

# Action and Insurgency

## An Interview with a Nepalese Activist



In May a coach load of activists from India and Nepal came to Britain as part of the Inter-Continental Caravan. While here they did an office action on a bio-technology greenwash company and visited a squatted ex-genetic test site (see page XXX). The Anarchist Teapot Action Kitchen did the catering, making them dinner and following them across fields with giant pans. As one of the cooks I was lucky enough to have many interesting chats with both the Indians and Nepalese. What follows is one such chat I had in the coach on the way back from the Crop Squat.

**Could you tell me what organization you're involved in in Nepal?**

I am involved in two. One is '*INHURED*', (*International Institute for Human Rights, Environment and Development*), based in Katmandu, which is 10 years old. We are also part of a national network of movements which is called the '*National Concerned Society*'.

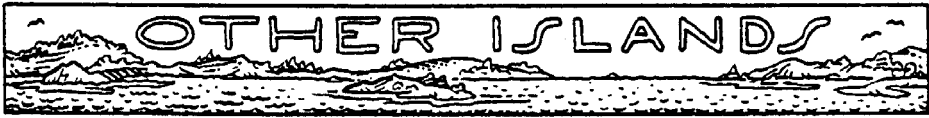
A lot of work we do involves monitoring the policies of governments, international financial institutions and multinationals. We fight a lot of legal cases against the government and companies through the local & supreme courts and we've won several.

In the last five years we have been focusing more on environmental campaigns, particularly relating to the construction of large dams either planned or under construction. We are actively involved in opposition to privatisation of all kinds. We are opposing Nepal joining the World Trade

Organization (WTO). Nepal is the only country in South Asia that is not yet a member of the WTO. With groups in India, where the negative effects of the WTO are already visible, we are pushing a strong campaign to prevent Nepal joining. All in all our campaigns are mainly environmental campaigns, anti-dam campaigns, campaigns against privatisation.

We have been filing a series of cases in the supreme court of Nepal against the construction of large dams, many of which we have a great possibility of winning. Last year we won a case against the privatisation (and sell off to Western companies) of the telecommunications sector. We also won the case against the Arun Three Hydro-Electric Dam five years back. We do a lot of networking with local movements. Wherever there are development projects and people who want to resist them we travel to the villages. We spend several days with the farmers

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and help them define the issues and develop campaigns. We give them training and assist them in local actions, in acts of resistance, in building local movements. These are actions free from the influence of political parties, and free from any type of NGO (Non Governmental Organisation) influence. These are actions by victims and communities. Though we work with some NGOs at a national level we oppose the work of many who create a lot of dependence, ignore the real issues and mislead the social movements.

## Nepal in Brief

**Ecology** Nepal is a landlocked country in the Himalayas with three distinct geographical regions: the fertile, tropical plains of Terai, the central plateaus, covered with rainforest, and the Himalayan mountains, where the world's highest peaks are located. The climate varies according to altitude, from rainy and tropical, to cold in the high mountains. **Population** 22,021,000 (1996) of which only 10.6% are urban. **Agriculture** Over 80% of Nepal work in agriculture. Main crops are rice, sugarcane, tobacco, jute and cereals. Livestock is also important; sheep and buffalo. **Languages** Nepali is only spoken by half of the population, Tibetan is the second most common. Many speak one of a high diversity of ethnic languages. **Religion** Hinduism 86.2 %, Buddhism 7.8 %, Muslim 3.8 %. Remainder consisting mainly of ethnic religions. **Capital** Kathmandu, 660,000 people. **The State** Parliament with a powerful and active monarchy, under control of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Armed Forces, 35,000 (1994), Police 28,000.

We bring local people to Katmandu, we provide popular forums and we get them access to the media. The day after we have secured national media coverage we bring them to negotiate with the companies and the government. If that doesn't work we take legal action. Local direct action of many kinds is done also. It depends on the situation, and that is decided by the local people.

