

# Wombling Free? Anarchists and the European Social Forum

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THE 2004 European Social Forum, held in London on 15-17 October, attracted more than 20,000 participants. The event featured 500 plenaries, seminars, workshops and cultural events, with more than 2,500 speakers representing every shade of opinion within the global justice movement. The ESF concluded with a 70,000-strong demonstration calling for an end to war, racism and privatisation, and for a Europe of peace and social justice. Hundreds of volunteers gave their services for free. The whole event was made possible by financial support from the Greater London Authority, who also provided free travel for the participants and cheap accommodation at the Dome.

However, the disruptive actions of the anarchist group the Wombles added a sour note to an otherwise successful ESF. On Saturday evening the Wombles and their allies invaded the main venue at Alexandra Palace and occupied the stage before the start of the anti-fascist plenary, at which Ken Livingstone had been billed as a speaker. They unfurled a banner bizarrely denouncing Livingstone – one of the most prominent opponents of the invasion and occupation of Iraq – as a Labour Party warmonger. Weyman Bennett of Unite Against Fascism, who was to have chaired the session, was assaulted and had his mobile phone stolen. The following day in Trafalgar Square, at the rally following the demonstration, the Wombles clashed with stewards while trying to storm the speakers' platform, leading to arrests by the police.

These actions were condemned by most of those involved in the ESF. A statement issued by 21 leading trade unionists and campaigners declared that "censorship of views by premeditated physical violence at the ESF is completely unacceptable. If such methods were introduced into our movements they would destroy all democratic functioning".

Others, however, while not prepared to condone the Wombles' behaviour, have been inclined to see it as a response, albeit a mistaken

or exaggerated one, to the supposedly undemocratic process through which the London ESF was organised. It has been suggested that a more inclusive approach would have been able to draw the Wombles into the preparation of the Forum, dissuade them from setting up their own rival series of events, and avoid the disruption of the official ESF.

ESF – Bureaucratic and Undemocratic? Among those who were not involved in the organising process, the belief that the preparation of the London ESF was exclusive and bureaucratic appears to derive largely from reports in the far left press, and in the *Weekly Worker* in particular. It should be noted, however, that the criticisms of the London ESF in that publication were a repeat (admittedly in a greatly expanded form) of what it said about the Paris ESF last year.

In a *Weekly Worker* report of a preparatory meeting in Paris in September 2003, Tina Becker and Anne McShane complained about the lack of "democracy and transparency" there, and accused the French organising committee of acting in an "undemocratic and overbearing" manner. In the following issue Becker wrote that criticisms of the British SWP by Bernard Cassen of Attac were hypocritical, "as the French organising committee has been behaving in a similarly bureaucratic way".

The fact that the *Weekly Worker's* reports and criticisms of the Paris process were not as extensive as those of the London ESF was due to the fact that the group has no members in France. If they had, we would no doubt have been subjected to numerous articles along the lines of those published during the preparation of the 2004 ESF, combining inaccurate accounts of meetings, half-baked gossip and the political fingering of individuals with influential positions in the labour movement.

Criticisms of the 2003 ESF similar to those by the *Weekly Worker*, but from a libertarian perspective, can be found in the current (November-

December 2004) issue of *Radical Philosophy*, where Les Levidow complains that the organisation of the Paris ESF was:

“... controlled by party cadres. When a French network of local social forums requested a meeting space, for example, their request was denied, though eventually they found a defunct church and expanded a Europe-wide network of such forums. The main opportunity for coordinating actions, the Assembly of Social Movements on the Sunday morning, centred on statements which bore little relation to strategic debates during the overall event. Indeed, the final declaration was largely written beforehand by an invitation-only small working group.”

Others favoured more physical forms of criticism. During the demonstration that concluded the Paris ESF a couple of hundred anarchists, incensed by the involvement in the Forum of members of a political organisation they regarded as bureaucratic and reformist, attacked the French Communist Party contingent with bottles and fireworks, provoking an intervention by the police. Even the *Weekly Worker* drew the line at this sort of behaviour. “In objective terms”, their reporter commented, “such a stunt is reactionary: frankly, it is the sort of thing one expects from fascists.” It might be remarked in passing that the same paper took a much more relaxed view of anarchist hooliganism at the London ESF.

