SEATTLE IS NEVER COMING BACK



REFLECTIONS ON THE DNC

by the

LAKE EFFECT COLLECTIVE

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The Democratic National Convention descended on Chicago during the last week of August, bringing with it swarms of police and politicians who quickly rendered the city uninhabitable. In response, Chicago's major Palestine-sympathetic organizations coordinated marches and demonstrations, and seemingly thousands of out-of-town activists came to visit, some of whom attempted to make good on their more radical aspirations during the week's many marches.

These disparate militants—communists, anarchists, and others looking to "escalate for Gaza"—shared a distaste for the notion that speaking truth to power should be the horizon of our movement. For our part, we understood our presence to work towards an eventual countervailing power capable of winning large-scale victories against the police and actually shutting things down—like the DNC—in the process. This power would rival, undermine, and render obsolete that of the capitalist state instead of peaceably communicating our demands to it. Street militancy and confrontations with the police may not be immediately identical with this aspiration, at least at the moment, when we are at a remove from aboveground mass organizations whose strategic horizons are congruent with our goals. But as we confront police violence and navigate around movement misleadership, we work to cohere a force with the skills and strategic clarity necessary to act when the moment presents itself—and which makes that action thinkable to others who may share our goals.

What the present moment needs is political experimentation. The various "movement building" organizations—for example, the organizers of the marches on Washington, DC, or the recent marches on the DNC—have decided that they know exactly what acceptable political practice looks like. The worst thing that could happen to them is the unexpected. We take the exact opposite position. A form of politics that is adequate to the present moment will need space to emerge and clarify itself.

While the first major protest of the week of the DNC, the "Bodies Outside of Unjust Laws" march on Sunday, August 18th, underscored the predominance of social-democratic and incrementalist organizations at the fore of the coming marches, Monday, by contrast, ended in a set of unlikely escalations. As the official Coalition to March on the DNC (the "Coalition") filed marchers into its designated "free speech zone," radicals calling for a breakaway march clashed with protest marshals who formed a human chain to separate them from the broader march. While this altercation

drew marshals' attention, other participants began unscrewing the bolts attached to the security perimeter's fence, eventually breaking it down and spilling into a street that faced the United Center, where the convention was taking place. After this minor victory against two sets of police, a short-lived "encampment" emerged at the march's endpoint but served as little more than a pretense to stare down police for a while before the crowd ebbed away.

On Tuesday, in an attempt to capture Monday's momentum, a previously marginal, politically-vague but outwardly "militant" group called Behind Enemy Lines (BEL) led a demonstration outside of the Israeli consulate that they had been promoting since at least July. They were met by lines of bike and riot cops who prevented entry to the building, or getting anywhere near it. Instead, the demonstration's location at a major transport hub, its extreme publicity, and the high-stakes target pushed participants directly into the open arms of Chicago police and Illinois state troopers, who kettled the entire block. Seventy-two arrests depleted the radical edge of the week's attendees and chilled further participation by other militants. Wednesday and Thursday were uneventful as a result.

The Coalition organizing the marches on the DNC discouraged participation in BEL's action at the consulate, pointing to Monday's altercation with the marshals as evidence of the organization's untrustworthiness. This limited the size of both the crowd at the consulate inside the police barriers and the sparse groups that formed outside those lines to support demonstrators, making mass arrests in both cases much more difficult to combat. On the other hand, BEL, driven by its commitment to the moral virtue of confrontation absent any serious efforts to make that "escalation" fit a broader movement strategy, attempted to force open a window that had shut after Monday's perimeter breach brought the combined weight of CPD and the Coalition down on militants.

Strategy and Tactics:

The Coalition and BEL tried—and failed—to navigate a problem that defines the limits of the Palestine movement's current form. We are confronted by a gap that emerged in 2020 between two tendencies: first, a radical, tactically ambitious, and spontaneous belowground of street militants and second, a more conservative, movement-disloyal aboveground in its activist, academic, and state-affiliated layers. Throughout the opening days of the George Floyd rebellion, the movement's conservative edge retreated from the tasks at hand. Only a few marginal and belated efforts—such as an action at Grant Park in Chicago—attempted to correct this general trend. The window closed, and efforts by isolated "rioters" and "agitators" to force it open again were met with force and disappointment.

