

# Reflections After Genoa

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## Contents

- [Genoa Prepares for War](#)
- [Resistance Prevails](#)
- [We Are Still Winning](#)
- [Learning the Lessons](#)
- [The End of Summit Chasing?](#)
- [State Violence in Perspective](#)

LIKE WATTS, KENT State, Waco, and Seattle, “Genoa” now means something much more than a mere geographical location in popular consciousness. This birthplace of Christopher Columbus hosted the 2001 summit of the Group 8 (G8), the largest European protest in over twenty years, and the first death of an anti-capitalist protester of the global North in decades. Less well known is that Genoa also saw the advent of bitter movement in-fighting, routinized mass protest, unaccountable leadership, and fascist police tactics.

The Group 8 (G8) is comprised of the heads of state of the most powerful nations in the world: Germany, Canada, the United States, France, Japan, Italy, Russia, and the United Kingdom. They convene yearly to coordinate global economic policy, discuss geopolitical concerns, and pose for photos.

This past July 19-21, their meeting was met by radicals, revolutionaries, and reformers alike intent on demonstrating against them and disrupting their agenda. Over 300,000 trade unionists, pink-clad artists, Communist Party hardliners, militant anarchists, single-issue bellyachers and life-long revolutionaries participated in three days of protest.

## Genoa Prepares for War

To protect the meeting from the nuisance of interruption, Italian police deployed 14-foot high barricades of iron and concrete bolted to the streets and walls of downtown Genoa. They dubbed the area inside the fences the “Red Zone.” Eighteen thousand Carabinieri (Italian paramilitary police), and unknown numbers of Guardia de Finanza, military, and foreign secret service were enlisted to ensure that no demonstrators breached the zone.

In the weeks before the summit, public demonstrations and leafleting were banned, and downtown residents had to pass through security checks daily. Italy also withdrew from the European Union’s Open Border Treaty, arresting and blacklisting many activists trying to enter the country. Authorities raided political squats, conducted “sweeps” of immigrants in Genoa, transported hundreds of inmates to make room for protestors, and declared that 200 extra body bags were ordered.

These preparations are unsurprising given recent shifts in Italian politics. Last year’s election brought to power a right-wing coalition including the Lega Nordista (an anti-immigrant business

party) and Forza Italia ("Up with Italy," a nationalist party). Heading the government is Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a multi-millionaire who owns the majority of Italian television stations and print media.

## **Resistance Prevails**

On July 19<sup>th</sup>, 50,000 people flooded the streets to demand the recognition of immigrant rights. The march was sponsored by the Genoa Social Forum (GSF), the main umbrella group organizing the weekend's demonstrations. The event was colorful, spirited, and joyful.

Everyone present respected the immigrants' wishes that tranquility be maintained to ensure police had no excuse to make arrests. Police still drove close by in armored personnel carriers, decked out in riot gear, and brandishing the latest in crowd control weaponry. Demonstrators exercised tactical self-control, and the march concluded as a grand success.

July 20<sup>th</sup> was the "Day of Direct Action" against the G8. Clusters of protestors set out to either disrupt business as usual in Genoa, or attempt to breach the Red Zone itself. Pacifists, Greens, and others formed non-violent blockades just outside of the Red Zone. A "tactically frivolous" Pink Bloc was busy starting street parties outside of the Red Zone.

Meanwhile, the disruptive communist group Ya Basta, unionists, and the international Black Bloc separately tried to enter the Red Zone. As each group neared the Red Zone, they were beaten back by clubs, tear gas, and water cannons. Riot police unloaded hundreds of rounds of tear gas on demonstrators of all stripes, and appeared to be randomly charging and beating protestors, bystanders and journalists alike.

Consequently, street fights and rioting erupted all over the downtown area. From nearly all points of the city, plumes of smoke from burning cars, banks, and dumpsters were visible, and the sting of tear gas lay thick in the air.

By late afternoon, reports that police had killed a protester had reached most demonstrators. Carlo Giuliani, a 23-year old squatter and son of a unionist, was shot in the head twice by Carabinieri from their jeep, and was then run over by the same vehicle. Although much has been written about his death, few have mentioned that the shooting happened several kilometers from the Red Zone, where there was nothing that the police had any interest in defending.

The 21<sup>st</sup> saw the largest demonstration in Europe in at least twenty years. Over 300,000 people participated in the march, a particularly impressive number considering that the GSF canceled the demonstration the night before and a number of prominent groups withdrew. Although much attention was given to the rioting that day, it was actually far less widespread and intense than the day prior.

