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The UK Student Movement
January 27, 2011

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Further Reading

Geographies of the Kettle: Containment, Spectacle & Counter-Strategy: A critical appraisal of the police tactic of "kettling" demonstrations, and how to resist it

Movement beyond "Actions": An insightful critique of the limitations of "activism" as the default setting for resistance movements in the UK, especially as we enter an era of widespread discontent

November and December 2010 saw an unprecedented wave of student protest in the UK, touched off by an attack on the right-wing Tory party headquarters during a demonstration against tuition increases. With the assistance of members of the Last Hours collective, we've completed a belated overview of the causes and highlights of the UK student movement.

The events in the UK are significant in that they come on the heels of labor unrest in Spain and France, and coincided with fierce student protests in Italy as well. To the south, the government of Tunisia has just been toppled, sending shockwaves to Egypt. Broadly speaking, these are all reactions to the effects of the ongoing financial crisis that came into public consciousness in 2008; we will probably see more of these as disaffected youth take stock of the world they will be inheriting.

Sooner or later, this outrage is bound to erupt in the US as well. Last year's student movement is surely only a preview, though we can't tell what form it will take next. What we can do is study upheavals elsewhere in the world, reflect on how we can best contribute to oppositional momentum, and keep up our experiments in catalyzing resistance.

"The Insurrection Has Begun"

On November 10, 2010, 52,000 people participated in a protest in London organized by the National Union of Students. As the main demonstration moved by Millbank Tower, a splinter group of hundreds, headed by no more than 30 black bloc anarchists, broke into the Tory Headquarters there.

Carrying red and black flags with their faces concealed, the small group of anarchists formed a bloc at a doorway to Millbank tower within eyesight of the main demonstration. The intention was clear but at first the crowd seemed reluctant to join them and passed on by. Then more people started to join the back of the bloc. This gave others confidence and the group soon grew to several hundred, at which point the front of the bloc entered the building. Then another entrance was taken as many more people left the proposed rout and the crowed filled the courtyard.

Protesters broke windows, flooded hallways, and scrawled anti-government graffiti across any available surface. The small number of police at the scene moved in to prevent anyone else from entering or exiting the building. An estimated 200 people were trapped inside Millbank tower as thousands waited outside.

Soon those inside the building attempted to break out by throwing furniture through the large lobby windows, while others smashed CCTV cameras. Some ran further into the building, even reaching the roof. People outside fought police with sticks and fists, trying to open a passage in and out of the building.

The corporate media immediately attempted to blame the invasion on a small group of troublemakers, focusing on an incident in which a fire extinguisher was dropped from the rooftop. However, these claims held little legitimacy juxtaposed against images of thousands of protesters gathered outside the building. Sky News reported a fringe group were taking part in violent protest, but their feed had to be suddenly cut when stu-

18 years and began off the back of a demo. This excitement persisted through some organizational challenges, enabling the occupation to become an active hub of discussion and organization in the center of Brighton.

Overall, however, I feel that the effectiveness of occupations has diminished since last year when most local student movements were fighting the cuts being implemented on their own campuses. This year the issue has become much more national, and it could be argued that occupations serve less of a purpose. Despite this, many have been invaluable in organizing on a local level.

Q: What do you think are the paradoxes of being an anarchist involved with protests against cuts to state-funded education?

A: I don't necessarily see any paradoxes as I do not see revolution and reform as polar opposites. While many local anti-cuts movements are protesting the cuts, they are also setting up or at least considering alternatives to the current system, such as the Really Open University at Leeds and the teach-ins which have been popping up at university occupations.

instead focused on issues and activities that may be more related to anarchist ideas than others, but in no way conflict with the general feeling of the movement. For example, encouraging direct action, the use of face masks, engaging and networking with college and school students as well as worker movements, and occasionally offering up an alternative analysis of the cuts and the struggle so far. All extremely important, but none which involve attempting to alter the general direction of the movement.

Q: What role do you feel the occupations have played? Are there different dynamics than on the street?