There is no evidence that the Wombles themselves participated in the attack in 2003, but they were as scathing about the Paris ESF as they were about its successor in London. One of them has recalled that “one of the things we had found depressing about the Paris ESF was endless platitudes of speakers with little or no opportunity for participation”.

The point here is that criticisms of bureaucratism, centralism and undemocratic procedure, and violent protests against the involvement of members of political organisations, were not limited to the London ESF. Such criticisms and protests, whether at the Paris or London Forums, are a reflection not so much of deficiencies in the way they are organised as of the compulsive and destructive oppositionalism that afflicts a section of the far left.

Neither the Paris nor the London ESF would have been possible without the commitment of large sums of public money and the involvement of mass organisations, notably the trade unions. A formal delegate-based structure is therefore a necessity for the preparation of the ESF wherever it is held. Inevitably this provokes hostility from individuals and groups who have little popular support and therefore favour a looser format that would allow them to secure a prominent role for themselves within the organising process. Cynic-

ally, they present this demand – for small ultra-left minorities to wield powers entirely out of proportion to the negligible forces they represent – as a campaign for democracy.

#### Wombles' Critique of the ESF

The Wombles themselves, who are an extreme example of this tendency, have since attempted to justify their behaviour at the London ESF with the argument that it was undemocratically organised. They claim that the Forum was hijacked by Ken Livingstone, the Greater London Authority and the SWP, and that it “deliberately ignored all the guiding principles of the World/European Social Forum”. As others have pointed out, however, there is a considerable degree of double-talk going on here.

The Wombles were initially involved in the organising process for the ESF but walked out at a very early stage. They attended one of the early preparatory assemblies in December 2003 where their main contribution involved “heckling and shouting at every speaker from the SWP”, according to the *Weekly Worker*. When it became clear that the organising body would adopt a delegate structure, rather than remain a free-for-all in which any random individual could just turn up, the Wombles lost interest.

However, their argument at that time was not that the 2004 ESF had abandoned the established procedures and philosophy of the WSF/ESF. On the contrary, they argued that the organisation of the London event was very much in *conformity* with the principles of the WSF/ESF, principles which they themselves vehemently rejected.

The Wombles produced a critique of the World Social Forum and the ESF (available on their website, [www.wombles.org.uk](http://www.wombles.org.uk)) in which they described the Social Forums as “institutions which parallel the development of capitalist institutions of governance”. Indeed, according to their analysis, the ESF was itself one of the “contemporary institutions of domination”.

In line with their attacks on Livingstone and the GLA, the Wombles' document criticised the involvement of Lula and other members of the Brazilian Workers Party in the original Porto Alegre WSF. They even condemned the presence within the Social Forums of NGOs, which they defined as pro-capitalist bodies. The Wombles accused the WSF/ESF of promoting “reformist demands such as taxes on corporations, protective/anti-privatization policies from governments, power to ‘civil society’ etc”. They specifically criticised the inclusivity, diversity and plurality of the WSF/ESF, claiming that this led directly to the adoption of such “minimalist objectives”.

The Wombles explained the allegedly undemocratic character of the ESF not as a consequence

of GLA/SWP dominance but of the ESF's own organisational structures. "Even if the ESF publicizes itself as 'decentralised participatory democracy'", they wrote, "it is in reality hierarchical and thus becomes a field where other hierarchical organizations, such as political parties, try to control it in pursuit of their own interests."

The Wombles concluded their critique by stating that they would work with other groups to promote "autonomous spaces" during the period of the ESF, based upon the principles of self-organisation, autonomy and direct action. The organisation of such spaces is not necessarily opposed to the ESF itself, and indeed there were proponents of "autonomous spaces" who saw these as complementary to the official Forum. On that basis they organised alternative events, which were listed in the official programme. However, as the Wombles themselves made clear, they were among those who argued that in London the fringe should be organised in outright opposition to the ESF.

Unable to convince the more moderate advocates of "autonomous spaces" of their case, the Wombles announced the organisation of their own series of events on the basis of explicit hostility to the official ESF, which was condemned as "a place where political parties and social democrats co-opt and dominate the new movement against capital for their own purposes". Entitled "Beyond the ESF", the Wombles' anti-ESF events were designed to attract the minority who are already committed to anarchist/libertarian methods of struggle against capitalism, rather than those those they sneered at as "sensitive, political active citizens", who would be attending the official Forum.