Battles raged for two hours in front of the GSF convergence center, initiated when police launched tear gas from guns, tanks, rooftops and a helicopter into the front of the march. Soon, tear gas was being fired into the convergence center itself, and even the sea when people tried to swim away from the gas.

Police then charged and attacked many different parts of the huge march when it was clear that the "riot" could not be contained quickly. Between 150-200 arrests were made during the march and hundred of injuries were sustained.

Later that evening, police raided the Independent Media Center (IMC) and conducted a brutal attack on the Diaz School, a government-sanctioned sleeping area. The IMC was quickly barricaded from within, before police pushed their way in and forced everyone (including injured people in the infirmary) to the floor. Plainclothed, masked agents in riot helmets and armed with clubs marched in, presumably to identify people.

An Italian legislator who happened to be on site was able to get police to leave only after they had destroyed telephones, cameras, and computers.

Across the street, the assault at the Diaz School was meanwhile underway. While most of the 100 people inside slept, hundreds of riot cops occupied the perimeter. Activists, medics, lawyers and GSF personnel were denied access to the school, as police poured in and out. Two hours later, stretcher after stretcher brought out prone and bloodied bodies. Most were out cold, but the conscious ones all raised fists in defiance.

One witness described what happened next, “six cops then emerged carrying what looked like a black body bag. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the gut wrenching screams and cries I heard all around me when we saw that. Soon after another similar bag was brought out.”

Two seriously injured people reported being carried to an ambulance in body bags. The police eventually left, protected by a row of GSF honchos linking hands as they retreated.

Inside the school, police left evidence of their handiwork as a warning. There were a half dozen pools of fresh blood on each of the five floors, battered doors and walls, beams and chairs drenched in blood. Bloody handprints streaked across walls. Each stairwell had trails of blood streaked down them — suggesting injured people were dragged out. No area of the school was left unchecked for hiding or sleeping people, though at least a dozen made it out of windows.

One man who escaped said that as soon as the police entered, “everyone on the first floor laid on the ground with their hands up. We were no threat and I was sure nothing would happen. Then, without speaking a word, they began beating us.” He described as many as ten cops pummeling each person, and said that no one was spared. Medics confirmed scores of severe compound fractures, broken skulls, cerebral hematomas, shattered teeth and serious lacerations.

Official sources reported 93 arrests and 61 hospitalizations from the school raid. In total, over 300 arrests and as many as 700 injuries occurred during the protests. Those injured by police were under constant guard in the military wing of hospitals, some even handcuffed to their beds. Inside the prisons, most were tortured: women threatened with rape, continuous beatings, denial of food and water, people made to stand on broken legs for nineteen hours, forced to shout “Viva Il Duce,” police urinating on people, and tear gas fired into cells.

Prisoners reported that the penitentiary police sang fascist anthems, made Nazi salutes, and displayed photos of Mussolini. Most of this was confirmed in the Italian daily La Repubblica by an anonymous officer who reported being told officers were to receive political “cover” for such actions. A German Green Party MP visited the prisons days after the arrests and compared them to those of Argentina under the military junta.

## **We Are Still Winning**

The repression faced by demonstrators in Genoa was severe, and the weight of psychological damage to the victims is impossible to measure. Yet the demonstrations also resulted in tangible

victories. The thousands of people demonstrating against the G8 sent an incredibly strong message, considering the first large-scale demonstration against the G8 happened only in 1998. Clearly, the movement is growing rapidly and seeing at least some concrete gains.

Just as Clinton and WTO functionaries in Seattle were forced to mention global poverty and the inequalities of globalization, so too was the G8 forced to take steps toward addressing Third World poverty and the African AIDS crisis. Leaders of developing nations were invited to the summit for the first time, and the G8 pledged \$1.3 billion to combat AIDS in Africa.

While clearly insufficient and mostly symbolic, these steps reflect that the parameters of debate over geopolitics are shifting in the movement's favor.

Additionally, the legitimacy crisis of Western governments continues to intensify. When a meeting of leaders of the world's leading "democracies" requires a 15,000 member police force, the suspension of civil liberties, mass detentions, torture, and lethal force, the mask of industrial democracy is clearly slipping to reveal the true face of the authoritarian state and market beneath.

It is no longer possible to decry protestors as out of touch with reality, mere cranks who are impatient with the legitimate and just mechanisms of democracy.

This was especially evident in Italy in the weeks following the summit. A total of 200,000 Italians, mostly non-activists, took to the streets in a dozen cities to non-violently decry the actions of the Berlusconi government. Additionally, solidarity actions — including marches, occupations of consulates, sabotage of Italian multinationals, and refusal to unload Italian cargo — took place in over 200 cities around the world.

