

**No-to-NATO, No-to-War
3-5 April 2009 Strasbourg**

**WOMEN SAY NO-TO-NATO:
A ROUND-UP OF OUR INDIVIDUAL EVALUATIONS**

A : Introduction

After our return home from the events surrounding the Strasbourg Summit, we wrote to all the women who had participated at our invitation, asking them to send their reflections and evaluations. I suggested the following framework.

1. First of all your "diary", what did you do yourself during these days, what were the most memorable moments and impressions, good and bad?
2. We aimed to contribute feminist antimilitarist thinking to the Conference. Did we succeed? Or not? What were the difficulties?
3. We aimed to have an effective women's vigil and to participate as visible feminists in the public demonstration. Did we succeed? Or not? What were the difficulties?
4. How do you evaluate the performance of (a) the authorities and police, (b) the demonstrators of different tendencies, and (c) the organizers of No-to-NATO. What did each of these parties do right and what did they do wrong?
5. Our own group was about 40 feminist antimilitarist pacifist nonviolent women from several organizations. Did we make wise choices? Did we make mistakes? What could we have done better?
6. We spoke many languages. Did we manage to communicate with each other OK?

Fourteen women replied with their reflections, some in just a few paragraphs, some in several pages. (Please see list below.)¹ The following is my 'round-up' of our thoughts. I insert the initials of one or more of the women who contribute particular points. 'CC' indicates that I am inserting my own observation. For everyone, as you will see, the weekend was a mixture of some very good

¹ Anna Valente & Margherita Granero, Donne in Nero, Torino, Italy (AV);
Asuka Sanada, WILPF, Berlin, Germany (AS);
Cynthia Cockburn, Women in Black and WILPF, London, UK (CC);
Diane Brace, WILPF and Women in Black, London, UK (DB);
Emma Rosengren & Josefina Karlsson, WILPF, Stockholm, Sweden (ER);
Evelyne Joly, Strasbourg (EJ);
Heidi Meinzolt, WILPF, Munich, Germany (HM);
Helga Berg, WILPF, Denmark (HB);
Irmgard Heilberger, WILPF, Neuburg, Munich, Germany (IH);
Martine Toulotte, WILPF, Grenoble (MT);
Natasa Dokovska, World March of Women, Macedonia (ND);
Nelly Martin, World March of Women, Paris, France (NM);
Sabrina Qureshi, World March of Women, London, UK (SQ);
Sofia Segura Herrera & Ma. Angeles Bleda Fuster of Mujeres de Negro, Sevilla, Spain (SS);
Ursula Gelis, WILPF, Norway (UG).

experiences and some very bad. It was 'a personal and group experience full of shadows and highlights, hard to separate' (SS).²

B : The Women in Black 'encuentro', evening of Thursday 2 April

In putting out our call as the four-member WiB / WILPF / WLOE planning group inviting women to come to Strasbourg, those of us who were active in Women in Black had a particular hope: to gather women of WiB groups in an "*encuentro europeo*", something we had never done before. We hesitated to ask busy women to come a whole day early to the No-to-NATO events for such a meeting, but we thought it just possible some might arrange to come early enough on the day before the International Conference to permit at least of an evening get-together. We therefore reserved a meeting space in one of the hotels for 5-9 pm on 2 April, and organized a light supper and drinks.

We were happy that almost 30 women turned up for this little WiB encuentro. Of those who wrote their names in the register, two came from Mujeres de Negro in Spain (Sevilla); nine from Donne in Nero in Italy (Torino, Napoli and Rome); two from Denmark; two from the UK; and there were at least nine from France, including Paris, but with a goodly contingent from the Strasbourg local group of Femmes en Noir.

This meeting was warm and sociable, but generally rather chaotic. It is clear with hindsight that in planning for it we seriously underestimated the difficulty of communication. We should have addressed the language problem directly, instead of assuming that people would find their own informal interpreters. We attempted an informal moment of 'getting to know each other' followed by an exchange of information about our local organizations, among groups of four or five women who could find a common language. The room however was too small, crowded and noisy (we had tried to keep costs down by taking the cheap option of the hotel breakfast room). When we attempted discussion in the whole group, the general level of informality, excitement and noise was such that it was difficult for the facilitator to gain people's attention and to enable one person's voice to be heard at a time.

