

Prague (2000)

IMF and World Bank /Prague 2000

INPEG

Twenty thousand world bankers, economists and financiers gathered in Prague in September 2000 for the 55th Annual Summit of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group. This prestigious meeting of the economic elite -- the first of its kind in Central and Eastern Europe -- continued to conduct business as usual...until thousands of international protesters filled the streets of Prague to give them a reality check.....

INPEG (Initiative against Economic Globalisation) was set up to facilitate and support actions around this Summit. This text is designed to provide an insight into their organisation. It is partly a summary of detailed and very informative working group reports that are structured around the questions: what we did, what worked, what didn't work and lessons for future mobilisations. They are highly recommended and can be found at the INPEG website (details below). This text, written with three years of hindsight, is intended to highlight the problems, which occurred. It does not mean to detract from the overall successes of the protest and process.

How was INPEG set up?

After the success of the WTO protests in Seattle it was clear to activists working on anti-capitalist issues that it was crucial for Europe to mobilise around a big event. The IMF and World Bank meeting in Prague in September 2000 was the next target. The initiative for a protest came from outside the Czech Republic by various people working with the People's Global Action (PGA) at that time. From very early on there were major problems, especially logistical, because the idea had come from a small number of individuals and not a movement with a strong social base. A number of times the question was raised as to what INPEG was and how it worked. The reality was that INPEG never had a collective identity or strove to have one. It existed purely for the practical purpose of bringing people together to work under a banner towards the logistics of the demonstrations. There was never ever a question of INPEG carrying on after the protests.

The Czech situation at that time consisted of fragmented and very small groups who were not used to working together. INPEG was made up of anarchist/socialist and ecological groups and at this time consisted of around 5 core people and around 15 others who were less involved. The INPEG group was being supported from outside Czech, mostly from Amsterdam, with help fund raising and looking for internationals to come and participate. The first internationals arrived in April and May, followed by many more in July and August. International involvement played a major role in defining the protests.

The theoretical structure of decision-making was that the working group in Czech would put forward a proposal for consensus by the INPEG group, it would then be put to the International meetings for agreement and then implemented by the Czech working group. Much discussion was had on list servers but they were not used to take decisions. We were continuously struggling with a lack of resources regarding finances, solid infrastructure, people, spaces, equipment etc.

INPEG aimed to be broad umbrella group coming together to organise logistics of a pan-European mobilisation during the week of September 21st-27th. The mobilisation aimed to include as a strong part of its content a counter summit and cultural festival that celebrated the diversity of the movement and provided a forum for debate and discussion around globalisation/capitalist issues.

The four goals of INPEG were to:

- Disrupt the IMF and World Bank
- Highlight issues surrounding the IMF and World Bank and economic globalisation
- Challenge the legitimacy of such institutions
- Build upon and diversify the movement

Street Actions

We had a great deal of discussion within the Street group about whether to try and build actions around Seattle style blockades, which some people felt would have been a very effective tactic. The general conclusion that emerged based on discussion in international meetings was that the European movement was not united or experienced enough, nor wanted blockading the conference centre as a tactic.

INPEG felt that we needed to build a street action that converged from different areas of the conference centre, (possibly with different meeting points around Prague) and respected the diversity of different forms of protest. The third international meetings main agenda point was the street action – this would take place on September 26th (S26). The Socialist Worker's Party (SWP) were out in force for this meeting as they wanted to have a single 'unity march'. They attempted to fill the meeting with SWPers as a mean of manipulating the consensus to being one of more voting. After a laborious 13 hour meeting we managed to get away with an exhausted consensus: an agreement that we would all meet in Namesti Miru to 'unify' and then split into three blocks to take different routes to converge on the Conference centre.

Every evening at six, a week prior to S26, there was a spokes council meeting. Whilst they worked reasonably well in conveying information, the acoustics in the convergence centre were terrible. Also because it was a model being used effectively in America, the facilitators tended mostly to be Americans. This should have been avoided and included a wider diversity of people to facilitate, particularly from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Counter Summit (CS) and Art of Resistance (AOR) Festival.

