

Iraq war actions; an evaluation, Belfast

At Giro's Resource/Info Space, Wednesday 21st May 2003

This was attended by around a dozen people, with a few more coming in during the meeting. **It was organised jointly by the Justice Not Terror Coalition (JNTC) and Giro's** and open to anyone who wished to come.

After initial introductions, a brainstorm list was made of all the actions done. This was then worked through with people making comments on the action, its aims, execution (carrying out), effectiveness and any other comments regarding reactions from the public, police, or media. The focus was what was done locally in Belfast but comments on elsewhere were welcome.

Comments (which are indented below) are mainly attached to the item listed although some may have referred more to another item. Where not self-explanatory some factual explanation may have been added here but comments of judgement are those expressed during the meeting. There was deliberately no attempt to arrive at a 'consensus' on actions although it is clear this generally existed; however comments below were generally made by only one person.

THE LIST

- Legal support

This and literature were developed and important for e.g. the Hillsborough demo and other actions when Bush and Blair were in Northern Ireland.

- Nightly vigil [at City Hall]

This went on for around a month and was a silent vigil organised by Witness. It had a broad appeal, looked well, kept a focus once war started. Attendance wasn't always great, and a maximum of 20. It also had the power of silence.

- JNTC stall

This was a weekly event Thursday lunch-time in Belfast City Centre from September, with a petition [mainly to the British government/Blair] and leafleting. It was good in terms of general visibility and the media, and the latter was stronger because of the presence of Mairead Corrigan Maguire. When Blix was presenting his first report, the petition (and its carefully timed delivery to Castle Buildings at Stormont) meant there was a local angle to the big story, and excellent media coverage.

- Walk out

There was a walk out from universities and schools the day the war started. It was spontaneous and people felt powerful. There was a contrast between being allowed block the roads in Belfast city centre then, the police allowing people to let off steam, and the police reaction on 'Bush Tuesday' (although one school student had his arm broken during the latter, it was felt it would have looked bad to attack school students the day war broke out).

The number of people prepared to take civil disobedience was impressive and contrasted with British and US governments breaking international law.

There was confusion beforehand as to when demos would take place (on the day war broke out or the day after – 'Day x' or 'x + 1') but in fact things just happened.

Things did get a bit nasty at the US Consulate in Queen Street where for a while it degenerated into an anti-police focus. Also US flags were set on fire, and some people tried to stop this, with potential for a fight. Police kept out of the way in Donegall Place.

The question was asked why police were protecting the US Consulate, and whether they paid for this protection.

- Petrol/Shell Station action [Great Victoria Street]

This was a blockade of the two entrances for an hour or more, the first time lock-on blockading has been used in Belfast. The police were friendly, kept out of it, and asked how long it would go on for, even intervening when cars threatened to drive at people. It looked well and there were around 50 people there but the lack of getting a contact list together meant people couldn't be contacted afterwards.

- Bikes not Bombs

There were two anti-war cycle actions in Belfast (slow cycle 'critical mass' cycle actions happen anyway). One of these had about 30 people and a heavy police presence which helped draw attention and gave support to the action. The focus was on a 'war about oil' and sustainability. The police blocked off the West Link at one stage because they were worried about cyclists going on it, which they weren't intending.

- Food not Bombs

Food not Bombs had free food at a number of demos, maybe ten in total, focusing on weapons and arms. There was a good feeling about it.

- 15th February march/rally [Belfast one organised by ICTU-backed Stop the War Coalition]

Up to 50,000 in Belfast, 3 million in Rome, 2 million in Barcelona. Great.

It was felt Blair changed tack afterwards emphasising that it was a 'humanitarian' war because 'we care for the Iraqis'. The demo in London was felt to help local turnout because of the build up in atmosphere through the media coverage of London. In some places the media played a very negative role, e.g. in Italy saying how many people stayed at home (!) in comparison to the marchers. The pro-war ['support our boys'] rally at Belfast City Hall only had about 200 people at it.

- Body Outlines

This was done by a small group early in the morning using children's paint with washing up liquid. Felt to be useful, the police only intervened actively when outside the US Consulate was done. Others did use spray paint.

- Subvertising posters and stickers

e.g. 'Brits out of Iraq', or pointing out the Good Friday Agreement's commitment to exclusively 'peaceful means' in contrast with British and US policies on Iraq. Also Witness slogan 'Fight fire with water'.

- Jam action

- Hillsborough in and out

The 'jam action' was during the ICTU 'Bush Tuesday' die in at the City Hall, slogan 'Jam War, Spread Peace'. The intention had been to go to the City Hall demo and then on to the US Consulate but the action degraded because of police activity. Drums brought some life to what might otherwise have been a bit boring. The ICTU claimed their demo was hijacked but some people involved were delegates to the ICTU Stop the War Coalition and pressed for the retraction of a press statement subsequently issued. Others attending the ICTU demo were already blocking the road when the 'Jammers' arrived. The ICTU press statement didn't specify where (road/path) the die-in would take place but they were worried about members' reactions. Those who stayed on the road were engaged in peaceful nonviolent protest and what looked like an undertaking to the police to get demonstrators off the road legitimised police violence. There was a potential riot situation but it stayed relatively peaceful, and people chanted 'Peaceful protest'.