## Learning the Lessons

When social movements experience rapid victories and escalating repression, it is difficult to adequately plan and respond. However, to survive as a movement, it is essential that we allow space to reflect on lessons from Genoa and open ourselves up for internal criticism. The movement is at a crucial point of growth and Genoa demonstrated that it must confront issues such as media manipulation of movement schism, the taming and management of social struggle, the waning relevance of summit-hopping protest and increasingly brutal state repression.

There is consensus within the movement that the G8 is an illegitimate body with no mandate to set the course of geopolitics. However, Genoa also demonstrated that deep divides persist within the movement and are easily exploited by the state, the corporate media and movement authoritarians.

Elites, the general public, and perhaps the majority of activists themselves continue to subscribe to the "good protestor/bad protestor" paradigm. This well-worn framework posits that the majority of protestors have legitimate concerns, however, these concerns cannot be addressed until the "bad protestors" are weeded out. Lack of understanding and dialogue between "mainstream" protestors and militants continues to be a major vulnerability of the movement.

It is hard to say who attacked and demonized tactical militants more: the corporate media, the state, or movement mouthpieces themselves. Organized and quasi-organized affinity groups in Genoa were present in the Black Bloc to cause direct economic damage to capital, symbolic losses of legitimacy to the state, and respond to police intimidation and violence with active self-defense and, more rarely, strategic offense.

Following the riots, Berlusconi stated that the state cannot distinguish between violent and non-violent protestors, and if the latter do not control the former, they will all be attacked equally.

Rather than confront the government on this skewed logic and reinforce the concept of tactical diversity within political unity, GSF leaders responded by defining anyone more militant than the median as necessarily outside of the movement. They interpreted the very real police infiltration and provocation of the Black Bloc as active collaboration with security forces to the end of disrupting the demonstrations.

The media further buttressed this misinformation by emphasizing the (relatively rare) Black Bloc vandalism of private automobiles and domiciles. This triangulation: police disruption and division, driven deeper by opportunistic movement bigwigs and amplified by the corporate-owned media, results in a public perception that weakens the entire movement and directly endangers the safety of militant activists.

Allowing our enemies to dictate which political differences are most salient is a surefire recipe for movement failure. Further, we should argue about reform versus revolution and tactical militancy within movement organizations, conferences, publications and platforms, and not in the news media.

To the spectacle industry, we are a disposable phenomenon to be replaced by tomorrow's race car accident, celebrity overdose, or presidential sex scandal. Those of us interested in having a radical movement for social change must take it on good faith that activists from differing tactical and theoretical perspectives share the same goal: a more free and just world.

With global protests against political and economic elites becoming more frequent, dissent is in danger of becoming coopted and normalized by the very system we are fighting against, and even managed by activists themselves. In contrast to the libertarian, ad hoc atmosphere of pre-WTO Seattle, Genoa was organized much like a vacation package for protest-tourists.

Upon arriving at the Convergence Center, located adjacent to police headquarters, activists were met with the GSF logo: two stick figures playing with a globe and the phrase "Welcome to Genoa." Nothing inspiring, insurrectionary, or even suggestive of the manifold reasons people came to protest. Just "welcome:" relax, listen, follow, and the protest will go fine.

After perhaps purchasing the official GSF T-shirt, a protestor could patronize any number of capitalist vendors located within the convergence center.

Though many groups came to Genova under the banner slogan "Another World is Possible," it seemed that the existing world of low-wage work in the service industry, individualized consumption, and throwing away food and plastic was fine for the time being. There was no effort at collective organization of cooking, serving, cleaning, recycling or anything else.

More problematic was the GSF's lock on information. While both the Immigrants' Procession and the International March were plugged and summarized in the protest program distributed to activists, the program merely announced the 20<sup>th</sup> as "Direct Actions of Civil, Pacific, and Non-Violent Disobedience" — no details on how to get involved, guidelines, or explanation "direct action."

The actual map of Genoa, which clearly indicated GSF sites with happy little icons, showed the Red Zone only as an abstract blob, without a single name of the streets comprising its borders. This map, the primary tool given to activists, was useless for planning direct actions against the G8. It told people only where to show up, whom to listen to, and where to spend money.

## **The End of Summit Chasing?**

Historically, the state has employed two methods of repressing revolutionary social movements, by violence and/or co-opting a fragment of the movement into the system. Clearly, violent repression is being used against us, but we must also be wary of management from above. We must keep in mind that the fight for “another possible world” does not have a clearly defined beginning and end, and that we must actively work toward creating that world as we struggle.

One might trace the current “anti-globalization” protest movement not to Seattle in 1999, but to the G8 meeting in Birmingham in 1998. Since then Seattle, Washington DC, Prague, Nice, Melbourne, Gotenborg, Salzberg, Barcelona and Genoa have seen gatherings of political and economic elites disrupted to varying degrees of success.