A: I can only speak of the occupations I have experienced directly, these being the Sussex and Brighton University occupations. Each of these were very different, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. I feel that the Sussex occupation, which began 5 days after 10/11/10, was badly timed and implemented, but nonetheless allowed for a space in which to discuss Millbank and plan for the day of action on the 24th. The Brighton occupation however began on the day of action and continued for over two weeks acting as a productive and consistent space in which to organize. In part I feel that it was because the Brighton occupation more successfully captured the dynamics from the streets. It was the university's first occupation in

dents and members of the public berated the reporter live on air, one shouting "the insurrection has begun!"

Others who had proceeded to the end of the march appeared to become bored of the National Student Union speeches and returned to Millbank tower, swelling the numbers there already. Students who had been dancing to Rage Against The Machine earlier in the day were now fighting side by side with others dressed in traditional black bloc attire.

This was one of the most militant protests the UK had seen in recent years. It concluded with approximately 50 arrests. In an attempt to play down student involvement, corporate media ran "exposés" on long-running anarchist institutions such as the Anarchist Federation and Class War. While it might be true that individual anarchists where among the first into the building and some even made it to the roof, not one of the few organized anarchist groups in the UK were out in any great numbers. The images of suspects circulated by the police and media didn't show the faces of shady bomb-throwers but those of the countries' youth.

These events ignited a wave of protests, occupations, and action across the UK involving more than 100,000 students over the months of November and December.

Timeline

This is a summary of some of the more notable moments leading up to and during the months of November and December 2010. Many other actions, protests, and occupations occurred across the United Kingdom during this time, and each one was integral to maintaining momentum. A more detailed list is available here.

May 2010 – General Election results in a hung parliament, the first in the UK since 1974. Liberal Democrats form a coalition government with the center-right Tory (Conservative) Party.

October 12, 2010 – The controversial Browne Review is published, an independent report on education funding. The government paper recommends the removal of caps on the upper limit to university fees.

October 20, 2010 – The coalition government announces the largest spending cuts since the second World War, including huge cuts to public services.

November 10, 2010 – An estimated 52,000 people attend a National Union of Students demonstration against raising tuition fees and scrapping EMA (Educational Maintenance Allowance). Hundreds of students follow a small group of anarchists into Millbank Tower, the Tory Government headquarters. Windows are smashed and the building is shut down for several hours.

November 15, 2010 — A wave of university occupations and sit-ins begins, starting with Sussex University in Brighton. Over the next few weeks at least 25 universities and colleges are occupied across the UK, some of them multiple times.

November 24, 2010 — A national day of action is called for by the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts. Students use social networking websites to organise in cities and towns across the UK. In London a police riot van is destroyed when cops try to kettle the majority of the protest. Small groups of students run through central London starting fires and breaking

tactic when facing an organization that wishes to impose itself on others. Having said that, it is short-sighted to write off the NUS as useless. The union has the resources to contact almost every student in the country, making them particularly invaluable in universities in which there are no other political groups to publicize and engage in building for national demonstrations and such. The NUS could be a useful tool if they eventually decide to or are forced to represent the views of the students fighting these cuts, but they are not necessary and have been largely bypassed by the movement. Their plan for the day of the vote was to hold a vigil with 9000 candles on the bank of the Thames, a spectacle which seemed to be perfectly constructed to highlight their ineffectiveness and unaccountability while simultaneously celebrating the fact that the movement failed to stop the vote being passed. In the end, though, they chose to cancel the event in order to distance themselves even further from the "violence" that took place earlier in the day. This perfectly sums up the NUS's role in the current struggles.

As for anarchist groups, I do not feel they have been rejected by the movement, primarily because they haven't put themselves in a position to be rejected. From my experience working with these groups a little over the last few weeks, they have usually avoided putting their name to anything and

in people's minds everything was building towards the day of the vote in parliament. Now that the vote has passed, it is unclear whether the movement will continue with similar levels of strength. Usually I would expect a movement not to, but the energy, atmosphere and sense that people have been radicalised by this struggle that I witnessed after the demo on Thursday [December 9] are keeping me optimistic.

Q: Do you feel students have rejected conventional protest institutions such as unions and even "professional" anarchist groups like the Anarchist Federation or Solfed? If so, why do you think this has occurred? How has this affected the struggle?