The police were relatively well behaved in Hillsborough at the same time, maybe because of a different approach by the officer in charge but also because they knew they had security sown up in a 'closed' town. However one man was beaten up in police custody the night before.

The need to work together closely, support arrestees better; contrast with being arrested in anti-Iraq war action in New York when 200 people stood there with heads down as arrested.

Also the need to respect different ways of taking action.

On the Monday night in Hillsborough, a potentially dangerous situation was defused by a union guy who spoke out for 'free speech' when a man climbed a lamp post and started speaking pro-war (some bottles were thrown).

Coverage of actions in Hillsborough, e.g. JNTC banner on Monday night, die in by a small group on Tuesday, was good. The banner action could have lasted longer if people handcuffed themselves to the fence.

We were however relatively unprepared for action in Hillsborough because we thought we couldn't get in, and we could. The police had hyped up their 'ring of steel' and it looked bad for them when it was penetrated. Although media access was severely restricted in Hillsborough there was enough of a media presence to have some media impact.

- Palace barracks (Holywood) 'Reclaim the bases' action

There wasn't as much surveillance there as expected. It focused on 'support the troops' by not subjecting them to war, depleted uranium, and the risk of being injured by so-called 'friendly fire' etc. Getting people to Holywood was an issue (transport).

- Bunnies

'Bunnies against the war' appeared at the JNTC stall and delivered petitions to US Consulate, and appeared later at the Shell garage action. The linking with spring and 'life' was good and pointed to the war being ridiculous but the only media coverage (Radio Ulster) focused almost exclusively on 'is this trivialising the war?'.

- Speak out at City Hall

Two have been held, one more the coming Saturday. Participative, symbolic venue.

- Die-in at US Consulate

Done by various people, including JNTC at the US Consulate the day war started, after the main demo had moved away.

- Stormont Demo

There were a couple of small demos there including JNTC presentation of signatures which was well covered by the media.

- Shannon demos, buses

A few buses went from Belfast to the bigger demos. The Grassroots Gathering in October had focused on it as an issue. Others had also gone down.

- 12th April march and rally

Good, big. ICTU spokesperson booed when opposed war but supported 'our boys'. Energy dissipated by too many and long speeches, needed more participation e.g. with a speak in, there was no space for free expression. Organisers refused to advertise/mention Peace Party at Cornmarket.

- Madrid Independent Referendum

Big independent referendum on 'should the government have had a referendum before supporting war?'. Police didn't intervene or bother at all.

- Shaftesbury Square

Demo happened a couple of times, leafleting and presence of anti-war 'rocket' etc.

- Peace Party at Cornmarket

Twice at Cornmarket. Excellent, lovely. Hassled once by police due to traders pressure as only 2 hours amplified sound allowed.

- Peace Cabaret

Two at Giro's, the first raised £600 for save the Children, the second for things there. There was also one at the Menagerie as a fundraiser for the Anti-War Movement.

- Spray paint, chalk on road
A couple of people were arrested and cautioned for a paint bomb at the US Consulate but even though red gloss paint was used the shift change in the police guard meant it wasn't taken further.
- Drums at demos
Felt gave life to bigger demos.
- Space at Giro's
[Now Info/Resource Space] Good. Materials to make props, banners, placards.
- Video night
Organised by anarchist ASF. Went really well. But 'Real IRA' bomb scare at Front Page bar meant place completely searched by police.
- Belly Buttons against the War
Made appearance at US Consulate with message on belly buttons. Humour.
- Videos and photos of war actions
Great, useful. At Giro's Info Space. Others also have.
- Articles
- Indymedia
- Main media
Several articles were written, and anything happening was put onto the Irish Indymedia site, and there was a good cameraman contact at the BBC. Could have used local Indymedia site as contacts taken down twice in Dublin.
- Court cases
Good support by people for those charged
- Drunk
'Performance art' of acting drunk with placard 'Getting well oiled in Iraq'. But some of the public not used to ironic humour/politics and thought was drunk. Dressed as undertaker on 15th February with placard 'More wars please', some people also thought serious (e.g. one policeperson who was present when same individual told Queen Elizabeth 'Tell Tony no war', by placard).
- Theatre and costumes
Great.
- International Women's Day presence at Cornmarket
Some media coverage. Also 'Axis of Evel Knievel' street theatre. Brief reading of 'Lysistrata' (updated) which could have been used more.

● Final discussion focussed on the possibility of a further demo at the US Consulate, e.g. focusing on the lies we were told, and that we hold the US and UK accountable for the humanitarian and general situation in Iraq.

□ Facilitation at this evaluation meeting was by Rob Fairmichael who wrote up these notes and says "Impressive list, huh?"

● JNTC also received the following comment by e-mail:

"the email contact is great and much appreciated

ICTU backing for marches essential

there needs to be many more posters and leaflets for marches

much more contact with individuals/groups in rural areas needed, and

thought needs to be given to how this is best achieved – community relations

Officers in Councils and Rural Community Networks have address lists for groups, which could be mailed for marches."