*'Development is something done by outsiders, local people are never involved.'*

## Tell us about corporations and the process of development in Nepal?

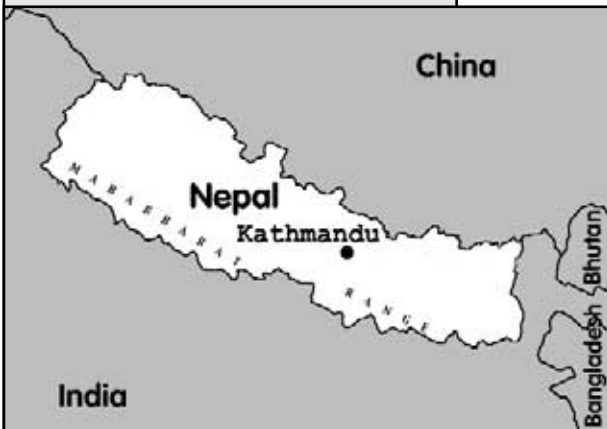
All Nepal's development projects are financed by Western donors, or International NGOs or the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Local people are never informed or consulted about what will happen to them. The information is simply not there, never mind in local languages. Everything is dictated and imposed from the top. Development is something done by outsiders, local people are never involved.

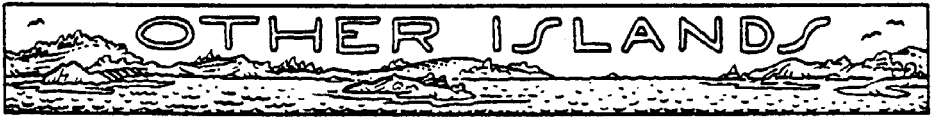
There are hardly any Environmental Impact Assessments. There are some, but they are not effective or participatory. They are done by consultants in Katmandu to justify bad projects. Sometimes they have mitigation plans but again, they are not made with the involvement of the local people. Even if there are mitigation plans they lack funds.

There are problems of compensation & resettlement. Nepal is an agricultural country and it has no cash economy in rural areas. The displaced are given cash. They are given no help in finding themselves land and they become homeless in a few months. It's a big problem. In the future we will see hundreds of thousands displaced if the big dams we are opposing are built.

At the center of the struggle against big dams are the local people, particularly the indigenous peoples and ethnic groups. Their right to their culture and their traditional means of survival are not respected, they're forced to leave the land. So we fight the developments with the indigenous people. If the dam cannot be stopped then we fight for benefits for the local people. For drinking water, electricity, irrigation- whatever.

Nepal is under the structural readjustment of the World Bank and





International Monetary Fund (IMF). So Nepal is basically governed by the global financial institutions. They are preparing the ground for investment from multinational companies particularly in forestry and water resources. Nepal's water resources are the second largest in the world after Brazil. Indian, US, & Norwegian corporations are coming in. The British government especially is pushing for privatisation and the opening up of Nepal to British companies.

In the past few years multinationals have been very active in Nepal in the production of junk food like crisps and soft drinks like coca cola. The majority of the population have no proper drinking water, but you find beer and alcohol all over the country, in any quantity. We are wasting more than half of our grain crop on the production of alcohol. That has led to severe poverty and malnourishment. So these are the kind of issues behind any development project that we are fighting.

**What kind of struggles, actions and tactics are local people using to resist this development and their internalisation into the global economy?**

Local people are still not very organized. In the past development has been defined as anything coming from outside with foreign money, foreign experts, foreign technology. It was seen as a positive thing, but increasingly no longer after a series of cases where local people have not benefitted but have been harmed. So now people are beginning to understand. What is lacking in them is information and strategy on how they can campaign, what legal tools can they use and what direct actions can they take. So for the past few years we have been focusing on training at local levels. Getting information, organizing training, preparing actions. Helping them understand their local struggles in the context of globalisation and the country as a whole. Giving them a more complete understanding of how this system works and why they are not benefitting. It is very difficult as most are illiterate and almost totally ignorant about what is happening outside of their area.