The DNC's spectacle of tantrum-throwing activists and deputized marshals invites a simple moral condemnation of responsible participants and

their host organizations. While warranted, easy condemnation threatens to obscure another more concerning observation: each contending organization dealt with this split between below and abovegrounds by collapsing one into the other. The Coalition collapsed street tactics up into aboveground messaging and "family-friendly" palatability, giving up on confronting police, much less intervening materially to disrupt the genocide in Gaza; BEL collapsed their own messaging and aboveground presence into months of non-stop agitprop about how hard they were and how much they wanted to riot—isolating themselves and those they attracted in the movement, and abandoning the element of surprise that makes most direct actions effective.

Many of us, cut off from any organizations in attendance, found ourselves in an equally uncomfortable situation: the organizations who convened the event and whose crowds we relied on to initiate (and get away with) escalation viewed us with something between hostility and indifference, and as a result, we lacked the presence to tie our marginal victories to more substantial and ambitious tactical pursuits. But this sidelined projects that would've used crowd support and drove militants to plan riskier and more numerically isolated actions—or, as it turned out, lowered the ceiling for the median direct action to noise demos and heckling. Breaking through the security perimeter on Monday would have spurred mass buy-in and unpredictable next steps at an action convened by Within Our Lifetime (WOL) in New York—instead, Chicago's self-styled movement leaders directed the rest of the crowd away from the "free speech zone" and left the fence-breakers to contend with a morass of riot cops and press. Like we had during the prior year of the Palestine movement, wee found ourselves in a belowground at odds with its movement-disloyal aboveground.

Our conditions for success are the substantial material disruption of American funding and military aid on which the genocide in Gaza depends. Under present organizational conditions, this is out of our reach. Our inherited organizational philosophies and models work against any strategic unity of public-facing and below-ground organizing that would make this possible, instead favoring our being siloed away as the footsoldiers of unending, toothless pressure campaigns. To that end, the tactical reflections in this document will also attempt to map our role as belowground militants who find themselves at risk of outpacing their movement in the present conjuncture.

Marshals:

At Monday's march on the DNC, protest marshals linked arms to isolate militants advocating for a breakaway march towards the United Center, physically assaulting two protesters and attempting to hand even more over to the police. This effort was impressively coordinated, relying on

walkie-talkies, earpieces, and real-time coordination of personnel to respond to the "physical violence" of protesters attempting to protect their fellow militants from the overeager footsoldiers of the CPD. We underestimated the extent to which the marshals had prepared to confront us—"We've been training for months!" one shouted at us—and lacked similar technology to coordinate our response, trapping a sizable section of the more militant bloc at Monday's action in a pointless scuffle with the marshals, unaware as better placed and prioritized radicals got to work on the fence separating the "free speech zone" at Park No. 578 from the DNC itself. That uncoordinated scuffle with marshals did provide cover for the people who breached the security perimeter—but only accidentally.

The Freedom Road Socialist Organization's trained organizers, who represent Chicago's primary "movement-building" org in the Palestine movement, do not attempt to hide their regular disdain for crowds they view as unruly children. Their relation to the demonstrations they call is paternalistic, opting for commands and shouting on the loudspeaker if the crowd fails to comply. A protest culture that casts protests as finely managed pageants is a natural fit for marshals who understand themselves as CPD's first line of defense—which is what emerged at Monday's march and reappeared each day of the DNC. These marshals, to echo a liberal credo about the police, *were* "just doing their jobs." As public-facing spokespeople for the two marches on the DNC, they unilaterally took on responsibility for the actions of every protestor in attendance; when they physically lashed out at demonstrators, they did so out of a perverse attempt at self-preservation in the function handed down to them at their host organizations' training sessions. Given this fundamentally petty-bourgeois and managerial relation to the movement, CPD superintendent Snelling's praise that "the [Coalition] organizers have done a very good job policing themselves and policing each other" provides the actual yardstick by which we should measure their success and failure at the DNC. They won, we lost.

An aboveground that presumes to "represent" and maintain direct control over the entire content of the Palestine movement will prove inadequate for future legs of the struggle. Instead, aboveground organizers will need to facilitate practical experimentation by belowground militants, both in protest settings and otherwise—treating marches and movement campaigns not as well-ordered machines but as opportunities for new tactics and strategic partnerships to emerge. If this is not seriously pursued, the movement for Palestine will find itself confined to symbolic parades and endless water-is-wet stump speeches as the genocide continues.

Coordination:

In the months before August, the DNC was frequently compared to the summit-hopping of the anti-globalization movement. This comparison

is fair at first glance: the DNC concentrated disparate radicals around the country, gave them a relatively common purpose, and put them at odds with a whole array of police (local, federal, intelligence agencies, et cetera), a coalition of dead-end "movement building" orgs whose raison d'etre never seems to arrive, and an atypically well-trained corps of protest marshals.

