

# War is the Health of the State

## An Open Letter to the UK Direct Action Movement



### From members of the Brighton and Hove Stop the War Committee

On March 24th, 1999 Britain went to war. It was a war in which Britain and its NATO allies bombed Serbia into submission. Warplanes, many of which took off from bases in Britain, systematically destroyed Serbia's infrastructure killing hundreds of civilians in the process and doing untold damage to the environment in the Balkans. Chemical factories, prisons, hospitals, housing estates and bridges were all bombed.

It was a war that precipitated the very humanitarian disaster that it was ostensibly designed to prevent: mass ethnic cleansing. What was a low intensity war before the bombing began, in which dozens were being killed every month, was transformed into one in which hundreds of thousands were driven from their homes and thousands were executed.

Yet what did the direct action movement do to oppose this war? Absolutely nothing. This abysmal failure to mount any kind of opposition to the war exposes important weaknesses we simply cannot ignore.

### The Hypocrisy of Humanitarianism

First, let us be clear and say that the war was not fought for humanitarian reasons. Before the bombing commenced, there was no mass exodus of refugees. Yet the moment the NATO campaign began, Milosevic unleashed his military forces to the full.

The media were surprised by this brutal reaction. Yet in Washington, a Defence Department

spokesman seemed unmoved: "In the Pentagon, in this building, we were not surprised by what Milosevic has done. I think there is historical amnesia here if anyone is surprised by the campaign [of ethnic cleansing]". And Clare Short, Old Labour turned warmonger, said on TV that if the West had been seen to prepare for the predicted influx of refugees, people might have assumed this to be "the inevitable effect of NATO's bombing action." In other words, screw looking after the refugees that the government knew would be created, just keep domestic public opinion pacified.

It's only one aspect of the hypocrisy that was used to justify the war. Readers of this magazine will be aware of the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994—one million dead and the West did nothing. Or the savagery with which the Turkish state militarily deals with the Kurds (Turkey is a member of NATO, so best forget about that). Or the fact that Israel consistently violates UN Security Council resolutions, bombs the Lebanon when it feels like it,



and violently oppresses the Palestinians, who were kicked off their land in much the same way the Kosovars were. But then Israel is America's major ally in the oil-rich Middle East.

## What Was the War About? And Why Was it so Important?

There is no doubt that the war was an extremely complex issue, one that many people had a hard time understanding. In fact, most people in the direct action scene did not even seem to think it was worth the effort at all. More than a few went out of their

way to avoid the problem, knowing it could cause a politically divisive argument. Here was a situation where the British state was raining bombs on Serb civilians, many of whom had in the past taken to the streets and struck work to oppose Milosevic's nationalism, while in Britain people who normally claimed to be 'political' walked around as if nothing was happening.

It was partly from an understandable feeling of powerlessness. The anti-war movement, which we shall look at below, was small. It looked as if there was never any realistic chance of militant direct action stopping the war. But it was also from a lack of understanding of the war and its ramifications, and a refusal to confront difficult issues.

So what was the war about, if not humanitarianism? And why was it so important to oppose it?

It was not a war for resources. With The Gulf War in 1991 it was obvious that the US, Britain et al were going to war because of oil. In Kosova, this was not the case. Kosova has historically been by far the poorest part of the former Yugoslavia. Some who opposed the war argued that Kosova has huge timber and mineral resources, but these are hardly the sort of things that send American bombers into the air. Others brought in the issue of oil under the Caspian Sea and a possible pipeline through a western-controlled Kosova. But Kosova is nowhere near the Caspian Sea and surely has absolutely no strategic importance when it comes to extracting this oil. In fact it was this lack of resources that strengthened the hand of the state in arguing that they were intervening purely on moral grounds.

The war in Kosova was a war for influence—the continuing, renewed influence of the US in Europe. This is the core of the matter. Ever since World War II, one of the central pillars of US foreign policy has been to lock as much of Europe as possible into the American world of 'free' capital, and the fall of Eastern bloc state capitalism has not changed this.

NATO's original function was ostensibly that of a defensive military alliance protecting Western Europe from Soviet aggression guaranteeing as a result that the region remained a stable, capital-accumulating zone. But it also ensured that within the NATO countries inter-imperialist rivalries were subsumed to the common task—a function it still performs.

