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lovingly assembled
by blackbird press

GROWING POWER AND IMAGINATIONS TOGETHER

Reportback from
Durham's January 4th
Autonomous
Palestine Action



Growing Power and Imaginations Together: Reportback from Durham's January 4th Autonomous Palestine Action

Viciously fulfilling its commitments to empire, the United States continues to materially support and justify the settler-colonial state of Israel's genocidal ambitions against the Palestinian people.

Yet, it feels like many mass public demonstrations in the US for Palestine do not hold the rage-filled powerful responses you may expect this level of incomprehensible violence to be met with in the belly of the beast. While halting American imperialism and state violence is no easy task nor is there one right way to achieve such a goal, many US demonstrations for Palestine have left protestors feeling demoralized and powerless.

More specifically, liberal organizations have stifled power and limited imaginations in ways that are detrimental to all of us through mass actions which police behaviors outside of electoral and "peaceful" strategies. We will never see a liberated future if our imaginations are limited to politely asking elected officials to sign an action less ceasefire resolution for Palestine and other tactics are policed.

Anti-state organizers in Durham, NC have been struggling with this tension in a liberally dominated political landscape where nonprofits have had a cultural choke hold over actions in recent years. Most actions for Palestine are centered around getting elected officials to sign onto a ceasefire resolution which requires no binding action. While this strategy seems to have some obvious flaws for those of us who understand the state as the source of imperial violence, the main critique we would like to focus on is not that it's the wrong strategy but that the culture which has surrounded these type of actions works towards making it the only public strategy.

In Durham, other strategies have been discouraged by groups such as Jewish Voices for Peace and the Party for Socialism and Liberation. JVP has attempted to change the messaging of demonstrations that they did not organize and then remove their support when their exact messaging isn't adopted. JVP has also demanded that others cancel their direct action near JVP's demo out of fear of being connected to a message calling for a boycott for Palestine. Additionally, the "safety marshals" at PSL's marches in Raleigh have functioned as peace policers and become controlling over behavior as minute as where people walked while listening to party leaders' speeches. Angry outbursts towards property have been stopped, and other tactics focusing on boycotts and divestments for Palestine have been discouraged. These behaviors have created a culture of following one static blueprint for liberation instead of encouraging trust in one's own power and creativity to build liberated worlds that work for all of us.

Further Reading

Organization and Spontaneity: The Theory of the Vanguard Party and Its Application to the Black Movement in the US Today, by Kimathi Muhammed

How to Build the End of the World: In Defense of the Chaotic Protester, by Miliaku Nwabueze

The Dragon and the Hydra: A Historical Study of Organizational Methods, by Russell "Maroon" Shoats

Taking Sides: Revolutionary Solidarity and the Poverty of Liberalism, edited by Cindy Milstein

How it Might Should Be Done, by Idris Robinson

Bloc-ing Up, at SproutDistro.com

A Field Guide to Protests: The Protest Marshal

The Siege of the 3rd Precinct of Minneapolis, by Crimethinc

The Criminal Legal System for Radicals, by the Tilted Scales Collective

Shattering Abolition™: Against Reformist Counter-Insurgency in the Streets of Oakland, at haters.noblogs.org

How to Get Ready for a Demonstration, posted at @DurhamPrisonLetters

Tips for organizing your own action!

You do not need to be an expert: We recommend studying up on security practices to keep you safe, but there are no qualifications or experiences you need to have to organize an action. This was some folk's first action as organizers! Many of us had no idea what we were doing. You can do it. You are a part of the "we" in "we keep us safe". There are so many wonderful resources to guide you if you are feeling lost. We recommend scrolling through what CrimethInc. has to offer to start.

Be patient with others and yourself: When organizing this demo we all got so tired of having to explain why we would not have "safety marshals". It was easy to get frustrated but in the process many people learned about the problems with designated safety folks. While it sucked to continuously reexplain to people claiming you didn't care about protestors safety, it was important and someone had to do that work. At the same time, be patient and kind to yourself if you are the person confused and others are frustrated with you. We are all on different political journeys, and we need each other.

Have a public facing way to connect or information for another upcoming event: While in black bloc, many of us didn't know how to answer, "Hi, I would love to get involved. How do I find you all again?" One person made the smart decision of handing out a flyer for the upcoming political prisoner letter writing event. However, many of us were left replying, "uhhhhhhhhhhh." We recommend having a public facing collective, or space, or event that you can invite new yet un-vetted people who want to be in community with you.

Consider the many measurements of success: While we are ecstatic and grateful that 200 people showed interested and participated in this event, a large number of participants wouldn't have been the only way we met our goals. If five people showed up and felt moved by our zines that also would have been a success. The number of participants doesn't have to reflect the success of your event. Don't be afraid to take action with three others.

Is begging politicians and performing civil disobedience the horizon of our politics? Are these events organized to aid the Palestinian resistance, or to simply aid our own conscience? Have we retreated so far since the fires of 2020?

We must strive to be more powerful against this state sanctioned genocide. The state wins by crushing forces of transformation and separating us from our own power. Rather than trying to direct or control transformations of empire as these liberals are doing, we would like to support people's capacities to discover for themselves how to live and fight together. We want to put energy into demonstrations which inspire others to relate in ways that are responsive to change rather than static and to feel trust for their own capacities to enact change.

As anarchists and anti-authoritarian organizers, we felt it was our responsibility to work towards creating these desired spaces that we didn't yet see. So, we organized a public demonstration for Palestine that aimed to be a small step towards this cultural shift in local organizing spaces. We share these action details in hopes that you will feel inspired to create your own autonomous actions. No one is coming to save us.