Following the events in Genoa, the Canadian government, host of the 2002 G8 summit, announced that it will take place in the remote Alberta village of Kananaskis. Short of the advent of activist paratroopers, this meeting is not likely to be disrupted. Likewise the WTO will meet this fall in the absolutist monarchy of Qatar, and the World Bank canceled its last meeting in lieu of a web-based conference.

Elites have no shortage of islands, aircraft carriers, dictatorial regimes, and nearby planets that could potentially host meetings far from the reach of protestors. The time of the “disrupt the conference” protest model appears to be up. What we do next will demonstrate whether we are in fact a social movement, or merely a footnote in the history of obsolete protest tactics. It’s time to shift gears and escalate.

If we can get hundreds of thousands in the street against the G8, why can’t we get millions to skip work and school for a single day? We’ve shown we can disrupt conferences and entire cities with our labor, now is the time to prove the more threatening fact that we can disrupt entire economies by withdrawing our labor.

What if we stopped following the schedule made by elites and instead took leadership from grassroots organizations of poor people in the global South? IMF privatization schedules are publically available, and Colombian, Brazilian, Indian or Indonesian activists might welcome a mass global action that corresponds to the actual timetable of their struggles.

Our movement hasn’t discovered anything new: Third World activists were using direct action to derail global capitalism when the left of the industrialized nations was still in shock over the demise of the Soviet Union. Direct action against the global institutions of capitalism was started as a matter of survival by poor people in the global South.

In the industrial North, mass solidarity actions with a direct action bent have been organized for at least three years by decentralized, anti-authoritarian networks, mostly coming from the anarchist, autonomist, and radical environmentalist “scenes.”

Rank-and-file unionists have established coalitions with such groups, linking solidarity with the South with workers’ struggles in the North. After the victory in Seattle, the media discovered this “anti-globalization movement” and subsequent global actions saw hundreds of leftist parties, union bosses, and middle-class reformists joining the “historic coalition.”

These very elements<197>inherently conservative and relative newcomers to this movement<197>were in Genoa chasing militants out of marches, protecting police after the bloody late night raid, and buying Heinekens in the shadow of the police compound after Carlo Giuliani was

killed. We must remember that the movement began to win when our actions could not be anticipated by the authorities or those that would try and direct protest from above. Continued success and the path to a new society lie in on-going tactical innovation and strategic resistance, not blindly following the most conservative elements who claim to represent us.

## **State Violence in Perspective**

Finally, we must reflect on the lessons to be drawn from the death of Carlo Giuliani and the police brutality in Genoa. For thousands, the killing of Giuliani and the bloodbath at the Diaz School will forever remain watershed events. They have galvanized us and precipitated a recommitment to a lifetime of struggle.

We must not however overlook why we are only beginning to experience such repression. The movement against global capitalism in the North is still largely white. Recent anti-globalization protests in Papua New Guinea, Brazil and Colombia have ended in police killings without much outcry from the media or white activists. Police assassinations and late night beatings are normal for political activists in most of the world. Any Central American unionist, South American peasant, Indian feminist, or Black, Puerto Rican or Native liberationist has seen far more blood in their lifetimes than that which flowed in Genoa.

For decades, dissent from relatively privileged white people in North America and Europe has been isolated and tame enough to be tolerated and ignored by the powers that be. The movement against global capitalism in these countries has now passed that point, and poses a genuine threat to the political-economic order. We can only expect state reprisals, including torture and homicide, to increase. This is not a romanticization of suffering and martyrdom, but rather a sober reflection of how the state has handled radical social movements in the past.

Thirty years ago, most industrial democracies were experiencing severe upheaval from organized social movements. These nation-states reacted with deadly precision to crush participation in the struggle. In the wake of this, most white insurgents retreated to the relative privilege afforded even working people in the North. The few who remained revolutionaries went down to long prison terms or police hits like their African American, Latino and Native comrades.

The time will soon come when the current generation of white activists will have to decide what price they are willing to pay to bring down global capitalism and the governments that support it.

Those from privileged positions can retreat to lifestyle politics, electoral leftism, and nostalgia about their protest days, or can get serious as a movement, address internal problems, and organize for collective self-defense and security.

This will make the movement a safer place for all of us, particularly those from groups who are targeted by the police everyday, regardless of politics. In this way, the movement can also begin to exercise true solidarity with and learn from our Third World, African American, Latino and Native comrades who have been fighting and dying for the cause of freedom and justice for centuries.

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\* From ATC 95 (November/December 2001).