It is clear from the above that the Wombles' claim to have carried out their disruptive stunts at the London ESF in defence of the "guiding principles" of the WSF/ESF is simply laughable.

Who are the Wombles?

The Wombles ("White Overalls Movement Building Liberation through Effective Struggle") were set up in imitation of the Italian organisation known as *tute bianche* (white overalls) and of the dominant tendency within that organisation, Ya Basta!, who were themselves inspired by the Zapatistas. The *tute bianche* (who dissolved their organisation in 2001) participated in demonstrations dressed in white workers' overalls and chemical suits. This was supposed to symbolise the invisibility of people with no rights, no power, no individual identity, on the margins of a "normal life". They also wore protective pads, shields and helmets, though they said this was in order to pursue a form of militant nonviolence, countering

police brutality by interposing themselves between police and protestors.

The Wombles were launched in Britain by self-styled "libertarian communists" after the September 2000 protests against the annual meeting of the IMF/World Bank in Prague, where they joined the *tute bianche* in confronting the police. Alessio Lunghi, who is described as the Wombles' "default spokesman" (because the Wombles claim to have no official spokesperson or hierarchy), is the son of an Italian wine importer and it was apparently through him that contacts were made with anarchist currents in Italy.

The Wombles have attempted to reproduce the self-managed "social centres", which have provided Ya Basta! with its base in Italy, by occupying empty buildings, "initially for the purpose of having a space to organise and then to create a social basis and service to the local community". They admit this has not been an equivalent success in Britain: "We found that the nature of our actions affected the safety of liberated spaces and have led to several places being prematurely closed by police." A recent example of this was the squat in Fortress Road, Kentish Town, from which they were evicted in August. The result is that the Wombles lack the roots in civil society that Ya Basta! established and have evolved as a free-floating association of individuals united by a common commitment to supposedly non-hierarchical forms of organisation and to methods of direct action.

The "militant nonviolence" of the *tute bianche* has also proved less than successful when transposed to Britain. One critic has observed that the Wombles "never recruited to a critical mass to duplicate this nonviolent militant tactic". On May Day 2001 in London, when they were heavily outnumbered by police, the Wombles' methods proved ineffective. Since 2001 the anarchists' May Day protest, which provided the main arena for such actions, has gone downhill fast. The 2002 and 2003 events were something of a damp squib, with small groups of protestors dodging around the West End trying to evade the police. In 2004 the Mayday Collective, with which the Wombles were involved, was forced to announce that the annual protest had been cancelled due to lack of interest.

The Wombles themselves now downplay this aspect of their activity. Their website points out that "only a few WOMBLES actions have required helmets, padding and white overalls. Though the media impression of WOMBLES has been this, we do more things than look silly - honest!" In fact the *tute bianche* approach now appears to have been sidelined in favour of more aggressive tactics.

The Wombles have in fact always had an ambiguous attitude towards political (or, more

accurately, anti-political) violence. They accused Ya Basta! of “hierarchical discipline and authoritarianism” – because Ya Basta! stewards tried to prevent “Black Bloc” anarchists from smashing windows during the protest at the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001. Indeed, one of the Wombles’ charges against the Social Forums is that they have “promoted the distinction between ‘violent’; and ‘non-violent’ protestors so as to be compliant with the status quo”.

#### Wombles at the Dublin EU Summit

An example of the Wombles’ new, more aggressive methods was seen at the May 2004 EU summit at Farmleigh House in Dublin, where a protest march was organised in defiance of an effective police ban. Although the broad-based organising committee, the Dublin Grassroots Network, had decided on a peaceful protest that would avoid physical confrontation with the police, the Wombles were part of a group of anarchists who rejected this decision. According to their own statement, a plan to try and break through police lines was adopted the evening before the demonstration by “people planning to join the march who did not wish to march under the guidelines issued by Dublin Grassroots Network”.

Note that there was no claim that the DGN was bureaucratic, centralised, undemocratic, exclusive, dominated by political parties or anything of that sort. The Wombles simply decided that they and their fellow anarchists would not abide by the majority decision because they disagreed with it. Their justification was:

“In a world where hundreds of thousands of people die every year due to the economic policies of global capitalism, the discussion of the ‘violence’ of a push through police lines or property damage on a demonstration becomes an irrelevance.”