However, these immediate similarities are less valuable than what distinguishes us from them: the old summit-hopping years featured national and international coordinating networks and federations that made these convergences more sizable and coordination between participating groups more feasible. By contrast, we were limited to accidental communication between affinity groups, with no means to cash out the hope we all shared that many simultaneous actions could spread the week's colossal police presence thinner and give us all better chances of success.

Action at the level of affinity groups only stumbled into one success in breaking through the fences on Monday, and missed the chance to capitalize on this open window before it closed permanently. Tuesday's attempt to force it back open at BEL's march on the Israeli consulate was disastrous, ending with mass arrests and no tangible windfall for the movement. We had previously assumed CPD's hands-off response to Monday's security perimeter breach indicated a shift towards passive counterinsurgency for the rest of the week—maybe money was primarily invested in surveillance and long-term security, not cracking skulls!—to our detriment.

Our enemies debrief when we do: the marshals and police managed us far more forcefully in the days after the fence came down, and the information they gathered from our one success colored their attempts to prevent us from ever succeeding again. The city built the fences higher, while CPD assigned more bike cops to later marches and kept the second march on the DNC from setting foot inside the park's "free speech zone."

We should be ready to achieve our goals the first time the window opens, not the second time after it's shut. In pursuit of this, we should develop specific goals with comrades well in advance, prepare tactically and technologically, and know how to take decisive action at the earliest intelligent opportunity. In the longer term, we need to solidify numerous (redundant) means by which we can plan with one another at scale.

Takeaways:

In the long term, success for underground, illegal, anti-system activists will depend on cultivating zones of indistinction between ourselves and the broader, legal movement, in which we can operate on a much larger field, freed from the burden of being an obvious minority, and potentially pull many sympathetic young activists in our direction in the process. Recent Chicago history furnishes an example of how this can be done.

In the summer of 2020, an umbrella of local organizations, including the Chicago chapter of Black Lives Matter, sponsored an action aimed at removing the statue of Christopher Columbus in Grant Park. They actively welcomed the participation of the so-called "horizontalists" now demonized by the clowns in the March on the DNC Coalition. The result was a welcome break from the endless parades that had by this point made a mockery of the militancy of the George Floyd rebellion, and today lead the Palestine solidarity movement into irrelevance. A hail of fireworks and La Croix cans forced the Chicago pigs, who had been beating on protesters all summer, to make a hasty retreat. The ensuing skirmishes, unfolding to a percussion section and the fiery speeches of a local BLM organizer, demonstrated that real militancy is possible across the lines imposed on us by radical liberalism and the funding structures of NGOs. This kind of action could have actually interrupted—or even shut down—the DNC.

Four years later, the Battle of Grant Park may seem like the exception that proves the rule. But it doesn't have to be this way. A serious revolutionary upsurge will require alliances that today seem almost impossible, and the example set by a militant minority can change movement organizers' conception of what is possible. In a moment of upsurge, activists trapped in NGOs, most often because they need a job, need not follow their leaders into the irrelevance of Democratic Party politics—just as militants should not consider anyone involved in these groups to simply be their inherent enemy.

What Can I Do in the Belowground?

- **Have an action plan!** Waiting for someone else to take advantage of open windows guarantees what happens next will be uncoordinated, and waiting for them to open spontaneously risks waiting forever. Go into actions with a specific playbook for two or three possible opportunities, whether initiated by you or someone else.
- **Be normal!** Match and lead your crowds, and *speak with them*. Learn and spread whatever culture and tactics are leading the movement without isolating yourself—in Chicago, this means leaving the 2000s-style black bloc at home and dressing like a regular person to whatever extent possible. Recognize whenever confrontations with the police or opportunities for breakaway actions present themselves: knowing how to ride the wave of an angry crowd is an acquired skill, but don't forget you are an active participant in the moment. Chants and calls to the broader crowd about whatever the pigs are up to have proven useful. During confrontations, don't be afraid to request crowds tighten up or pay attention to a new threat—people listen.
- **Skill up!** Learn how to de-arrest, practice arm-linking, grips, and grip breaking, hit the gym, and run regularly. Be ready to repeat a learned action under significant stress. Figure out what tools can help affect

immediate vibe shifts in the streets, learn how to use them, and how not to be apprehended with them. Bring your friends.