Prior to S26 the idea was to invite people to Prague to take part in an alternative summit with debates, speakers etc. This was to be a week long series of events that celebrated the culture of our resistance. There was a great deal of discussion around priorities. The street actions, logistics of accommodation and food, convergence centre space, media, borders and outreach were all getting much more attention than the Counter Summit and Art of Resistance festival.

Every time we secured venues for the AOR and began the process of organisation a phone call would be received from the owners, who had just been visited by the police and told that they would have their licences revoked if they allowed an event organised by INPEG to take place there. Although the counter summit eventually took place in the University, one month before they also wanted to back out of hosting the event due to police pressure. The AOR did take place and despite being greatly watered down due to space, it managed to be a brilliant festival.

Volunteers

Two months before, Prague saw a big increase in the number of people coming to help out with the mobilisation. In order to facilitate people's arrival in Prague we had a volunteer co-coordinator who basically directed people to a working group, sorted out their accommodation and armed them with a map and a list of relevant places. This worked extremely well and made it easier rather than everyone doing it randomly.

Legal

About a month before Prague a few of us were thrown into total panic by the realisation that we did not have a legal group. There was OPH (Czech legal observers) but they were recently formed. They were part of an external initiative (see section Jan Uban below) which people in INPEG were not connected to. A small group of internationals ended up forming the legal group. A number of people went straight from organising street actions etc to legal work and became quite burnt out by doing so. After the protests there were 800 people incarcerated, tales of physical and mental abuse and for two days people were just disappearing. The INPEG legal team and OPH worked together during and after the protests. For people left over in Prague after the protests it was quite a heavy time. The OPH offices were infiltrated by secret police and a number of files with lists of detainees went missing along with crucial video footage, which could have been used to prosecute the police.

The work of OPH after the protests has been phenomenal in terms of following up cases thoroughly, and putting political pressure on the Czech government. Had the mobilisation been more unified it would have been valuable to use tactics of using jail solidarity in order to protect people from CEE (EU) who were treated much worse by the authorities. A group of around 100 Spanish people used jail solidarity tactics effectively on September 27th.

Border Group.

The border group was set up very late into proceedings. There were three people working in the border group and this was not enough. The border group essentially aimed to document people being stopped at the border, enable them to meet up with others, and recommend borders to cross that did not have guards. There was a house in Dresden where people could go to eat, sleep and be given directions to get into Czech through lesser-known roads or the hills. The aim was also to get journalists, Indymedia and OPH to the borders where people were being stopped.

Around 800 people were turned away from the border. More organisation and pre planning at the international meetings for border strategy could have led to much better co-ordinated actions at the borders.

Finances

The financial structure of INPEG was bad. Initially one person controlled it, and then a group of three, which was no better. We tried on a number of occasions to set up a more transparent financial process, but it did not work. A number of people felt that money was not being evenly distributed and that there was a hierarchy setting the priorities - this is probably fairly accurate. We estimate that Prague cost around 35,000 euros, not including people personally financing things like mobile phones, renting flats for people etc.

Activist Colonisation

Both the UK and American activist movements had at this time a successful history of organising and mobilising people onto the streets. The Czech groups from within INPEG were inexperienced and young, but very open to ideas and suggestions. The Czech republic had emerged from communism 12 years previously: Czech activists were much more used to traditional forms of organisation and marches. Anti capitalism was viewed by many people as pro communism. The police were widely rumoured to have strong links to fascists groups and were renowned for lawless behaviour and brutality.

