

Gothenburg

A view from the other side

If you read the mainstream newspapers or watch the news on TV you could be forgiven for believing that a bunch of dangerous anarchists from all over Europe descended on the city, smashed things up and were finally stopped by the police who ended up having to shoot them. But the voice of the people who were actually there is rarely heard in the mainstream media and the picture they paint is a rather different one.

Below is the voice of Inge Johansson, a member of a political rock band, who went to Gothenburg from Stockholm to protest against the EU summit. The account goes from explaining why people were there, why they were angry, what happened and significantly, in what order.

This won't be seen by many other people however so please pass it along for someone else to read when you're finished. More copies can be printed out from the web site: www.sheffieldmayday.ukf.net

So, this is an e-mail to all my friends, people I met once or twice and people I know might be interested in this...

I was participating in the demonstrations/riots in Gothenburg this weekend between the 15th and 17th of June 2001. This thing has been all over the news in Sweden/Scandinavia, but I don't know how much it has been hitting the news around the world. And if it has, it's probably a very, very "produced" version of it. We all know who owns the media and what their purposes are.

This is my story and my version of what happened and other people might have different opinions of what and why things happened like they did, but I will try to give as much of a "live and direct" uncut version of what I experienced. I'm writing this only one day after coming back to Stockholm from all this and it's still very emotional to me and I'm still very tired so this e-mail might be full of misspellings and messed up grammars. My English always betrays

me when I'm not in shape. But I will try my best...

I will start by giving you a background to what was going on in Gothenburg...

Sweden has had the chairmanship of the European Union this year and this weekend they called in all the big shots, the Eurocrats, to have a big meeting in Gothenburg to discuss the future of European politics and the future of the European Union. I have been active against the European Union for 10 years now. For 10 years ago the debate if Sweden was going to join it or not was the topic on everybody's lips and I quickly understood that it would not be benefiting for me or any minorities of Sweden at all. I saw, and still see the European Union as a undemocratic, neo-liberal hell machine, like a bulldozer of law-enforced capitalism running over all the rights that labor movements and civil rights movements has won by fighting for 100 years now. A fortress around "rich Europe"

against the rest of the world and a new super state to compete with USA and Asia when it comes to production, consumption and exploitation of the 3rd world. And it's all in the name of free trade.

I was active in the "no to EU" line during the election of if Sweden was going to join the European Union or not, even though I was too young to vote by then. The "YES" line won the election by buying all media a couple of weeks before the election and putting a lot of pressure on the Swedish labor movements. The "YES" side won with 2 percent... Anyway, back to this weekend.

Unlike government meetings, this meeting was behind closed doors and the public was not invited at all. There is still a big critical movement against the European Union and it's neo-liberal agenda in Sweden and around Europe and none of those organizations were invited to debate with the politicians who represents the European Union. And all past meetings of the European Union, the

G8, WTO etc has been followed by mass protests and criticism. So I don't think that it was a coincidence that the politicians choose to have the meeting the same weekend as Sweden's biggest summer festival, The Hultsfred festival, to keep kids out of town. This was a closed meeting for the men with power about our future. And no radical or critical perspectives were allowed to be represented there. This was the first mistake made by the politicians that weekend, and there is more to come.

One funny thing about this meeting was that George Bush II was invited to participate on Wednesday. He was there for 20 hours and the city of Gothenburg brought in flowers and planted them all around town so it would look like the town was in full bloom. According to rumors, George Bushes visit to Sweden did cost something like 2 million dollars for the Swedish taxpayers. For 20 hours... I really hope he said a lot of things that might be good for Swedish taxpayers and the Swedish working class in the long run, but something tells me he didn't...

A lot of EU-critical organizations, grassroots organizations, labor organizations, environmentalists, socialists, anarchist, gay rights people, anti racist organizations, immigrant organizations had asked the authorities to participate in the meetings, but the meeting was to be closed from the public eye no matter what. That made a lot of people mad and the organization and the politicians of the city of Gothenburg organized meetings and tried to find a solution that would be fitting for everybody, even though the critical organizations already had com-

promised with the authorities.

