

Protesting the G20: A Waste of Time?

During the G20 ministerial meetings in Toronto, the sensational images of burning police cruiser cars and broken shop windows dominated the newspaper headlines. This is what the world saw.

What I saw in Toronto was radically different.

On June 21st, I travelled to Toronto in a van filled with activists and journalists from around the county to participate in protests at the G20 meetings. Using brightly colored rainbow paint, we displayed our concerns with the G20 agenda on the doors and bumpers of our caravan. From shut down the tar sands to sign the UN convention on the right to water, our messages expressed our beliefs that issues central to our vision of a more just and sustainable world are being ignored by the leaders of the G20.

Building on protests at the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference, the protests in Toronto were part of a much larger effort to question the inequality of the status

quo. A network of civil society groups known as the anti-globalization or alter-globalization movement, hold values rooted in anti-corporate and anti-colonial struggle. Public protest is just one way the movement aims to affect change. Groups also meet annually at the World Social Forum to share ideas and build alternatives.

Toronto was an excellent networking and educational opportunity. I had the chance to connect with community activists from across the country who are concerned about poverty and homelessness amidst the wealth in their communities issues similar to those that we are experiencing in Winnipeg. I was also able to expand



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my knowledge on issues unique to other communities that have a global impact, such as the Tar Sands in Fort McMurray Alberta.

Seeing the images of broken windows and flaming cars constantly repeated by the media was demoralizing because this was such a small part of a greater action that included educational forums and lectures by well-known activists like Naomi Klein and Maude Barlow and creative and peaceful demonstrations which made Toronto a truly important and memorable event. However these aspects of the Toronto protests and the valid reasons that brought thousands of people together to protest were virtually ignored by the media.

At the height of Saturday's protests, I saw twenty five thousand Canadians exercising their political agency in a way I have never before seen. It was truly inspiring and it brought me hope to know that so many people care about these issues and are doing something about it.

Returning to Winnipeg meant coming back to everyday reality. My Dad told me that protesting at the G20 was unproductive and ineffective. I was crushed. Suddenly, riding in my parents' car, I felt powerless. He was not the only one sending this message to his children. Many of my friends received similar text messages from their parents as well. In Toronto, discussing alternatives in the caravan with other activists, and holding my sign proudly on the streets of Toronto, I felt like we were changing things. But

at home I began to question whether or not we were making any difference at all. Perhaps we just had the illusion of change because we were surrounded by like-minded people. When my Dad asked me what did the protests change? I didn't have an answer. They certainly did not change the G20 agenda.

But my question for him and his generation is: what will change things, then? If protesting is meaningless, as he suggests, what can we do to create a more just society?

Surely my parents and others are concerned about the same issues we are. But what are they doing about it? Too often they don't challenge them directly and they don't encourage their kids to do so either. My dad reminds me that some choose to work quietly at incremental change rather than taking to the streets. But has that worked?

Would it be better if people did not protest at all? What if we all stayed in our comfortable homes, transfixed to our big screen TVs, ignoring the reality around us? Should we really just accept the status quo that makes the poor, poorer and allows the environmental destruction that is ruining our planet? Where are all the people who protested in the 60s and 70s that inspired many of today's activists? Have they given up on fighting for their ideals? I fear that too many people from my parents' generation have abandoned their ideals because they think eliminating poverty or weaning ourselves off our oil addiction just isn't realistic.

Not only is protesting important, it is our fundamental right. Many of my friends were denied this right when the police unlawfully detained them in appalling conditions for protesting peacefully, more specifically, for holding hands in a semi-circle. In order to preserve our right and ensure this does not happen again, a public inquiry into police conduct and detainee conditions is absolutely essential.

I don't agree with my dad and others that say our efforts were a waste of time. Protesting the G20 gave activists from across the country the opportunity to learn and network, as well as express and raise awareness about their discontent for current systems and policies. Protesting was undoubtedly better than doing nothing at all, and incremental changes alone are not making the impact necessary. Were past protests for civil rights, women's rights and worker's rights a waste of time? Just a hundred years ago the women's right to vote did not seem realistic either. But like speaking out against the tar sands, fighting for the right to water, and calling to end poverty, it was necessary. Protesting made it a reality.

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