In our experience, localized struggles are more likely to inflame the consciousness of Washingtonians than a march in our own backyard. In November, one of us was at a meeting of working class residents from a non-descript rent controlled apartment building that's scheduled to be torn down and replaced with a luxury high-rise. An elderly black woman who runs the tenant association rose to her feet and exhorted her neighbors to resist displacement: "if those Indians can do it out there in the snow and the rain we can do it on one block in Northeast." In meetings throughout the spring, she never mentioned a march.

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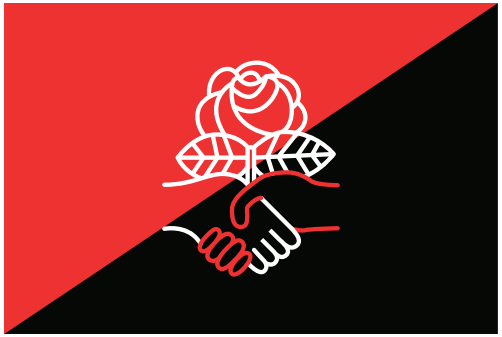
Marching Nowhere

By Comrades of the DC DSA



The recent call for a national march on Washington for single-payer health care has proved intensely unpopular in the DC chapter of the DSA. Washingtonians active in political life tend to grumble about out-of-towners who incessantly demand logistical support for big mobilizations without showing much interest in the welfare of the city. It's easy for District residents not directly employed in national politics to be alienated from the whole enterprise, since we are disenfranchised in the federal government that controls our judiciary and holds veto power over our legislature. But we believe there's another reason for our muted enthusiasm: bearing witness to march after march on Washington gives a locals a privileged perspective on the tactical exhaustion and limited strategic effectiveness of big marches.

Since Trump became president, there has been a cascade of marches: the women's march, the climate march, the equality march, the march for science, the march for truth, marches of workers, of immigrants, tenants etc. Later this summer juggalos will march. The marches aren't working. Insofar as the Trump agenda has been frustrated, it has mostly been due to the courts, fractures in the Republican coalition, and the fundamental incompetence of the stooges he's installed in positions of responsibility. If radicals want to organize meaningful resistance to the administration and its allies, we need to find some new tricks.

The women's march in January surprised everyone with its scale, and it undeniably renewed progressives' hopes and expectations for collective action when too many were wallowing in despair. Huge masses of people turned out with next-to-no direction from formal political institutions, and it seemed possible they might coalesce into

Mass marches usually converge on some symbolic or ceremonial center of power (hence the popularity of marches on Washington). But in recent years, protests that catalyzed mass movements have often exploded at the margins of America. Few "movement strategists" would have thought to stage demonstrations in the impoverished suburbs north of St. Louis or the Standing Rock Reservation. When mass protests did break out there, demonstrators did not simply gather to express their grievances or create a spectacle that would captivate some sympathetic observer, they sought to make the ordinary operation of major industries and police power impossible until their demands were met. Rather than politely petitioning public authority, protesters consciously attempted to create disorder, and in doing so, they broke down traditional deference to the state and property. These demonstrations galvanized millions of people not simply because of the righteousness of their demands, but because they provided practical examples of ordinary people fighting to reorganize their daily lives.

Marches, protests, and demonstrations all have their place, but they need to play a part cycles of struggle that interrupt the order of things and fracture public consensus. When capitalists stop making profits, when traditional elites and state officials cannot reliably expect that they will be obeyed, it becomes much more difficult to ignore insurgents' demands and delay concessions. National marches stage-managed by professional activists have never inspired that kind of mass non-compliance, more commonly they have lured militants out of struggles over the conditions of daily life and into a bureaucratic morass of lobbying and horse-trading where they are at a structural disadvantage.

Most of the recent wave of marches are called on social media and details, including their demands, are worked out later. Nobody seems especially proud of this. Looking back on the wreckage of so-called "Twitter revolutions" in the Middle East, it's easy to see why the intersection of social media and social protest seems less interesting than it did six years ago. Reflecting on the failure of mass protest to stem the tide of authoritarianism in her home country, the Turkish sociologist Zeynep Tufekci has noted that the internet has facilitated mass protests in ways that undermines mass movements in the long-term. Where large demonstrations and marches of the past usually required organizations with effective leadership, mass allegiance, disciplined cadres and a rank-and-file that could solidify into a social mass to carry out a plan, contemporary protests are usually ephemeral and lack the "organizational depth" necessary for a long war of position.