There was a lot of meetings and preparing to make the demonstrations and the activities around the meeting to run as smooth as possible and the people representing the police had PROMISED the people representing the critical organizations that they would go very easy on the activists and use no violence, no horses and no dogs. The police said that they wanted to cooperate if the activists were ready to cooperate, and the activists were. They expected around 25.000 activists from around the world and they didn't want the situation to go completely out of hand.

Anyway, the city authorities rented a couple of schools to the

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critical organizations for people to sleep in during the night and for workshops and discussion groups during the days. The theme for all those meetings was "For a different Europe" and we had the authorities blessings to have our own "EU critical conference" with our topics, our guests to talk about our future. The authorities also promised us to have 3 legal demonstrations against the meeting of the European union a couple of blocks from the buildings of the meeting. Not outside, of course. We are allowed to say what we think about the people ruling our lives and future on placards and banners, but not where they can see us...

I live in Stockholm at the mo-

ment and I was going to Gothenburg with my friends so that I could be there on Thursday night. We were driving to Gothenburg listening to the radio and on the news they said that the police had been surrounding one of the schools where the forums and the sleep ins took place. They had formed a line of cops and quickly thereafter built a wall of containers around the schools so no one could get in and no one could get out.

The first reason for all this that they gave people was that someone had used a slingshot (you know one of those kids toys) to attack the police with. But they changed the reason quickly to suspicions about preparing violent activities against police officers.

That night about 200 activists were arrested in the school building and outside when people were gathering to protest against the lock-up.

Friends of mine were held in a police car for 12

hours without getting any real reasons why they were taken. And the police used the "bad cop" style to scare them, make them beg to go to have a pee outside and stuff like that.

The activists that protested outside the school decided to go back to avoid police violence, but then the police struck with full power and there were clashes between the police forces and activists inside and outside the school. By this time, the police came in with horses, which they had promised a couple of days ago that they wouldn't use. So much for trying to talk things over with authorities. Everybody involved in the protest saw this as something very provocative and it was clear that the police had set the tone for

how they wanted the rest of the weekend to be.

On Friday morning, there was a big legal meeting in the center of Gothenburg where the critical groups met up to rally and to listen to speeches about what was going on. A lot of people were still kept by the police and people were angry because of the police brutality and behavior the night before and because of having their friends held by the police, for what seemed to be, no reason at all. And people were angry because the police had blocked the school where people, who had traveled to Gothenburg, were supposed to sleep and the workshops were supposed to take place. People gathered and there were thousands of us. I don't know exactly how many, but thousands.

After having the big, outdoor meeting the people started to march down towards the building where the politicians were having their meeting. A couple of blocks away from the building, the police were lined up, in full riot gear with dogs and horses and the activists had to stop a couple of meters from the police. It was a very narrow street and thousands of people were coming from the back and the tension was high. The police screamed to the protestors to back off, but the activists refused and all of a sudden, the police advanced against the activists, letting the dogs on the people in the front and then hell broke loose. People were running for their lives, people picked up stones and bottles and started to throw them at the police and the police hunted the crowd, who fled in panic back to the spot where the outdoor meeting was. There the clash between police and activists

continued and it was very, very violent. People were attacked by the police who had horses and dogs and swinging their clubs at kids in your own age and people picked up stones from the street and threw them back at the police. Many kids were brutally beaten up by the police, even people who just lied down and said "I give up, don't hit me". An innocent man that just passed by was beaten up by the police even though he wasn't participating in the riot at all. Maybe his crime was that he was not white.

Anyway, the police hunted the crowd down to the Gothenburg strip called "Avenyn". A strip with a lot of chain stores like McDonalds and H&M. This was maybe the stupidest thing by for the police to do at the moment. We were thousands of angry peo-

This was maybe the stupidest thing by the police

ple and they drove us back and denied us to go down to outside of the meeting to protest. And they used horses and dogs, even though they had promised not to. The situation got out of hand.