Since the fall of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact NATO has appeared redundant to many. Yet it is expanding: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are all recent members. Why is this? Post-Cold War, economic rivalries between America and Europe are

### Sowing a Harvest of Death

Adem Muncaj, an ethnic Albanian boy from Kosova, recently found a bright orange container that looked like a soft drink can and brought it home to his family. Unfortunately it was a British-made RBL-755 cluster bomb dropped by NATO warplanes on his village of Velika Jabalanica. Adem, his brother and mother, his uncle and aunt and their three daughters were all killed when the 'soft drink' can exploded. If his mother or aunt were within a metre or two of the bomb when it went off their internal organs such as the brain, liver or lungs would have imploded due to the force of the blast. If his brother or uncle were, say, 15 or 20 metres away at the time of the blast they would have had their limbs ripped apart and been hit in the stomach or head by bomb shrapnel.

The cluster bombs used by NATO contain 147 'sub-projectiles' or tiny bombs. Each of these on hitting a person will cause a wound 30 times larger than the projectile itself. Some of these cluster bombs have hit villages, markets and hospitals, people travelling in buses and cars. Thousands of unexploded cluster bombs now litter Kosova, waiting to be discovered, picked up or stumbled upon. Some of the bombs even have a timer so they can go off several hours or days after they hit the ground; set to kill and maim long after the conflict is forgotten here in the West.

According to the US Defence Department "the best pilots in the world" have flown some 18,000 missions over Yugoslavia and dropped some 9,000 cluster bombs as well as bunker bombs, depleted-uranium bombs, graphite bombs, laser-guided bombs and satellite-guided bombs upon the people of Yugoslavia.

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coming out. The recent trade wars over bananas, hormone-treated beef, and the imposition of genetically modified food are all evidence of rivalry between two powerful economic blocks. And the rivalries are not just economic. Germany, now re-united and re-militarised is becoming a powerful political competitor to US interests in Europe. With their economic influence being challenged, it is important to the US that they remain militarily dominant.

However, it is difficult to justify an expanding military alliance when there are no obvious enemies. Kosova gave NATO and America the chance to both justify itself and to prove that it could act independently without interference, particularly from Russia.

There is no doubt that NATO wanted war. At the Rambouillet negotiations which immediately preceded the bombing, Yugoslavia was presented with a treaty that was a deliberate provocation. NATO demanded free access to the whole of Yugoslav territory (ie Serbia as well as Kosova and Montenegro). This would mean an end to Yugoslavia's sovereignty—a demand that no politician, of whatever nation-state, could accept. And now, with the 'successful' conclusion of the war (i.e: no US soldiers killed, the apparent capitulation of Milosevic), NATO has won itself a new autonomy to act anywhere, unilaterally, wherever the US deems its interests are threatened.

It is a dangerous precedent that guarantees future conflicts. And it is a precedent that the direct action movement completely failed to grasp.

### The Anti-War Movement

There can be no doubt that the anti-war movement in Britain was hardly inspiring. (In other parts of Europe—Germany, Greece, Italy—it was different). The initial signs were good. A ten thousand strong

demonstration in London the day after the bombing started, demos in Oxford and Birmingham, well-attended public meetings called by the anti-war groups that had formed in most cities. However, this start was never built on. With the liberal media's onslaught in favour of the war; with politicians aggressively accusing anyone who opposed the war of being appeasers, complicit with the 'Nazi' Milosevic; with images of refugees beamed into our

womes nightly, it was extremely difficult to take an anti-war position.


The problem was not so much convincing people that the bombing was wrong (few people on the streets were prepared to put up much of an argument for the war), rather it was that people could not see the possibility of any real opposition to the war developing—an opposition that the direct action movement could have played an indispensable role in developing.

What made matters worse was that there was very little opposition from the tradition-

al liberal-left anti-war movement. If you visited the Peace and Environment Centre in Brighton, for instance, you would have been hard pushed to find out a war was going on at all. They were more concerned about selling tickets for Glastonbury.

This left a fairly sorry crowd to form the anti-war groups. In Brighton the group was made up of a few die-hard pacifists, the SWP and various unaligned (and confused) individuals. Hardly a welcoming committee! Yet the group, at least at the start, did talk about direct action. Occupying roads or blockading the Territorial Army barracks were discussed. There was also the possibility of getting people to RAF Fairford where the B-52 bombers were departing from. But with no other activists turning up to meetings, and most people in the group over forty, with little or no experience of direct action, it never happened.