Needless to say, the anarchists’ attempt to break through police lines resulted in a backlash against all the demonstrators. A water cannon was turned on the marchers, who were then subjected to baton charges by riot police. A minority of the demonstrators responded by throwing bottles and cans of beer at the police, hitting one policewoman on the head and hospitalising her. The media of course seized on this in order to ignore the actual objectives of the march and instead misrepresent the event as a case of anarchist hooligans attacking the police.

As the DGN pointed out in a statement issued after the demonstration: “The main story is surely that between 3 and 5,000 people found the courage to march in the face of the ban and the threat of the riot police, in defence of the freedom of assembly and opinion and as a protest against privatisation, militarisation and ‘Fortress Europe’. A secondary story is surely that the police did indeed attack

citizens on the Navan Road, injuring several and arresting two dozen. Yet media attention has largely ignored both of these stories in favour of a focus on the alleged actions of a small number of protestors.”

The Wombles claimed that their own methods had been nonviolent, amounting to no more than linking arms and trying to push through the police line. However, they refused to criticise others who did favour attacking the police. As one Womble declared: “The only problem I had with people throwing beer cans was that it was a waste of good beer! For fuck’s sake people, this is a social war, are we really going to cry if people throw a few rocks and bottles – I’m sure I’m not!” In any case, the Wombles’ decision to force their way through police lines, in circumstances where the riot police were looking for an excuse to suppress the demonstration, inevitably led to a violent clash.

The actions of the Wombles and their friends prompted a fierce debate on the Irish Indymedia discussion list. As one critic of the anarchists’ tactics argued, “many had hoped there would be unity in the last part of the march to Farmleigh – this splinter group made everything turn sour and gave the state and the media exactly what they wanted”.

The arrogant elitism of the anarchists came in for particular criticism. “By deciding to have a confrontation with the police”, another participant pointed out, “these people were completely interfering with our attempts to have a peaceful protest. That showed no respect whatsoever for our tactics or goals.... By insisting on their tactics, and refusing to take others’ views into account, they were displaying fanaticism and closed-mindedness, as if *the only thing* that mattered was their right to do whatever they wanted ...”

Addressing the Wombles and their allies, another supporter of the DGN complained bitterly: “It is your small group of friends who try to dictate to the rest of us how we should act and what we should do. There is nothing ‘democratic’ nor ‘non-hierarchical’ about this strategy ... instead of creating new forms of resistance you offer division and violence.... You led people into a violent situation of your own planning. People came on to the street for the first time attracted to the positive energy of the march to Farmleigh, *not* because they wanted to be put in danger by the violence that you planned and provoked.”

Some might argue that these methods flow directly from the Wombles’ anarchist ideology. As Hal Draper argues in his pamphlet *The Two Souls of Socialism*: “Anarchism is on principle fiercely anti-democratic, since an ideally democratic authority is still authority. But since, rejecting democracy, it has no other way of resolving the inevitable disagreements and differences ... its

unlimited freedom for each uncontrolled individual is indistinguishable from unlimited despotism by such an individual, both in theory and practice.”

The Wombles’ actions at the Dublin EU summit, and their subsequent disruption of the London ESF, were entirely in line with this philosophy.

Whither the Wombles?

Apart from its roots in general anarchist ideology, the latest evolution of the Wombles seems to reflect the fact that they have reached something of an impasse as far as their original methods of action are concerned. As we have seen, by their own admission duplicating the Italian social centres has proved difficult in Britain, where the harsher character and more rigorous enforcement of anti-squatting laws have prevented the establishment of such centres on any but a short term basis. The methods of the *tute bianche* have also proved ineffective when relatively small numbers of

Wombles are confronted by the much larger forces of the Metropolitan Police, while it appears that the May Day anarchist protests have in any case fizzled out.

Recent experience suggests that the Wombles are now turning instead to publicity-generating physical confrontations that have more in common with the aggressive forms of direct action pursued by elements within the “Black Bloc”. With the forces of the state having proved too strong for them, there is no doubt a temptation for the Wombles to choose softer targets, namely their opponents on the left, as happened at the ESF. They should be persuaded that, even from their own standpoint, it would be disastrous to go down that road. If the Wombles’ preferred libertarian, “horizontal” form of organisation is to win wider support, this will be done by demonstrating in practice its superiority as an alternative to the hierarchical methods they oppose, not by arrogantly disrupting and obstructing the activities of those they have as yet failed to convince. ■

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