The fact people came to Prague early to build the protests was essential. What began to emerge was a form of activist colonisation. It was clear from the offset that to achieve the objective of building and diversifying a movement we would have to rely on the experience, knowledge, instincts and opinions of central and eastern European people. This also meant working with groups with lesser experience in using consensus models. This did not happen enough, to the point where nearing the protests the involvement of Czech people in various

processes dwindled to being very few and one of technical support as opposed to being actively involved in discussions and logistics. Some English and American activists tended to come with a very set way of doing things, complete with various levels of activist arrogance, paranoia and tear gas intolerance. Skilled American activists dominated the media group. The work they did was fantastic but the 'INPEG' press statement on the 26th was never agreed on by INPEG and certainly did not represent the views of the majority of people involved in the build up process. A meeting was held just before the press conference where the media group announced they were going to condemn the violence. A number of options were put to them in order to prevent them from going ahead with the statement they had prepared. However, because only one person who opposed the statement going out could get to that meeting, the media group pushed it through on a majority wins basis. The Czech groups and others had been stressing for a long time that there would be riots, police repression etc and we should prepare for that in terms of media strategy. The total denouncement of the violence allegedly by INPEG but in fact by a group of internationals created a great deal of argument.

There was a co-operative European process going on that was intent on the formation of some process before protest which some UK and US groups may have missed out on.

Media

Public perception, created by hysterical accusations of the Ministry of Interior in Czech and printed by the media meant there was a great deal of hostility towards the protests. In August we held a weeklong action camp in order to build on non-violent direct action (NVDA) tactics. As part of this we held a half day 'open' camp where we invited the global media circus that was forming to take part in tours, workshops etc. This marked a key turning point in our media relations. Up until this point we had very negative press coverage - both in Czech and internationally. The following day a number of articles appeared which were considerably more balanced and positive. This opened up the door to a much more receptive press in general. A privilege system was introduced into dealing with the media, ie: press that had fairly reported events were contacted first, offered interviews etc.

Jan Urban

Around May, a man called Jan Urban approached INPEG; he labelled himself as a humanitarian journalist and had set up OPH (the legal observers for the Prague demonstrations.) He had been a political dissident and put himself forward to an INPEG meeting as a left wing democratic, who was anxious to see the protests going well. In his introduction he said that he wanted to attend meetings and help out where he could. Czech INPEG was vehemently against being involved with Jan Urban in any way, citing that he was working for President Havel and could not be trusted. However despite consensus reached that INPEG would not work with Jan Urban, a number of internationals decided that meant that as individuals they could participate. As September rapidly approached there were no venues for anything; no AOR, convergence centre, info shop, media office or IMC centre. Also, the University was pressured by police to prevent the counter summit from taking place there. Urban's intervention meant venues were found and secured, and his level of involvement transpired to be immense. Urban was very open about himself. He was clear that he was meeting with Havel, the IMF and World Bank security officials, and the Czech police on a regular basis, and that he had access to the police intelligence on us.

After S26 and with over 800 people arrested, stories begin to emerge from people with phones inside prisons of torture, sexual abuse, physical and verbal assaults. We outside were feeling helpless, then within the hour Jan Urban had arranged for a humanitarian inspection of the prisons where people were being held. Two hours later the majority of people were out and Urban visited the ones still inside to monitor their condition. What occurred in INPEG was a break down in communication between international individuals communicating with Urban and the rest of INPEG. Due to the fact that INPEG took a decision not to have anything to do with Urban, those that decided to do so behind the backs of the rest of INPEG with a totally unstructured form of communication. This caused a great deal of frustration and anger within

the rest of INPEG as it created a hierarchy of information. Those that communicated with Uban did so because they felt they had nothing to hide and that without him there would be a logistical nightmare.

Conclusions

The main problem of the INPEG co-ordination was that there were a lot of big ideas and not the resources to put them into action. Instead of realising our capacities and limitations we pushed ourselves forward in trying to do them all. As someone said in one international meeting "it is not the protest that we go after, it is the process of getting to the protest." In the end it was the protest we got to, and the process that was damaged in doing so. Whilst the Czech movement was not strengthened by the creation of INPEG and the mobilisation, large protests in Europe have continued and created a massive 'space'. Yet we (whoever we are) seem unable to find the ways in which to fill that space which is of our creation.

For further information on INPEG and to access working group reports please see <http://www.travatools.com/takdem/takdem.htm>