ALL NATIONS



HALLUCINATIONS

ARE YOU READY TO DIE  
FOR THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION?

If we are going to insist on maintaining a state we can obey, then we have to breed children who will die for it. So quit whining.



## The Direct Action Response to the Bombing

The direct action movement is well aware of its strengths, and these should not be underestimated. A commitment to direct action cuts through all the endless debates we find in the traditional left. It avoids many of the compromises campaigns make to 'get people on our side', in favour of convincing people by example—propaganda by deed. The movement has a strength in diversity which enables it to take up a range of issues and set its own agenda. And it has the imagination to develop new tactics that can make effective use of limited numbers. All these strengths have been evident in the successful anti-roads struggle and the recent actions against the biotechnology industry.

The problem is that it is, to a large extent, based on a personal commitment stemming from a 'moral liberalism.' What do we mean by this? The direct action scene is sustained mainly by the dole. This provides a 'neutral' baseline, which we do not have to relate to in the way that we would have to relate to work (i.e. collectively) and from where people feel free to make a moral, personal choice about which campaigns to get involved with. Politics is no longer a necessity, rather it is an option. In other words, and unlike the first half of the twentieth century, politics does not choose us—we choose politics. And with so many 'issues' around, fragmentation automatically happens.

Moral liberalism identifies something as 'bad'—bad for people, bad for the earth—and then tries to do something about it. The problem is that these simplistic terms are completely unable to cope with complex issues where 'good' and 'bad' are less clearcut. Because it is difficult, if not impossible, to compare the importance of issues simply on moral grounds (i.e. how 'bad' they are), every issue becomes as important as every other issue in the supermarket that is the direct action movement. In Brighton, it's seen most clearly at Rebel Alliance meetings, where the issues that are taken up depend only on personal tastes and fashions. Yet it was precisely this moral liberalism that Tony Blair used to justify the bombing. His appeal that we must 'do something, anything' is exactly the view many direct action people take towards the world as a whole.

As a result, the direct action movement is unable to develop a sense of collective priority or historical importance. By historical importance we mean an ability to recognise, not only our place in the ongo-

ing struggle against capitalism (many direct action types are very informed about 'our' history), but the present stage, and most recent developments of capitalism. Sometimes—such as time of war—capitalism sets the agenda for us. And if we don't even understand that agenda, the whole direct action movement can become outdated and irrelevant.

## June 18th—A Step Forward

Although June 18th was a global day of action, it is considered here from a purely British perspective. From this point of view we can see that June 18th came out of the feeling many activists had that Reclaim The Streets parties had got predictable—in fact, were going nowhere. It was a recognition that we need to constantly transform the way we protest.

There is no 'heart of capitalism.' It is a social relation and, as such, is not to be found solely in the factory, the money markets, the high street or the air base. But capitalism does develop and change and, since the end of the 1970s, the expansion of finance capital which shifts endlessly around the globe, regardless of borders, in the search for profit, has become an identifiable and definable phenomenon. And it was this specific targeting of finance capital as an important (not the most important, or the least important, but an important) part of the system that was the most exciting aspect of June 18th.

As for the day itself, which is well documented elsewhere in this magazine, all we can say is that it moved beyond the symbolism of protest into an actual challenge to that particular sector of capitalism. It was certainly a step beyond the individual campaigns into the idea of struggling, physically, together. As practical criticism it was excellent!

Our only criticism of June 18th is that, again considered from a purely British perspective, it seems to be contextless in terms of an ongoing campaign, as contrasted with e.g. the anti-Poll Tax struggle. Clearly it has come out of the anti-roads movement via Reclaim The Streets parties, but where does it go now? Unless another June 18th is organised, which at the present time does not seem likely, it leads nowhere but into prisoner support—a necessary but essentially defensive measure. And while we would say there has been a definite advance in grasping what capitalism is when a day of action is directed specifically against finance capital, can we say that the nature of the beast has really been grasped by the direct action movement when a European war is completely ignored? In other words, while some parts of the scene seem to have latched onto finance



capital as an explanation of capitalism they have failed to grasp the crucial point that war is one of capitalism's most basic forms.

However we can't be too hard on June 18th. At the time the idea was cooked up very little was going on nationally and it was an attempt to get something fairly coherent going on. For reasons explained above, we do not believe that, had June 18th not been such a focus for the direct action scene, activists would have moved en masse into the anti-war camp. We would only point out that many activists working non-stop for one day (however good it is) and who subsequently become burned out after that one day is over, is perhaps not a healthy use of our time.