A: One of the most simultaneously disheartening and exciting things about the last few weeks has been the role that the NUS has played. After Millbank, the NUS clearly showed themselves to be unaccountable to the student movement, reformist at best and ultimately self-serving—a fact that some of us have known for a while. However, the backlash against Aaron Porter's denouncement of the violence at Millbank has snowballed into a widespread disinterest in the views and actions of the NUS for many students. Rather than spend time and energy encouraging the NUS to back the movement, the movement itself has made the NUS largely irrelevant, which seems to be the best

windows. Italy sees similar protests, with an occupation of the Coliseum in Rome.

November 28, 2010 — A council meeting in Lewisham, South London is attended by several hundred protesters; 16 police officers are injured when scuffles break out.

November 30, 2010 — In London, 139 people are arrested for "breach of the peace" during a second national day of action. The word "Revolution" is sprayed across Nelson's Column. Protests are held in 14 other cities across the UK; these are fast-paced, as students adopt new tactics to avoid kettling.

December 9, 2010 — The government votes on the raise in tuition fees while a national protest is attended by thousands. In London, 2800 police are deployed to protect Parliament. Protesters break into splinter groups to avoid being kettled. Thousands make it to Parliament and fight police; 43 protesters are injured. One protester is hospitalized, requiring surgery to treat "bleeding to the brain." Several breakaway groups head into the city shopping district where windows are smashed and a car occupied by Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall is attacked. The windows of the Treasury are smashed. The government votes in favor of the rise.

"We're from the slums of London"

As with any mass movement, it's impossible to identify every brush stroke that contributes to the bigger picture without making assumptions about individual motivations or simplifying the complexity of human behavior within a struggle. It would be improper to proclaim that a single series of events or conditions

led to this outburst of protest, but we should identify factors that can aid our future manifestations of resistance. In particular, we can look at how momentum is created, maintained, and finally lost.

One feature of the protests was the wide range of social classes on the street. The United Kingdom has a rich history of class-based struggle, from the Diggers' land occupations of the 1600s to the Miners' Strikes of the 1980s. Many considered the latter the beginning of the end for organized working-class struggle in the UK when the previous Tory government, lead by Margaret Thatcher, brutally dismantled the trade union movement and paved the way for modern free-market capitalism. Up until 2010, celebratory proletarian culture had been notably absent from the wider public for the preceding 20 years. Consequently, the visible anarchist presence of recent years had lost some of its historic emphasis on class, instead playing a secondary presence in larger campaigns such as anti-war and anti-fascist movements. Many younger anarchists had become engaged through single-issue activism and later adopted an anti-authoritarian perspective.

Over a few weeks at the end of 2010, however, a new form of class struggle appeared. It manifested itself less in the conventional workplace struggles associated with unions and the traditional Left and more as an angry reaction against the alienation experienced by those outside the ruling class under 21st century capitalism. Debt, fewer education opportunities, fewer job opportunities, a stagnant political system, police violence, and general social ennui are all contributing factors.

"agitator." To an extent, it feels as if Millbank awoke something in the student movement which has not faded yet. The kind of events that took place on 10/11/10 had not been experienced by most, and say what you like about its tactical significance or the political consciousness of those smashing the place apart, Millbank's most significant outcome seems to be a huge sense of empowerment that has been built upon and refined in consequent protests rather than allowed to fade. It is a sense of empowerment which many students seem to have come to these demos to recreate simultaneously to expressing their anger.

On the other hand, there are some things which have actively been done by those involved in the movement—I'm reluctant to call them organizers because from my experience, it has not been the same bureaucratic organizations and individuals who have been calling for the demonstrations—which have helped build momentum. For example, attempting to engage college and school students on a wider scale was extremely important after Millbank, and it was an idea which succeeded, judging from the mass walkouts on November 24. I also think that switching the focus to local struggle after 10/11/10 has served the movement well also.

However, I feel that one of the major reasons for the continued momentum has been the fact that

ters, infoshops, and other explicitly anarchist projects have an important role to play.

We can also confront the discourses aimed at delegitimize our struggles. Government and corporate media propagate the ideology that the capitalist economy is directly linked to our very survival. If they succeed in this, the public will accept the necessity of additional neoliberal policies, further attacks on the lower classes. Resistance can polarize society, but we need strong alternative proposals for this to be a good thing.

Many legal battles are about to begin that will decide the fates of those arrested over the last few months. Once again this highlights the importance of long-term infrastructure; between periods of state repression, we can concentrate on building up skills and passing on lessons. Although the initial momentum of last year seems to have dissipated, it's possible that this energy will adopt other forms. If people remain engaged in the struggle, they may find themselves back in the street soon.