I felt so powerless, so degraded by the people ruling my life and angry for being denied to protest outside the meeting and angry for knowing that the police broke all their promises and that I still had friends held by the police. And a lot of people was angry and started to smash the windows of McDonalds, H&M, Bang & Olufsen and a Swedish Bank. This was widely reported in the Swedish media and all the activists were portrayed as "hooligans and terrorists destroying the inner city". There were even writings about "raping" the

city and the people there, and that was completely ridiculous. What media didn't report was that a lot of small businesses and cafes did not get smashed at all. Only the big chain stores like McDonalds, who have made a fortune by exploiting poor people and using child labor around the world.

The fights continued for about two hours. The police were attacking the people and the people were throwing stones at the police. The police picked up stones and threw them back at the activists.

After a couple of hours things calmed down. Some people were trapped by the police on a bridge and about 100 people were arrested. I went home to a friend to lie down and just think and rest for a while. Because I knew that this was only the beginning...

Later that night, me and my friends went out again to participate in the announced "Reclaim the City" party that was supposed to be held in a park in the city. We came there and there were a lot of kids gathered and two big trucks were rented and some DJs were playing music and kids were dancing and I thought it was pretty neat. But there was a weird tension in the air and you could tell that this would not last very long. All of a sudden, I heard screams like "You scum! You fucking commies" and right beside me a fistfight broke out between activists and some fascist kids that had shown up. It was started by the fascists. They quickly fled when the activists started to hunt them away from the spot and it sort of made me laugh, even though I hate fights. Because I know that right wing

people are seriously brain damaged, but I didn't know they were so stupid so that they would go to a outdoor party, arranged by left wing people that are angry because they have been hunted by the police all day, and call them "ommie scum" and look for a fight.

The fascist kids ran away, but not shortly thereafter the real fascists entered the scene, the Swedish police. They surrounded the park, in full riot gear and with horses. It was about to blow... Somewhere the fight between activists and police broke out and people started to run from the cops who were riding and swinging their clubs. The more militant activists responded by throwing stones at the police. The police were driven back and then they attacked again and people fled down the streets, but the police had surrounded the whole area and you were lucky if you got out of there. The police were hunting the people down the street and some activists started to smash windows of businesses. I think that was very unnecessary. To smash the window of McDonalds or H&H in a situation like this, I can clearly see the logic of that, but to smash the local bookstore? What's the point? I don't know...

The clash continued and many people that were not participating in the demonstration were gathering around to see what was going on. And some of them started to throw rocks at the police too! That was interesting. People who looked quite ordinary, without black masks throwing stones at the violent police force. Interesting.

The activists advanced and started to run up against the cops again.

The clash continued. All of a sudden I heard a sharp bang, and another one... I don't know how many bangs I heard. But I looked at the police and I saw one of the police officers holding his gun aiming it at the activists. And I was hearing screams about somebody being shot. As far as I know, the Swedish police haven't fired at demonstrators since the black days in 5dalen 1931 when five (or six, don't really know for sure) labor activists were shot dead. But anyway, seeing a Swedish police aiming his gun against kids in my own age will stay in my memory forever.

When the shots were fired, panic broke out and I was able to escape a couple of blocks away from the scene. On my way, trying to avoid being hit (or even

I saw the police ride over a naked guy with their horses

worse, shot) by the police I saw random clashes with the police everywhere. I saw the police ride over a naked guy with their horses. A friend of mine was run over by a horse and she had to go to the hospital. Another friend came up to me with blood on her hands. She had been taking care of one guy that the police had shot in the leg. It felt so unreal... Like being on TV or in the news (which we probably were all the time, because the sky was full of police helicopters). The activists gathered in a park and squeezed together and started to chant "no more violence, no more violence" while the police were surrounding the park ready to strike at any minute. The people in the park continued to sing and dance and after a couple of hours, the police left the place to the sound of cheering activists dancing in the park.