### A Human Reaction?

It wouldn't be entirely true to state that everyone involved in direct action was paralysed with inaction by the war. Some worked with those involved in

Workers' Aid to Bosnia to send aid convoys to Kosovo. The principle of international solidarity is one we advocate fully. During the Bosnian conflict, Workers' Aid had sent convoys to multi-ethnic places where the inhabitants were resisting the nationalism that was tearing other communities apart, and this is extremely important.

In Kosova, though, it was different. Multi-ethnic communities did not exist, and in any case, Kosova, being a war zone, was impossible to get into.

There are two points. The first is that those collecting for the convoys, genuine enough as they were, were falling victim to the same moral, good vs. bad judgements that were used by the government to defend the bombing. Instead of taking a little time to think about why the war had happened and what it meant, they had the kneejerk reaction that the media encouraged—a human enough response in view of the undoubted atrocities the Serb militias were com-

### A Present For Your Children From The Caring NATO Forces

During the 1991 Gulf War over three hundred tonnes of Depleted Uranium (DU) was used in Iraq. DU is produced when enriched uranium is separated from natural uranium. Two and half times heavier than lead it is used to tip missiles and bullets to give them extra weight to help them punch holes in armour plating. On impact the DU metal oxidises and releases radioactive heavy metal particles into the atmosphere. DU is now in the soil, air and water in Iraq, and is believed to be a factor behind the increased levels of cancer of the lung and liver and kidney failure as well as a huge increase in incidences of congenital deformity.

In the maternity hospital in Basra in the South of Iraq, two or three children with cases of severe congenital abnormality are born every day. Most of them die within hours, some having been born with no skull, face or brain—and many with severe internal organ defects. The doctors keep a grisly photo archive. One young doctor, pregnant with her own child, was scanning herself daily for any sign of a problem, but for most the awful truth is found out too late...

During the Gulf War, the USA and Britain tested and used their DU weapons as a new technology. They have since sold it to many countries around the world and have used it in bombing Serbia—now facing many of the same problems as the people that live in Iraq.



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mitting. Nevertheless, it was a strange moment of activist and Prime Minister hysterically reinforcing each other. We argued, unpopularly at the time, that activists would be much better spending their time building an anti-war movement that would have challenged the centre of the problem. It was also a great opportunity to challenge New Labour's racist Asylum and Immigration Bill, which brutally clamps down even further on those who, fleeing persecution, end up in Britain.

We were accused of being cold, but in the face of the national celebrity appeals that were organised on behalf of the Kosovars, appeals that raised much more money than the direct action scene ever could, was it really worth the effort? Couldn't that energy have been better used elsewhere?

The second concern is where the Workers' Aid convoys ended up. Those direct action people who were wary of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and their anti-war efforts should have checked first before they jumped into bed with the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), who are the main grouping behind Workers' Aid. They are a Trotskyist sect who supported the Kosova Liberation Army against the Serbs and who notoriously refused to go on the anti-war demonstrations. As the convoys mainly ended up in Albania, the recruiting ground of the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA), it is not impossible that some of the aid ended up in KLA hands.

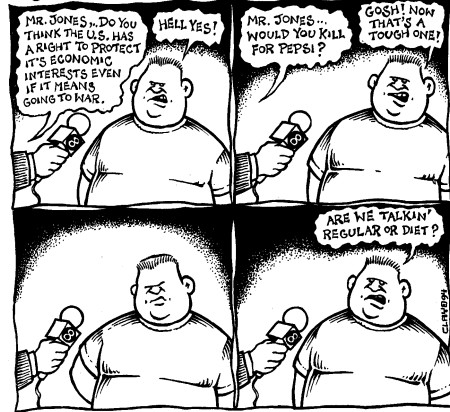
## Support for the KLA?

Like the WRP, some activists even went as far as outright support for the KLA, though, when pressed, it seemed to be based on little more than romantic notions of armed struggle.

The KLA began its career with attacks on Serb refugees fleeing from Croatian ethnic cleansing in the Krajina region. Later they targeted Serb civilians as well as police—they have, for example, thrown grenades into crowded Serb cafes. More recently they have intercepted fleeing Kosovar refugee columns and pressganged the men into joining up. Soon, with different uniforms, they will be the police force and prison warders of the NATO protectorate that is Kosova.