We have been exchanging farmer-activists from one part of the country to another. So different communities learn and get empowered by each other. This is very, very effective. These experienced activists prepare local people for action. Non-violent or sometimes violent. While we in Katmandu mobilise the media and fight the court cases in favor of the people resisting. If their struggle is related to a development project with the involvement of any foreign country or world bank, or IMF or ADB or

multinationals we always try to find friends and groups and activists in those countries where these companies are based and together plan international campaigns. So we have been linking up and coordinating local direct actions with national level advocacy and international level campaigns.

**Most of the readers of this magazine are people who are involved in campaigns, direct action and local struggles either in Britain or in Europe. They would be very interested to know what tactics people are using in Nepal on the ground on actions. For instance you mentioned some were non-violent and some were violent. Is it blockades, stopping work?**

Well, mostly in the struggles that we have been involved with, local people have been stopping the operation of the Hydro-power projects, often for several days. Taking over buildings, preventing the officials and workers of the company getting into their offices and carrying out maintenance. They also divert the water from the turbine tunnels to their land. This stops the generation of electricity. They block roads, they prevent public transportation. They organize protests and demonstrations with slogans and banners on the street. They also embarrass government officials and political leaders who are in opposition to their struggles. These are the kind of activities at local levels.

**What kind of numbers are involved in say the occupation of the Hydro-Electric Schemes?**

Okay there is one case where we saw about 10,000 people mobilised using direct action to prevent the generation of electricity for several days. 10,000 people, for 24 hours and by rotation. It's like taking over. Taking over the entire complex. All the offices of the company. So its anything from hundreds to ten-thousands.

We do not get involved in actions when there is no consensus at the local level. We invest lots of time and energy first in convincing everyone that their fight is for everyone. It has nothing to do with any particular political party or ideology. So we avoid any confrontations or divisions among ourselves based on ideology and political manipulation. We are completely neutral in our actions. It doesn't matter who is in government, who is in power, we are critical of them.

**Has the scale of direct action been growing in the last couple of years & what kind of numbers across the whole country?**

We have been involved in about thirty local movements and actions all over the country. They are

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related to the dams, the irrigation projects, drinking water, conservation areas. It's growing and people are taking local actions sometimes even without our knowledge, but based on what they have heard about our campaigns. So we have basically developed strategies that anyone can use. We have little brochures about it, which explain if there is a development what do you do? How do you meet? How do you form an action group. The *National Concerned Society* is a network of local action groups.

Anyone can participate and there is no need for funding from outside. We give our time free and rely on each others hospitality. When we are in the village they feed us and when they come to Katmandu we take care of their expenses. So there is no need of foreign money and there is a trust because they see we have no monetary interest. It is very important that we are not seen as an NGO. It is so hard for us to convince people we are not NGOs and doing it for money. NGOs have a very bad reputation

So we always say first fight for information. Fight for compensation. Decide what you want to get out of that project. What benefits and know about the conditionalities that are being imposed from outside. Ask the developers if there will be training for local



people, if there is no employment then kick them out. Ask for land to land compensation- don't take money. So with these few campaign tips people are taking action all over the country. There can be no development project from now on without more and more education about all these issues of privatisation and globalisation of the economy. Without more battles in the courts. Without more actions, blockades, occupations. With every gain in a struggle the other communities become stronger through learning about it from the network. This is what we will be doing in the future.

**Could you tell me about the reaction of the elite and the state to both your organisation and the demonstrations? Are those involved in direct action under threat?**

Because of the kind of reputation we already have politicians blame us even if we are not directly involved. These people in government think that the people of Nepal have no clue about how to take actions and that we are the ones who do them. We are called anti-development, agents of Western environmentalists, sometimes dollar eaters- doing these things because someone is giving us money. There is a lot of character assassination in the media, all types of lies are told about us. Whenever we visit the communities and project sites they create local pro-corporate/government NGO's to confront us and harass local peoples. We have been physically attacked. Doing these sort of actions in Nepal is very risky, physically risky. Our network which tries to help these struggles is small and many of my past colleagues and friends, nearly all of them have joined NGO's- have become Project Consultants.