- **Be smart!** Communicate on Signal, make your phone number not searchable, and opt for a username. Leave your phone at home and work out how to use alternative means of communication during actions, cover identifying features without looking like a nutjob, read about how cops conduct surveillance and repression—and keep cameras out of your and your friends' faces.
- **Find each other!** You are not the only person—or crew—who wants to materially disrupt American support for the Gaza genocide! Work to balance necessary security with slow efforts to build capacity to coordinate bigger and better interventions in the movement.

What Can I Do in the Aboveground?

- If you are sympathetic to the radical edge of the street protests, **find your people!** If your organization is objectively conservative in the movement, find or build a new one! From the perspective of the street, movement orgs can seem monolithic and hostile to more radical elements—often because they are. However, some promising interstitial organizations and unique scenes exist: local Students for Justice in Palestine or Jewish Voices for Peace chapters not beholden to conservative oversight, or New York's combination of PYM, university SJPs, and WOL, respectively. If this is you, do what you can to carve space out for more ambitious and truly diverse tactics. Refuse to follow movement-policing commands from larger organizations and help encourage crowd support when street confrontations escalate. Start building trust with street militants.
- **Make room!** Emphasize to other organizers that calling a protest does not mean controlling it, and if possible, call protests that encourage autonomous actions. Shift as much as possible towards a style of marshaling that obstructs police repression instead of aiding it and obstructing militants. Approach mass actions as spaces where anything could happen instead of tightly-controlled demonstrations. Shift away from conservative attempts to use "safety" as a bludgeon against autonomous actions and instead prepare crowds for the possibility of escalation.
- **Be smart!** Compartmentalize at actions. More privacy around actions-within-actions and a culture that accommodates militancy instead of punishing it can foster a style of organizing that avoids the representative pitfalls that compelled the Coalition marshals to do CPD's work for them. People not involved in the action do not need to know about it, much less its details. Organizers do not need to know whether escalation comes from within or outside the organization.

- **Help shift the culture!** Do what you can to bring protest culture in line with the needs of its more radical participants without dropping the needs of less radical ones—this is what proper marshaling should make room for. Fight the racist "outside agitator" trope, encourage concealing your identity, remind others that there are no bad protestors, fight the tendency to use "anarchist" and "agitator" as a badjacketing slur, emphasize the necessity of confronting the police and cover for ambitious tactics when they emerge—including by discouraging overeager press presence. *Cameras towards the cops!*





To date, revolutions have given us nothing but defeats. Yet these unavoidable defeats pile up guarantee upon guarantee of the future final victory. There is but one condition. The question of why each defeat occurred must be answered. **– Rosa Luxemburg.** // There will be a special page in the book of life for the men who have crawled back from the grave. This page will tell of utter defeat, ruin, passivity, and subjection in one breath, and in the next, overwhelming victory and fulfillment. **– George Jackson.** // Palestine, in my opinion, is actually the most beautiful place; not because of her greenness, blueness, yellowness, redness, crops, bounty, or nature. Her beauty is that she is the one who answered my search for meaning, and she is the one who answered my existential questions, and who justifies my existence and cures my chronic anxieties. **– Basel al-Araj.** // We are all responsible for our dream of storming the heavens. We cannot turn ourselves into dwarves now, after having dreamed, elbow to elbow, each feeling the others' heartbeats, of attacking and overthrowing the gods. This is the dream that makes power afraid. **– A. M. Bonanno.** // 'Hope' is not a scientific category. Nor is it a necessary obligation in polemical writing. On the other hand, intellectual honesty is and I try to call it as I see it, however wrongheaded my ideas and analyses may be. I believe that we have arrived at a 'final conflict' that will decide the survival of a large part of poor humanity over the next half century. Against this future we must fight like the Red Army in the rubble of Stalingrad. Fight with hope, fight without hope, but fight absolutely. **– Mike Davis.** // It must be admitted that Brown assumed tremendous responsibility in making war upon the peaceful people of Harper's Ferry, but it must be remembered also that in his eye a slave-holding community could not be peaceable, but was, in the nature of the case, in one incessant state of war. **– Frederick Douglass.** // Extermination or communism is the choice – but this communism must be more than just the sharing of wealth (who wants all this shit?) – it must inaugurate a whole new way of working together. **– Antonio Negri.** // The next 50 to 100 years or so, beginning from now, will be a great era of radical change in the social system throughout the world, an earth-shaking era without equal in any previous historical period. Living in such an era, we must be prepared to engage in great struggles which will have many features different in form from those of the past. **– Mao Tse-Tung.** // The crisis is permanent, the government is but provisional. **– Karl Marx.**