Retrospective comments on the encuentro included the following. There was 'the usual chaos you get at the beginning of all female gatherings... women arriving and chattering when they should be disciplined to listen' (HB). 'I had a sudden perception, not rational, that I was at ease among so many unknown women, different but congenial. What made me feel this? Their gestures? smiles? clothes? way of moving? age? Perhaps their eyes, so interested, so close, so concerned. I felt the will to understand each other, in spite of the many languages, in spite of everything' (AV). All the same AV continued, 'the mental fatigue of listening and speaking in three different languages! I have more difficulty to understand women speaking in their own language. I am lazy about asking them to repeat it, saying that I didn't understand. I felt confused because many women were speaking at the same time.' She concluded, 'In the meeting it was difficult to

2

The evaluations were written in Spanish, Italian, French and English. For purposes of this text I have made my own translations from Spanish and French, and they are rather rough; also, I have taken the liberty here and there to change the not-quite-correct English of some of the texts. In general, I have tried to convey the spirit of the remarks.

follow a thread, a reasoning. The time was short, and we need to know each other before we can discuss together'(AV). Another comment was, 'Our long journey to Strasbourg was rewarded by the warm welcome from our Women in Black friends...The language [problem] didn't stop us being able to relate to each other. We think that women transcend words and understand each other through gestures, glances and complicity... We felt protected, cared for and loved; and we could absorb the huge power that women develop on the basis of a sureness in their own ideas and political practices' (SS).

C : The women's vigil on 4 April

Our final task in this meeting was to address the important question of the Women-in-Black-style vigil we wanted to organize (not just for WiB but for women of all our groups, organizations and networks) as part of the demonstrations planned for Saturday 4 April. Many of us had hoped we might make ourselves visible in the city centre, in the busy Place Kléber, the normal vigil site of Femmes en Noir Strasbourg. We would stand in our usual quiet and dignified way for an hour from 10 till 11 am, impressing our message on the passing shoppers with our WiB placards reading 'No to NATO, no to War' in French and other languages. The FeN women from Strasbourg however warned us that, first, there would be no public to see us, since the city had been almost emptied and closed down for the weekend by the security forces. Secondly, they were sure that the extraordinarily high police presence and the total ban on all political acts (locals had even been made to remove rainbow peace flags from their balconies!) made it certain that we would be moved on, or even taken to the police station, immediately. Could we perhaps attempt a 'walking vigil', going on foot in the direction of the Not-to-NATO rally at the Port du Rhin planned for 12 noon, stopping to stand here and there on the way? This was not considered feasible either.

So a decision was made that we would all go directly to the site of the mass rally. This alternative had the disadvantage that it would not be visible to any members of the public. But it had the merit of being legal. We would meet up briefly at the entrance of a nearby hotel, the Formula One, and then proceed together to the rally ground, led by the French Femmes en Noir, who would decide an appropriate location for us to stand. The organizers had promised that, when the march set off, at a programmed time of 2 pm, our women's organizations could march as a bloc with our banners, immediately behind the 'peace movement' organizations. We would thus be ready to move, when the time came, directly from the vigil to the head of the march.

The ground designated for the rally was an open space of gravel known as the *champ de foire*, near to the river Rhine, 5 or 6 kilometres by road from the city centre. (Please refer to the sketch map appended.) Already by the morning of 4 April, bus and tram services were reduced to a minimum in Strasbourg and by the afternoon they had all closed down. Some of us walked the 7 km road in a south-easterly direction to the *champ de foire*, others took a taxi in that direction, as far as a bridge (the Pont d'Anvers which crosses one of the dock basins), where we met a police block. After a ten minute wait the police permitted us to cross the bridge and walk the last couple of kilometres down the Rue du Port du Rhin to our agreed meeting place. Even the earliest of us arrived at the *rendez vous* late, and

many others failed to make it. (Indeed quite a few women never made it to the vigil at all.)