**Have been assimilated into the System?**

Yes, have been assimilated into the system, have become consultants, have become political party workers. Have become tools and the NGO's fund their election campaigns. We do not belong to any political parties and we are very critical of them all. We basically oppose the donors & we oppose foreign aid. We just say *No to Foreign Aid. It did not help and it will not help.* So we are very unpopular among the donors and among international financial institutions and Western governments that have money in Katmandu.

We are treated like enemies by political parties including the leftist political party. Last year for instance we were holding a meeting at the office. The police came to the office, seized all documents, and prevented the meeting. They arrested one of our campaigners under the Subversion Act, and put him

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in jail for 11 days. Those who have been involved for many years are in danger. All over the country we have physical danger and risk. The police hate us for our exposes of human rights abuse particularly in relation to the Maoist insurgency. We are very critical of the government suppression of the Maoist's. It is carried out in a very oppressive way, repressing the innocent in the name of suppression of the Maoist movement. We are also of course critical of Maoists when they take actions against civilians. So we are fighting for the protection of civilians from both sides.

## **Could you tell us about the Nepalese political situation surrounding the Maoist Insurgency?**

Nepal restored the multi-party system in 1990 which was brought together by the Liberal and Communist parties. The Communist Parties also joined parliament. They secured seats as the opposition and when later the majority party government was dissolved by the president there was a call for another election but no-one got a majority. *The Communist Party of Nepal Unified Marxist-Leninist* formed the government- for 9 months. In 9 months they were totally co-opted. They followed everything which the US, IMF, ADB & World Bank told them to do. Now they are preparing to join the WTO. *'Oh yeah we will privatize everything. No problem we're preparing to become a member.'* So we have lost the strength and credibility of the left movement in this country. This is very unfortunate. The government are not delivering, health, economic reform, social justice.

In reaction to the increasing corruption and co-option of the Communist Party & the left movement and the NGOisation of social movements; the Maoists formed the *Communist Party of Nepal Maoist*, launching the underground movement. In their statements and actions they oppose multinationals. They oppose privatization. They oppose globalisation. They oppose big dams. They fight for land reforms, proclaiming that the only solution for Nepal is armed revolution.

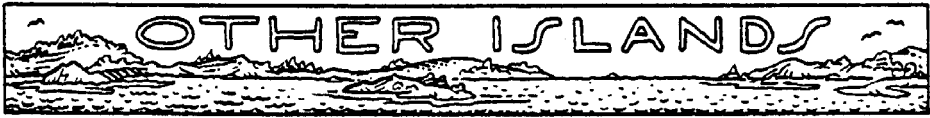
The state response has been very brutal, very repressive. People are just killed, children are killed, women are raped, innocent people are murdered on the suspicion that they maybe Maoist sympathizers. The situation is that anybody could be killed any time by the police- civilians, activists, and people like us, on the ground that whatever we are doing we are supporting the Maoists. So it has become a serious game. If something is not done in the near future Nepal will end up in a full scale civil war- what we used to see in the 70's in the Philippines. We will see a militarized state like Pinochet in Chile in reaction to the Maoists. It will be very unfortunate. India is very involved in the conflict. It of course wants a pro-Indian government in place so it can take over the Nepali market for Indian multinationals. To take over Nepal's water resources, to build large dams for the making of thousands of thousands of megawatts of electricity for the Indian market and industries. America too has interests in Nepal- with ENRON and other companies involved in big dam projects.

The US are already providing counter-insurgency training for the military and police and giving all sorts of assistance - including monetary assistance to suppress the Maoist movement. The suppression of the Maoists will also mean the suppression of all popular movements and critical opposition. They may be environmental activists, they may be human rights activists. They may be those opposing privatization, globalisation and multinationals. I am not involved in the Maoist movement and looking at it from outside it is very difficult to see how the Maoists will create their revolution. I don't know how they are going to continue their struggles with no assistance from other countries and fighting an Indian & US backed enemy. Especially as they are the only ones carrying on in resistance a continuity of some kind of left, social, mass movement.

