

# Protest culture: How's it working for us?

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I live in Toronto and in any given week (outside of G20 season) I receive no less than 10 (and usually more) call outs for protests, rallies, marches, pickets, vigils or other actions supporting a variety of causes. Like every other activist, I support these causes but find it impossible to actually attend all the actions. I further wonder if there might be other ways of serving their goals. Of course, before strategies and tactics can be discussed, it becomes necessary to elaborate the vision and goals that inform them. For a skeletal outline of a vision, I refer readers to my previous article published on Rabble: ["Community, Relationship Framework and Implications for Activism."](#) I don't own that vision. It comes out of ancient teachings as well as out of interacting with colleagues, friends and ancestors. Nevertheless, if we can generally agree that a relationship framework is intrinsic to our vision, then there are crucial implications for our strategies and tactics.

As someone who grew up in the midst of the Civil Rights, American Indian and Brown Power Movements, I recall what made organizations like the Black Panthers, for whom I sold newspapers in my childhood, powerful and dangerous in the eyes of authorities, and admirable to me. It was the way in which they won over the hearts and minds of their communities by

enacting self-empowerment with child breakfast programs, senior escort services and free health care -- all implemented without a penny of government funding.

We can discuss how effective or not these movements were at achieving their goals but regardless of which side we come down on in the debates, I think most of us recognize that protest isn't sufficient to usher in the kind of changes we seek.

Besides, who has the time to make 10 demos a week? Who has the energy to negotiate ongoing coalition building with the myriad of social change groups out there? What are the implications of our dependence on protest tactics for differently-abled people? For women with children? For people living outside of major centers who can't afford regular travel? Who ends up playing



leadership roles in our movements that centralize protest and mass action as the focal point of social change? Why do we count attendance at our activities as a measure success without significant efforts to measure shifts in thinking of those both present and not?

Don't get me wrong. I believe that many protests and actions are useful, helpful and downright necessary. There are moments when you just have to protect land from development; defend Our Relations (and the food chain) from industrial pollutants; protect lives from state and corporate violence; advocate for consumer boycotts, divestment and sanctions that weaken genocidal corporations and; take advantage of international scrutiny to make a point (or several points) at key historical junctures.

I'm also well aware that many activists are involved in community-building activities such as providing services, advocating for individuals in crisis, training, awareness-raising, etc. While we acknowledge that crisis services (especially government funded ones) don't fix the fundamental problems that arise from our colonized/capitalist political economy (and it can be argued, services actually exacerbate dependency and disempowerment) we still understand that in building relationships with people we are able to engage their hearts and minds and cultivate growing support for our varied goals and ultimate vision. Not to mention that we, ourselves, are transformed in the act of working for change with others.

Sometimes, though, I wonder whether there is an imbalance between protesting, with all that entails, and facilitating community empowerment, in which the former gets more time and attention. As a



form of resistance, is protest the highest aspiration of community empowerment? I further wonder, what is the most effective balance of resources allocated to say, organizing protests versus nurturing a shift in thinking and preparing for the inevitable demise of capitalism? Are there some alternatives to protest that might more effectively support the person-by-person transformations that need to happen to accomplish our goals and establish the vision we share?

I have some suggestions in this regard. As activists we excel at harnessing resources for actions, education and legal defense funds. How about allocating some of those resources to community empowerment? For example, how about supporting community gardening? Or enabling groups to purchase eco-friendly vehicles to be used for community purposes? Investing in our own renewable energy sources to power our activities and community spaces? How about supporting collective childcare? Food distribution co-ops? Community kitchens? The provision of alternative healthcare services? Arts and sporting activities for youth and

children aimed at indigenizing (decolonizing) our relationships?

The list of possible community building activities is endless:

Communities around the globe are increasingly empowering themselves in a variety of ways. Red Cloud Renewable Energy Centre on the Pine Ridge Reservation trains "solar warriors" in the building and maintenance of solar water heaters, solar electric systems, straw bale building, wind breaks, organic gardening and small-scale wind power.

In Japan they have created an alternative to cash payments for Elder care called fureai kippu (caring relationship ticket). In this system, an alternative to institutionalization, services for seniors, such as grocery shopping, escorts and cooking meals are paid off in the form of credits that can be traded in for services years later or given away to pay the cost of another elderly person's support.

This is a system that could be used for a variety of services within a community. Tickets could be traded for yoga instruction, childcare, house painting, bike repair, driving services or fresh produce from a community garden. Similarly, there are thousands of global communities employing a form of LETS (local exchange trading system). Information and instructions as to how LETS works are online.

Anyone who doesn't believe these can be radically transformative actions has only to consider, for example, recent lobbying efforts on the part of agribusiness aimed at getting the U.S. government to ban, or at least legislate, backyard gardening. Or understand how the medical establishment, particularly pharmaceutical companies, fights universal coverage for alternative healthcare, despite evidence of its effectiveness. Consider the flexibility it gives individuals and families when they decrease their dependence on the cash economy. Imagine the quality of relationships and self-empowerment that result from creating, caring for and nurturing rather than destroying, stopping or dismantling something that will be fixed or replaced tomorrow (laws, policies or windows). Consider the blow it deals capitalism when people become increasingly independent of an unjust economic system.

I am not naive enough to believe that those in power will ignore us. Sooner or later we will be confronted. Whether we are beat down, imprisoned and killed (like Dudley George and Fred Hampton) or we emerge victorious by using community authored tactics and strategies, will in part depend on the numbers we represent; the hearts and minds we shift through our work; the strength and resilience of our communities. Our transformational/revolutionary power lies in role-modeling care, dignity and respect for ourselves and Our Relations.

If we really believe that capitalism is unsustainable then we also must believe it does not require much assistance to collapse. It will collapse under its own weight. We must act with the courage and faith of our convictions. Yes, we must protect life and draw lines in the sand to ensure survival and well being NOW. But what will come after capitalism's collapse if we are not prepared with healthy, sustainable community-based alternatives? Who will create the new and better world if we, who have achieved a level of consciousness, don't start acting on our beliefs? Besides, don't these alternatives, in and of themselves, contribute to the demise of a poisonous and violent system? Personally, I want to be nurturing life when I go down in struggle. I want nurturing life to BE my struggle.