

FREEDOM TO PROTEST CONFERENCE, 23/10/05

The importance of protest... empowering ourselves as individuals, groups and movements

Workshop 4

Why is protest important? The institutions which currently dominate our lives and society work very hard to keep control of all the decision-making and resources, and to convince us - through their access to, and control of the media - that we should trust them to run the world. They are not only oppressing us all, they are also causing major social and environmental crises.

But these are **our** lives, **our** communities, **our** workplaces and **our** planet – we have to stand up for our own interests and take back control. The only way to do this is by building up strong, grass-roots movements against all kinds of injustice & oppression, against wars and damage to the environment.

Whilst opposing what's wrong around us, we also need to spread alternative, human principles and ideas based on co-operation, solidarity, freedom, sharing and equality. In the way we organise ourselves we can also show by example, and create the seeds of the future in our struggles today....

Public protest is the way we communicate directly with the wider public, urging them to join with us. It is also a way of empowering ourselves and each other, building up our public presence and strength to challenge what's wrong. It is not a minority activity or a luxury. Protesting, and the freedom to protest, is an absolute necessity for everyone.

How can people overcome isolation and fear? As an individual, it's easier for the authorities to isolate or intimidate you. But by linking up with others a 'private' dispute can become a public issue, with the promise of wider publicity and opposition forcing those responsible for the intimidation onto the defensive. You will also be able to get encouragement, support and solidarity. It is empowering to be in an organization which encourages your involvement, collective decision-making and independent thought and activity. Any group also needs to link up with other groups taking up the same issues, or others who are in the same locality.... And 'hey presto', you have a movement!

If we make sure that we widely and continually circulate independent and alternative ideas we can counter the media's promotion of capitalism and government, and its negative portrayal of protesting.

People themselves have enormous power when they get together to speak out about their concerns. By getting actively involved in movements for change, millions of people can discover and experience this for themselves.

What inspiring examples are there of movements successfully overcoming repression in UK history, and around the world? We can all gain strength from the many struggles & movements around us – eg. the inspiring activities of the people represented here today! And we are just a tiny fraction of all those who are campaigning for their interests, their communities or for a better society.

Our rights and freedoms have not been handed down by the powers-that-be, but have been won through grass roots movements and struggles over the years - including the Tolpuddle trade unionists and 20th century strike waves, the suffragettes, millions defying the poll tax (in 1381 as well as 1990!), and protests by the social movements of the 1960s and 70s. More recent freedom-to-protest victories include the 4yr long non-stop anti-apartheid picket of the South Africa embassy in Trafalgar Sq, and the 20yr long leafleting campaign in defiance of McDonald's and the libel laws.

And it's not just in the UK... Throughout the world people have built powerful grass roots movements, often having to overcome severe repression - labour struggles and strikes, the US civil rights movement in the 1960s, the anti-apartheid struggle, the fall of the Berlin Wall, youth movements, women challenging patriarchy, anti-war and anti-capitalist mobilisations, battles over land rights, self-determination for oppressed peoples etc. All kinds of totalitarian forms of control have eventually been challenged and overcome.

Wherever there is injustice or oppression, there is protest and resistance. We will not be silenced! Oppressive laws can be made unworkable by determination and solidarity among those affected, and by increased protests and defiance.