## **A friend who went to stay in Mexico said that the major effect of the Zapatistas was not the action**



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**the armed group itself takes but the political space and opportunity they opened up for social movements. Has that been similar in Nepal?**

Yes. Their struggle is also creating lots of social movements in other sectors. Women, Indigenous peoples, labor, students, intellectuals. So many other social fronts are being created in the past four years, that didn't exist at all before as movements.

**How many people is it generally accepted are in the Maoist Insurgency?**

It is presumed they have around five to six thousand. But they will grow. Unless the parties in power make big shifts in their policies and programs in addressing social and economic problems. Unless they stand against globalisation and privatisation these parties are just going to lose their credibility. The only alternative will be counter-movements.

**This will be a rather long winded question I'm afraid. If it is possible that the Maoists succeed in either creating social revolution in the whole country or controlling significant territory, many of us in our movement would support that. However most of us come from an Anarchist position of being against the Nation state and having seen the Left win over and over again in these battles in the last hundred years, only to replicate the authoritarian principles of the organisations and classes they fought against. So to a certain extent that is why we have been so inspired by the Zapatista's because they have openly said that they do not want to conquer power, but to do away with the nation state and let local communities become autonomous. What is the Nepalese Maoist's position on local autonomy and the nation state?**

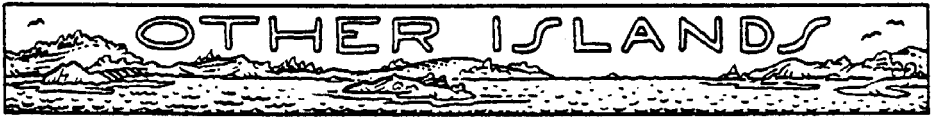
Regarding their strategy for power, they are for the abolition of the monarchy and they are for a Republic of Nepal. With regards to local autonomy they have said that they will guarantee complete

local autonomy for communities and ethnic and indigenous groups. Nepal is very diverse culturally and linguistically. So that is where the Maoists have a lot of attraction for people. Many indigenous peoples movements, and ethnic groups, support the Maoist movement and some have gone underground to join the insurgency. So the Maoist's strategy is that they take over the power and they give the power to the local indigenous populations at local levels. It has become very attractive—because much of the country's populations are fighting for local Autonomy, for a kind of right to self-determination.

**The other worry I would have about much of the Left is that as well as copying the governmental institutions of capitalism they also accept almost uncritically Industrialisation. The whole process of the destruction of the living social fabric that keeps many societies together, and its replacement by very compartmentalized society. Do the Maoists in Nepal have a criticism of Industrialism and high levels of technology themselves?**

Since I am not part of the Maoist movement I cannot speak with absolute accuracy. Given my reading of various political literature and newspaper stories I think they are not promoting and they do not believe in high technology, and industrialisation. Their main push has been for a radical land reform. In Nepal nearly 80% of the population are agricultural. Nepal is a very mountainous and hilly region, due to lack of transportation etc. it is simply not possible to industrialise the agricultural and forestry sectors. Their struggle is to basically preserve and manage what we already have and prevent the foreign capital and technology, and multinationals. They have a very clear position that when multinationals come and foreign technology and capital comes the western economic monopoly capitalism comes. They are very clear about it. Nepal can survive and would be better off without any industrialisation.