Interview with Participants in the Occupations

Collectively answered in December 2010 by some students involved in the protests

Q: What factors have contributed to maintain momentum over the last few weeks?

> **A:** I think there have been numerous reasons for the continued momentum, many of them being entirely beyond the reach of any "organizer" or

After the protest on December 9, a video appeared in which masked individuals proclaimed "We're from the slums of London, how do they expect us to pay £9,000 for uni fees?" "What's stopping us from doing drug deals on the streets anymore? Nothing!" This video contrasted starkly with corporate media interviews with white middle-class teenagers condemning protester use of violence. This gives a good insight into the tension on the street, but also the growing class divisions within the UK and the tools used by state apparatus to delegitimize protests.

We surmise that struggles in which the participants aim to address their own conditions directly offer greater likelihood of sustained resistance and continued momentum than campaigns based on moral objection, which are easier for the state to neutralize. This is a common line of thought among many anarchists, but it's worth reiterating as we choose how to focus our own energies.

Anarchy in the UK

There are many signs that, in the UK, modern anarchist culture has put down roots within current youth culture; among young people, it may be on the way to becoming the prevailing stance outside of the conventional conservative-liberal spectrum. Anarchist flags, class war placards, and banners with anarchist symbols peppered the protests and occupations in towns that previously had no visible anarchist presence at all.

Anarchism remerged in the UK as a cultural mainstay in 1980s, then gained momentum during the 1990s with the

rise of the anti-roads movement. That movement largely transformed into the anti-globalization movement, an often celebrated phase in anarchist history worldwide. There have been peaks and troughs since then, but campaigns and projects such as Smash EDO (see Rolling Thunder #7), the Camp for Climate Action, Earth First!, and a network of anarchist-run social centers have all contributed to an ongoing visible anarchist presence. In the last few years, a string of new book fairs and small press events has sprung up across the country, most with varying degrees of anarchist involvement. Since 2000 there has also been two summit protests against the G8 and G20, both a successful insofar as they created effective anti-authoritarian infrastructure and mobilized large numbers of people.

However, many recent protest campaigns had been largely organized and attended by "full-time" activists and dedicated anarchists, and most anarchist actions had been an appendices to campaigns that were not explicitly anti-statist or anti-authoritarian in nature. Consequently, an activist subculture has emerged. Though this subculture plays an important roll in fostering radical activity, creating infrastructure and providing protest experiences, in many ways it has been separated from broader forms of class struggle. Meanwhile, creating a movement based on political affinity rather than longstanding community also provides opportunities for police infiltration.

The student protests represent a re-emergence of a popular movement based largely in class issues, the likes of which have not been seen since the anti-poll tax movement that peaked at the beginning of the 1990s (see Rolling Thunder #6).

After the Storm

The first stage of the struggle is now over. Groups like the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) that once played a purely logistical role have begun to take conventional positions of power. As occurred during the anti-war movement against the invasion of Iraq, these groups are adopting the stance of "legitimate" protest.

As in the Greek riots of December 2008, the end of the year served as the closing of parentheses around a period of gained momentum. What can be done to ensure that moments of visible social upheaval are not for nothing? How can we ensure this momentum is not wasted?

The 2008 Greek riots set the tone for further struggles. The efforts of Greek anarchists to build a culture of ongoing resistance have heavily influenced not only the current Greek strikes against austerity measures but many other acts of resistance around the world. The student protests can do the same. Where years of inaction had created a reputation of apathy, the UK now has a refreshed history of student organizing. Future struggles will begin from this new context. A new generation has its own personal experiences of resistance in addition to those inherited from previous generations.

The term "anarchist" has entered public usage once more with both negative and positive connotations. It's impossible to gauge the effect this has had; while some have been introduced to an interesting set of ideas, others have probably adopted corporate media definitions and the prejudices that come with them. At this point anarchist book fairs, social cen-

Smoke from the Prairie Fire

The events that took place during November and December 2010 are called “student protests” because so many students participated and because of the focus on education issues. But this shouldn’t suggest that it was only students involved. Corporate media demonized the non-students that attended the protests, labelling them professional protesters or outside agitators. This was intended to prevent the spread of popular protest, encouraging division and marginalization and implying a hegemony of self-serving individualism at the protest.