Later that night there was a meeting at one of the schools that wasn't yet surrounded by the police. A guy who had been representing the activists in the meetings with the authorities and the police told us that two or three kids had been shot by the police that night. One had been shot in the back or in the chest (no one was quite sure at that point) and he said that there should be "no more collaboration with the police". People cheered. The meeting was very short, because people from outside were calling in telling us that the police was closing in to the school. We left the place really fast and took off to the place we were sleeping at. During the night the police formed tighter lines around the schools where the meeting had been held.

Saturday morning. About 25.000 people gathered to do a peaceful demonstration against the European Union and the police brutality. 25.000 people must be the biggest demonstration in Swedish history ever. But the demonstration was not allowed to go into the center of the city, which was blocked with walls built by freight containers, but had to stay outside the city, even though nothing dangerous or violent were happening. The demonstration was very inspiring and really what I needed after a day of violence and shooting. Being together with comrades from all around the world showing our discontent for the present capitalist society and our hopes for another world order was so positive and inspiring. I loved every second of it, even though it was a bit rainy. The "funny" thing is that this big, peaceful demonstration was not at all as widely reported in media as the shootings

and the riots. 25.000 people walking down the street to show people what they believe is not interesting in mainstream, tabloid press.

After the demonstration I went down to the inner city to find something to eat. I went to a restaurant and ate and after that I went back home to rest for a while. I got back into the city and I was walking down the street to get to the place where we were supposed to play that night. I walked in a city that was a war zone. Containers everywhere, scared people and a weird tension in the air. I was thinking about the shooting that I had witnessed the day before. It still felt so unreal.

All of a sudden I started to hear police sirens and cops in riot gear filled the street in a minute and police truck after police truck after police truck was passing by. I heard the sound of the cars, I saw the blank looks of the police officers faces, and I saw truck after truck. The sound of power was hitting the walls of the houses. The sound of fascism and violence was in my ears. I was scared so I decided to take another way down to the tent venue where the gig was rather than go where I planned to go in the first place. And that was good, because I got there without being harassed by the cops. The cops had stormed into a square in the city, surrounded people who hadn't done anything and pushed them into police buses and drove them away. My friends mother was riding her bike when a police officer pulled her off the bike, dragged her to the ground and arrested her. For no reason at all. Another friend was held by the police and got a gun to his face. About 100 innocent people were

harassed and arrested. That night we did a wonderful gig. It was the right place for us to be. In the center of the class struggle, where the action was and where power and people met. People were going nuts while we played and we ended the show with screaming "International solidarity working class unity" over and over again. One of our best gigs ever. I was almost crying when we were done. It felt so god damn right at the moment to be in a political rock band. For once it made a little bit sense.

That night the tension was high in the city. I was walking down the street and I met activists in the street. No one knew what was going on really... They said that the police officially had given up, but no one believed that at all. I saw police cars passing by

and they said, "yes, and next time we will shoot even more"

me while I was walking in the dark streets and I looked away all the time, hoping that they wouldn't stop and pull me into the car because they had been performing that kind of kidnaps all day long. But I didn't get arrested or anything like a guy that had been pulled down and handcuffed the same day by the police. He was innocent and asked what he was handcuffed for. The police answered that "that's because you are causing trouble" and he replied "but it's you guys who are shooting people" and they said "yes, and next time we will shoot even more!"

That night I didn't sleep that very much. It felt like war was in town and I knew that even if the protests and the meeting was officially over, the war on the street wasn't. That night the police

stormed one of the schools that activists had rented from the authorities to use for sleeping. The police came in with drawn guns and arrested almost everyone who didn't escape.

The next day, all of this was over and we went back to Stockholm again. The events of the weekend was all over the radio, the newspapers, the TV... All about the violent activists and the riots. Nothing about the peaceful demonstrations. Nothing about the fact that the police started the violence. Nothing about the violence that the police practiced on innocent people of all ages, nothing about the structural violence that the European Union is for poor people and poor countries, nothing about our side of it. The policeman who had shot a guy was portrayed as a hero and claimed that

he did it in self-defense (even though he shot the guy in the back).