**Given that the supposed Communist parties and organizations in power are not likely to capitulate to radical demands, serious civil war between the ruling elite on one side and the popular movements, and indigenous peoples through the Maoist Insurgency is very likely?**

Yes, I have no inside knowledge from the Maoists or government but watching the political situation I think an immanent civil war situation is very likely. The king, the military, the police, the liberals and Leftist parties in the parliament are all opposed to the Maoist movement. The Maoist movement is challenging the whole existence of monarchy. It is challenging the political ideology of liberalism. Challenging the co-option of other leftist parties. So it is challenging nearly all the power structures. As a result the Maoists have a lot of enemies. These power structures are not going to be able to provide a solution to the basic problems of the country. Even if there was no Maoist movement there would still be protests and demonstrations. People are going to be resisting in one way or another. This international financial system coming into Nepal, with privatisation and structural adjustment has to be fought. No one is fighting from within the Nepalese Power structures. So there will be resistance, there will be struggles and presently the Maoists are leading it. There will be sever confrontation. I don't see any possibility of compromise between the two sides.

**What do you think activists and radicals in the west can do to support the popular movements and anti-development struggles in Nepal.**

One is exposing Nepalese human rights violations in your media. Secondly, on anti-development activities it would be helpful for solidarity actions to be taken in the West, on companies involved. For stories from the Nepalese resistance to be told at demonstrations, in the media. You are not in a position to hear so much about Nepal. For although it is a small country, so many good things are happening in terms of social movements, anti-dam, anti-development actions. The whole society is in a big transition from feudalism towards radical movements. So I think it's basically letting the world know what is going on in Nepal, with the multinational manipulation, with bad development, and growing social movements.

**For more information on anti-development struggles in Nepal contact:**

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Kathmandu, Nepal Tel/fax: 0977-1-429741**

### **A note from the interviewer**

Some readers may object to us covering the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Objections will come from both anarchists and pacifists. Pacifists will object to us covering a violent armed movement. When facing off repressive elites, if you want to remain effective or for that point alive, pacifism is simply not an option. See the review of *Pacifism as Pathology* on page XXX. More interesting is the likely criticism from anarchists who have a tendency to be very suspicious of any non-anarchist political movements. This is quite sensible; most political movements of the last hundred years have been authoritarian. This is not just some quasi-moralistic position, in practical terms it has meant libertarians time after time being repressed and murdered by the Left. In Russia, Trotsky said of anarchists "we shall shoot them like partridges" and made good on his promise. Anarchists were shot and imprisoned in their hundreds by the socialist/republican government during the spanish civil war in 1936. Ho Chi Minh ruthlessly crushed the workers councils in Vietnam.. I could go on.

Anarchy then as well as a history of rebellion and dreams is a history of defeat. (Though I suppose I prefer being from a social movement of the massacred rather than the massacerers). Suspicion of non-anarchist social movements then is sensible. Unfortunately this can result in some First World activists taking a holier-than-thought attitude to many Third World movements. This is unbelievably arrogant. These movements consist of millions of brave, hope filled, heavily oppressed revolutionaries. Finding out about these movements can knock us out of our complacency and we can learn allot from them. Often their ideas are not as far away from ours as you'd think.

The accelerating global collapse of Leftism has led many movements to reject authoritarian ways of organising. Others start off authoritarian and change, some after a process of self examination like the Nigerian Trotskyites—who became the anarchist Awareness League, some as a result of the involvement of indigenous people. When they first went to the hills the nucleus of the Zapatistas were Maoists—but they changed when confronted by the Indigenous peoples non-hierarchical, collective way of organising. Most revolutionaries have never even heard of anarchism. Some Palastinian fighters after meeting Israeli anarchists for the first time remarked how sensible it sounded and went on to form their own group. As a result of the present downturn in class struggle in most of w.Europe we live in a political comfort zone. We are rarely jailed, even rarer killed. We can print pamphlets and argue about the minutia untill the cows come home. Others are busy fighting revolutions and trying to stay alive. In most countries access to the experience and ideas of generations of anarchists and the revolutions they fought is simply not available. This knowledge would be invaluable to revolutionaries in the rest of the world. It remains for the most on the shelves of cosy little anarcho bookshops, it's a long way from Whitechapel to Nepal. There is an urgent need for discussion and solidarity between all radical social movements. Thankfully we are seeing this happen. We can all learn a lot from each other.