When the approximately 200 participants arrived at CCB Plaza on January 4th in Durham, they were greeted by an art installation on the city's prized bull statue. A clothesline hanging infant clothing lined the Plaza, representing children killed by the occupation since October 7th. Art materials including markers and spray paint were presented and attendants were encouraged to take them up. "Fruits Against Fascism. Resist Pinkwashing," read one banner. "زجواحل لك رمد. Destroy All Borders," was written on another. Someone presented information to others on how to purchase ESIMs to donate to people in Gaza, one of the few ways that we know of to provide direct material aid. Another participant stood by a vigil with candles and portraits of martyred Palestinians, offering space and materials for grief rituals. Durham Community Fridges, a local food pantry project, provided fresh produce and other food items to the public. Other resources that were distributed included information on receiving updates from journalists on the ground, Palestinian prisoner solidarity networks, food assistance projects in Gaza, zines about anarchist and autonomous organizing perspectives, and Know Your Rights materials.

Before departing on the march, an open mic was hosted. Opening remarks reminded participants that, in explicit distinction from other demonstrations they may have participated in, the demonstration was not the creation or responsibility of a formal organization. Their participation was highlighted as what made the demonstration possible and effective. The crowd was encouraged to not allow their pain, anger, joy, hope, frustration, sorrow, grief, to be stifled in favor of permissible forms of expression or demonstration.

The first speaker made connections between the occupation in Palestine and American policing and border militarization. An imagination exercise was led by another that invited members of the crowd to envision dreams for the future. Another shared words from a man imprisoned in Texas who retold a story of a martyred Palestinian man and his wife. A local drag performer made an impassioned argument against criticism of queer people who demonstrate solidarity with Palestine. Another participant sang a song before reading a poem they had prepared that drew ties between racist American violence and the Palestinian struggle. Another speaker drew attention to those murdered by local police. Lastly, a Muslim woman shared a moving spoken word piece to conclude the open mic.

One participant in the open mic said, “The open mic represented an energizing moment for me. It felt good to not allow our thoughts and feelings to be diluted by having our attention drawn to electoralism or anything less than the end of the occupation.”

After the conclusion of the open mic, the crowd marched from the plaza and toward the county jail. The march was not directed by designated safety marshals in hi-vis vests. Instead, traffic was managed with bike scouts, many of which brought their own bikes and decided to participate the day of the demonstration. Lines of communication were used to alert the crowd to possible hazards along the way. Throughout the march, members of the crowd aimed megaphones to the night sky and blared out chants. A sheet of ideas had been handed out to encourage anyone who may feel nervous about holding a megaphone to pick one up. One chant adopted from videos of demonstrations in the Arab world translates to “With our souls, with our blood, we will avenge you, oh Palestine!” and was heard chanted out in a clarity that revealed native fluency. We were intentional in making the sheets widely available and provided access to megaphones to anyone interested in using one. Additionally, art from Fauda, a Palestinian anarchist group, offered a reminder to all of us that “أفعالنا أقوى من كلماتنا” Actions Speak Louder Than Words.”

Upon arriving at the County Jail, an explosion of fireworks rang out over top of the crowd and against the walls of the building. People imprisoned inside responded to chants of “We see you. We love you” by flashing lights. Sound of windows getting smashed mixed beautifully with the saxophone, drums, and other noisemakers protestors played. As another open mic spontaneously popped up outside the jail, the emphasis was again placed on the police as an occupying force from Durham to Palestine. The crowd’s chants became more broadly abolitionist as the nature of the demonstration had seemingly become more explicitly clear. “Take to the streets and fuck the police,” evoked memories of the 2020 George Floyd Uprising demonstrations.

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The goal of the demo was to expand people’s imaginations around strategies for liberation, and to create an autonomous space that encouraged people to be powerful in their own creative and diverse ways without constraint for Palestine and beyond. We feel successful in this incremental step towards this goal. Tables of zines and flyers on autonomous perspectives were emptied before the march even started. When the speakers suggested that we stop merely begging the state to stop supporting this genocide, participants screamed with a new type of energy. Many messages were received after the demo from inspired protestors who shared their restored feeling of power and revitalized interest in taking action beyond electoral persuading. People wanted to know when the next event was, and how they could create it. The action also brought in old faces who hadn’t been active. One long time local anarchist reached out to thank us for lighting a fire in them again.

While this march was more symbolically impactful than materially for Palestine, we hope that the shift towards diversity of tactics and autonomous organizing will mean more material wins in the future for Palestine and beyond. We hope to see direct actions targeting local supporters of genocide, blockades of money and weapons to Israel, and whatever else you may dream up. We hope to be more powerful. We hope to deepen cracks in empire, and build our capacities to take care of each other. We hope for a free Palestine. When imaginations are allowed to run free and liberal organizations and their sanitized professional organizers are no longer allowed to stifle people’s power, anything is possible.

Bits and pieces of experience and memory can accumulate into a shift in what people believe is possible and our own perceptions of our power to impact the world. Exposing the public to sights and sounds and ideas that help them make connections and have realizations they may have not otherwise have had is important. Making instruments and avenues for direct action and liberatory practices accessible is important. All attempts, large and small, at nurturing liberation can transform and expand people’s capacities for creative resistance, dreaming, and action.

Enticing further action and growing our power should be a continuous aim.

Let us create a future where we are more prepared, more organized, more powerful. We need more autonomous actions and spaces. We need you!