Any radical factions were purged in autumn 1998 when the KLA was comprehensively reorganised following their summer defeat by the Serb military. Ultimately, wanting a Greater Albania, they are nothing more than another nightmare in the logic of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. Already the Serb minority in Kosova have fled in advance of expected

## "IS THIS GONNA BE ON THE TEST?"



Sidewalk Bubblegum ©1994 Clay Butler

KLA reprisals, and some have been attacked and killed.

Support for the KLA is not only misguided, it is irresponsible and dangerous. Nationalism never has, and never will have, anything in common with anarchism, communism or radical ecology. In reality, according to London's Breakdown Notes, "national liberation consists of the liberation of the guerrilla chairman and his national police from the chains of powerlessness." And it consists of nothing else.

## Strategy and Tactics

On an anecdotal level, the response to the anti-war movement reflected the unthought out and muddled response to the war itself. But one or two points came up again and again, and these we shall deal with by way of a conclusion.

One was the 'I don't want to sit in the same room as the SWP' argument. Of course, nobody wants to, but when a war is going on, it's not a question of choice. It's simply not good enough to have such an apolitical point of view when the state is flying bombing missions—in our name—on people who, when all is said and done, we have far more in common with than we ever will with 'our own' ruling class. Instead, we need to be in there, arguing our corner. The Leninists are a lot less influential than they were even ten years ago and because they need more friends, are less manipulative. That doesn't mean we can trust them, merely that, despite their current slump in fortunes, they will be around for a long time to come and we either learn to deal with them or we refuse to get involved in many important



struggles. Is that what we really want? After all, we saw them off in the anti-Criminal Justice Act campaign and we could do so, easily, again.

Another gripe was 'I don't want to go on boring marches.' Again, nobody wants to, and the anti-war demonstrations in London were certainly boring, attended as they were by a rearguard of Serb nationalists who nobody had the nerve to physically confront. But—and this may be news to some—demonstrations have not been invented specifically to piss off direct action people. They have been around for hundreds of years. Good demonstrations are places where the power and immediacy of the crowd becomes transparent, where the regular life of city streets is temporarily transformed. The state either allows the demonstration to go ahead—a sign, especially during an illegal gathering, of weakness; or it must attack the demonstration, revealing the authoritarianism at the heart of the modern liberal state. And an attack on, or by, a demonstration or gathering ensures that a symbolic event becomes a historical event. June 18th has already passed into history as an event to be remembered and celebrated, another passage in the struggle against capitalism.

There is a strategic point also. The anti-war movement that is usually cited as a model is Vietnam. But the Vietnam war had been going for years before any real opposition developed. In these days of high-tech weaponry and an expanded NATO, wars have usually been concluded within a few weeks—months at the most. It's therefore imperative to organise as quickly as possible, and traditional demos can be an important forum, bringing people immediately together to forge new links and find out what is happening in other parts of the country. And let's not forget what happens when traditional demonstrations are swamped by people who refuse the constraints of the leftists. The anti-Poll Tax march was called by the Militant-dominated All-Britain Federation and we all remember what happened in London that day.

Of course some demonstrations (small, quiet and saturated with Trots) leave a bad taste in the mouth and can be very dispiriting. But we must not fetishise the actions we are prepared to take as activists. It is this fetishism on road camps that emphasises the monkeywrenching, the climbing, the tunnelling, while (sometimes) insultingly referring to building support in the community—without which you can never win—as 'outreach.'

The national roads building programme is dead; many activists are getting the feeling that street parties are past their sell-by date; June 18th represents a

real step forward, yet there has been a European war with barely a peep from the direct action movement.

And it is a movement, which is why it is worth arguing over. We must decide what we are. Are we militant liberals with a purely green agenda capable of making only the simplest moral decisions? Or are we serious about confronting the complexities and difficult situations that capitalism presents us with? Most importantly, having dealt with these complexities, are we willing to prioritise our actions?

And this last point must be said loud and clear. Not all issues are equal. Some are more important than others. Subvertising billboards is not as important as opposing war. Having an enjoyable street party is not as important as opposing opencast mining.

If the direct action movement, with its vital innovations and uncompromising attitude stays fragmented internally, and isolated in relation to other social struggles, if it does not learn to prioritise, we will go walkabout at precisely the vital moment and will have enabled capitalism to proceed apace with the destruction of humanity and the planet.

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