In fact, the protests were attended by many non-students acting out of solidarity, concern for their children’s education, or simply class anger. Many students expressed the importance of this solidarity. The most interesting event in relation to this occurred November 28, when a local council meeting to discuss general austerity measures was attended by 100 students and other members of the public. A mini-riot broke out and 16 police officers where injured when the crowd tried to force its way into the building. This was one of the first moments that the student protests could be seen outside of the context of protest for educational reform. Further attempts were made to draw parallels between the student protests and other anti-cuts struggles; but as of this writing, most anti-cuts organizing has been small and directed at engaging the bureaucracies of local government. It is too early to tell how influential these protests may be when austerity measures begin to bite in full force; however, the bar has been set, and escalation may be inevitable.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that anarchists represent more than a fraction of those involved in these protests and occupations. Yet it’s important to note that the actions of even small groups of anarchists such as the initial invasion of Millbank Tower can create huge waves of momentum and spark whole movements. Even in small numbers, well-planned or even spontaneous actions can catalyze momentum we couldn’t otherwise create ourselves. Existing anarchist groups and networks have provided important infrastructure in the form of legal advice, communications, and independent media; they’ve also shared street knowledge such as how to remain anonymous and how to handle police violence. In one case, the police targeted FITwatch, a group set up by anarchists to encourage anti-surveillance tactics at protests, prompting their web host to close down their blog for “attempting to pervert the course of justice.” The group had simply distributed information on avoiding arrest after the invasion of Millbank Tower; the suggestions included tips on getting rid of the clothes you were wearing, seeking legal counsel, and so on. The actions of the police backfired as the information was quickly spread via social networks; the liberal press eventually picked up the story, spreading the information far wider than FITwatch could have ever managed.

Anarchy in Action

A revolutionary movement may not be explicitly anarchist but nonetheless embody many of the values expressed through anarchist theory such as mutual aid, autonomy,

solidarity, and distrust of authority. From the protests in towns with smaller populations to the largest in London, the rejection of traditional power structures was a running theme. The leadership of National Union of Students (NUS) was increasingly marginalized. To some extent, this was their own doing: for example, it didn't help that Union President Aaron Porter condemned actions taken in the NUS' own protest. This may have helped foster a distrust of leadership; when attempts where made to organize speeches from opposition politicians and the usual "movement leaders," many moved off before the speeches even began.

Within the school and university occupations, the occupiers organised non-hierarchically, examining their own processes, structures, and effectiveness. One individual statement from the Goldsmith Occupation even expressed a sentiment common in modern insurrectionary texts, criticizing the "connivance of pseudo-radical academics, anxious union reps, obnoxious sub-Trotskyists and pedantic anarchist hangers on." The text goes on to describe the frustrations of dealing with "a more academic faction of occupiers" and calls for action similar to that of the "Human Strike" discussed in the text "Preoccupied" produced after the New School occupation in New York City.

On the other hand, despite being the most explicitly horizontally organized element of the struggle, the occupations themselves created points of authority for the movement. The time, resources, and public attention granted to students involved in the occupations offered them a louder public voice than some of those on the street.

In addition to the occupations and protests, thousands of schoolchildren walked out of lessons or locked themselves in classrooms as an act of rebellion or mischief. The spontaneous and self-organized nature of these protests no doubt greatly contributed to maintaining momentum. Instead of carrying mass-produced "official" placards, most people made their own with varying degrees of comedy or political poignancy. Instead of being told where to go and at what speed, people chose to run and splinter from the proposed routes when it suited them. Sometimes this led to protests taking seemingly illogical paths, such as marching from one side of a city center, turning round, marching back, and then repeating the same pattern; but this atmosphere of autonomy and spontaneity gave the protests an energetic air and communal spirit. No one knew where we where going, but we were all going there together. When the front of the march took a bad turn, the middle would branch off and take the lead.

The protests were not self-conscious attempts to organize horizontally so much as they reflected the organic process of consensus seen in most friendship circles. This makes sense in that the largely youthful crowd on the street has more experience with this form of relationship than with bureaucratic and hierarchical structures. Disputes were dealt with by those involved rather than any authority stepping in. The only people asking "who shall lead us?" were those with longer experiences of being led.