But even before the era of social media, big marches seemed to be running out of steam for decades. The protests against the Iraq war were the largest the world had ever seen, and yet the war came. The million man march in 1995 could not slow the fevered expansion of mass incarceration or check the beginning of a boom in predatory lending practices that would confiscate half the wealth of black Americans. The AFL-CIO's enormous 1981 Solidarity Day demonstration in support of striking air traffic controllers might as well have been a funeral march. Throughout this era, small bands of confrontational activists like ACT UP, ADAPT, and Earth First! were able to wield more force than mass demonstrations.

self-organized networks of resistance that could seriously challenge the country's reactionary drift. When protesters against the Muslim ban shut down dozens of airports less than a week later, many of us perceived a nascent culture of resistance that encompassed marches and these more militant tactics that seemed to break out almost by accident. But in the months that followed, the marches continued and the militancy did not. Attempts at nationwide strikes, even with the endorsement of the organizers of the women's march, were damp squibs, touching only a tiny handful of workplaces. Whatever infrastructure mobilized people to march has yet to demonstrate the capacity to coordinate more disruptive actions or continuing forms of struggle.

The social composition of these marches is worth examining, because they do not appear to be mobilizing the people with an interest in launching a thoroughgoing assault on the status quo. Lately we keep hearing the crack that "protest is the new brunch," which captures both the low stakes of these marches and the privileged social position of most of the marchers. A recent poll found that residents of DC's affluent white wards are almost 5 times more likely to attend protests than people from poor black neighborhoods. Yard signs bearing slogans of resistance are mostly confined to the gentrified areas of major cities. Of course, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with relatively privileged sections of the population getting organized, but we worry that mixing too much yuppie habitus into contemporary protest culture is creating a barrier to organizing majoritarian social movements. It's not good enough for people to express their outrage on lunch break and then go back to work, especially if the protesters are incapable of forging links with the racially oppressed service workforce making their lunches.

Under normal circumstances, it makes sense for political leaders to ignore marches. A rational elected official worries about how public opinion is articulated at the polls, and there are much more sophisticated methods for projecting the outcomes of elections than counting people at a rally. To be effective, a demonstration needs more than just numbers; it has to make a credible threat to cause bigger problems if it goes unanswered.

In his essay on the nature of mass demonstrations, the Marxist philosopher and critic John Berger derided the idea that protest ought to be an appeal to the conscience of the state -- either to the better angels of state officials or to the phantom of “public opinion.” Instead he argued that effective demonstrations are “dress rehearsals for revolution," in which protesters develop awareness of their latent power as a class and begin to exercise that power in limited ways. At their best, mass demonstrations take command of public space and manipulate it to project a vision of alternative forms of public authority. If a demonstration succeeds, the state must either accept a challenge to its claim to supreme authority or turn to repression and reveal its dictatorial essence. Since the strategic horizon for a demonstration is an open challenge to public authority, Berger saw officially sanctioned protests planned in coordination with that authority as a lifeless spectacle.

When people are fighting for citizenship, be they workers during the industrial revolution, women during the struggle for suffrage, or racially oppressed people in civil rights and anti-colonial movements, the mere fact of rallying and acting politically represents a fight for power. The stakes are obvious, and those forms of demonstrations frequently meet repression and then spill the banks of protest and flow into strikes, riots, and/or rebellions.

When the right to participate has been decisively won, however, protest is not as dangerous to the protester or to the protested. Demonstrations can still mount a challenge, but they must pursue self-conscious strategies to disrupt public order. Over the course of recent waves of popular mobilization around the world, especially the anti-globalization movement, Occupy, and the movement for black lives, certain repertoires of fighting protest have been developed. These repertoires have internationalized, appearing at Tahrir Square, the UK student movement, and Occupy Central in Hong Kong. Protesters make their mark by occupying public squares and buildings, blockading important commercial arteries, and taking the streets in order to snarl traffic, disrupt the business of the sidewalk, and occasionally break a window or two. Protests most effectively challenge the social order when they stray from the public sphere into the economic, moving from expressing voice to mounting an incipient challenge to the law of value’s domination over everyday life, something the forces of order cannot tolerate.