The papers were full of the readers comments, everybody saying that "the police were right... we need more cops, we need harder cops, we need to control those terrorists".. Tony Blair called the 25.000 activists a "travelling anarchist circus". People that he should listen to... It was very sad, but I was there I know what happened. I'm an eyewitness to the whole thing and that's why I'm writing this. To get my side out to the people I care about and to people that might understand and not just buy everything that bourgeois media is telling them.

So... What did we learn from all this? Well, right now it's very hard to tell. Maybe in a historical perspective we'll know everything about the protests in Gothenburg, Prague, Niece, Seattle etc etc and what the consequences of those events were. What I see right now

is that Globalized capitalism, neo imperialism is the cause of all this. The structural violence against poor and working people everywhere is getting so apparent that people all over the world is gathering against the same enemy. it's the same ideology and same corporations everywhere in power. And as times and repression gets harder, the clashes between people and the power get more violent and harder.

A lot of people are condemning the violence used by activists during the demonstrations in Gothenburg. The stones thrown at the police and so on... But, the police knew that they had no control over the situation at all and they tried to show everybody in town who was boss so they became very violent against everybody and everything. And no one in mainstream media seems to be criticizing the police throwing stones and beating up people who just passed by. And everywhere the policeman who shot a guy in my own age in the back is portrayed as a hero. It's scary.

And the reactions of many people in the left make me very confused. Everyone is cheering the zapatistas and the people arming themselves against corporation hell in the third world, but when the violent side of the battle against capitalism comes too close to home, people are too quick to condemn everything. McDonalds, H&M and Burger King got their windows smashed during the riots. Corporations that got big by exploiting natural resources in poor countries and using child labor. Everybody hates that, but as soon as someone get enough of that that person is a "terrorist" and the cops are free to shoot him.

The right wing moralism is

spreading down to ordinary, decent people who get exploited by the big corporations every day. And the police violence is just a sign of everything that people like us has been talking about for so long, that globalization and neo liberalism will lead to violent and hard times for everybody, except for the people hiding behind container walls, laughing at us. The European Union was not for the working class and the police are not on the people's side. We are up against the European Violence Machine and if you have anything that you want to say to the people who are in charge, off you go... or even worse, you will get shot for doing it.

I think that this weekend will go to history. Maybe in a negative way, because the police will get free hands in the future and maybe they will bring in water cannons and tear gas in Sweden (that stuff is still illegal over here). And maybe it will be harder to organize protests in the future. And people will maybe only remember the violence they saw on TV and not the 25.000 activists gathered together peacefully to demonstrate and to say what they believed in. But people forget history so quick. Sweden used to have Europe's most militant labor movement until the 30ies. And all the rights that we have, such as the right to vote, freedom of speech, women's right to abortion, holidays and stuff like that was won by the working class after fights with the police and people in power. But they don't teach us that in school.

I think this is a challenge. We have to organize globally to confront this new, violent phase of capitalism. We have to do this to-

gether and win by the strength in numbers. I'm not a pacifist at all, but I think the most important thing right now is to organize your friends, your neighbors, and your parents, friends at work and school. Let people know what is going on! It's our future that they wanna sell to the one who pays us the least... And now it's up to us to change it and to do what people have done throughout history, over and over again, to win their rights. To educate, to organize and to activate! And it might be violent, and it might not be. But I'm quite sure that the people in power won't give up their money, power, modes of production, corporations to the masses without trying to kill us all first.

Anyway, I feel very alive after all this. My life will never be the same. Everything I ever read and heard about class struggle, human rights struggle, politics and history became true and alive this weekend. It made me relate to everything from Karl Marx "Das Kapital" to N.W.A:s song about the police...

So, I guess my story ends here. Or, it's just begun. I guess as time goes by, I will get more perspectives on this and we will all see the consequences and I'm ready to debate this with anyone. But for now, I'm finishing this by saying

Smash Capitalism! Tear down fortress Europe! Another world is possible!

Inge

More reports from Gothenburg can be found at:

<http://sweden.indymedia.org/>