actively encouraged as many people as possible to do so. Similarly, many of them came on to the party afterwards.

- Debt in the third world is about capitalism and globalisation. The car culture is about capitalism and globalisation. We should have more in common that to argue about.
- J2000 had a policy to ban anyone publicising the street party during their protest.

Many, many people made the Birmingham G8 street party possible – thank you to them all. In particular we want to ceremoniously award certificates of soundness to the following people: our top techno bod; the bloke whose local knowledge helped us to stash tripods; everyone sat in a house in Brum on Friday night panicking about accommodation; at least one friendly NGO, our stewards, crews, scouts and friends; everyone who helped save a camera man from being lynched; the traction engine; all the tripod crews, especially the one that got nicked; our shadows; and the dear people who took us away on holiday to recover!