The French women led us right up to the front of the stage whence speakers and musicians would address the crowd. We formed a long line across the front of this podium, holding many colourful banners of WiB, WILPF and other women's organizations, and placards in several languages. There were 20 women in the vigil at its height. We maintained our silent stand there for well over an hour. We were well visible to the demonstrators as they gradually assembled. On the whole women were satisfied with this 'second best' vigil. Photos confirm that it held the high ground and it looked good. 'This action...could have confused a lot of people, and could be just ignored by others. But several young women did come up to us and ask us who we were and about our political message' (SS).

As to having a strong and bold presence of women in the march, however, this came to nothing, as we shall see below. Since 'the demonstration was destroyed, boycotted and violated in the most patriarchal and military manner conceivable, it was certainly not evident that there was a block of united women there' (SS).

D : The International Conference *No-to-NATO, No-to-War*, Friday 3 and Sunday 5 April

To go back to the previous day, the International Conference was, on the whole appreciated. It was attended by several hundred participants, in a pleasingly wide age-range with a good mix of women and men. The venue was a sports complex in the suburb of Illkirch, 7 or 8 kilometres by road from central Strasbourg.

It is well understood that the ICC were given minimal choice over the location of the conference. Nonetheless it was disappointing that the distance from the city and the interruption of public transport by the authorities made it very difficult for people to attend. At least two women in our group didn't make it out to Illkirch. 'It was a great disappointment for us' (ER). The facilities were intimidatingly spacious ('really *bad!*' wrote HM). But not everyone perceived the place negatively, and there were certainly some enjoyable aspects. It was, after all, a sunny weekend and the outside grassy space where people gathered to chat over food and drink was agreeable. There was 'a climate of tranquility and co-operation' (SS). A room and entrance hall accommodated stalls where participating organizations were able to set out their material.

I think some of us probably felt less than fully engaged in the working content of the International Conference as a whole (CC). On the other hand, one of us concluded positively, afterwards, that it had been 'very interesting and well organized, giving a chance to more than 800 people from 25 countries to contribute in the various plenaries and workshops...It permitted a large number of antiwar movements, associations, political parties and trade unions to work together in very good circumstances' (NM). 'We were imagining how those of us who were there, between us, could have comprised a whole little country – girls and boys, young men and women, older people, and older still. The idea that "another world is possible" took solid form' (SS).

The plenary sessions

There were some excellent conference speakers, although several who had been billed to speak were impeded from entering Strasbourg –Bianca Jagger, Tariq Ali, Lidia Menapace and Jeremy Corbyn, among others, failed to arrive. Among those who spoke, some were specially appreciated, including Joseph Gerson, director of the American Friends Service Committee; Jacqueline Cabasso, executive director of the Western States Legal Foundation that monitors and analyzes U.S. nuclear weapons programs and policies; Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies and Transnational Institute; and Jan Tamas, active Humanist and spokesperson of the Czech ‘No to Bases’ initiative (UG, CC). The presence of Malalai Joya from Afghanistan was an unexpected pleasure.

The simultaneous translation in the plenary (English / French / German) was nothing less than essential, but Spanish was a significant lack. ‘It was a handicap for us that “castellano” was lacking...it has the effect of excluding people, because a lot of young people don’t have access to language education...particularly a lot of women, and although they want to participate in these events they are afraid to come because of their ignorance of languages’ (SS). This commentator suggested that Arabic was another significant omission. No doubt Italian was missed likewise.

One of our self-criticisms in WiB and WILPF was that we had failed to foresee the opportunity offered by the information stalls, and hadn’t brought enough material with us to give and to sell (HB, DB). We did however manage to set up on the corridor walls two photo exhibitions, one of *Women Antiwar Activists* (by CC), the other of women in Palestine mounted by Faty Koumba. (In addition, a collection of portraits from the *Peace Women Across the Globe* exhibition, and some of our banners, were displayed in our workshop space.) We had struggled with the organizers, without success, to get a feminist speaker in the plenary programme. (By the time they responded to our request that they invite Luisa Morgantini she had other commitments.) We did however make some modest contributions from the floor (see below).

On the first day (the Friday), the plenary had the feel of being male-dominated, in the dual sense of a majority of male presenters and speakers from the floor, and some rather macho anti-NATO, anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian posturing. On the second day (the Sunday) there was a subtle change in atmosphere however. This time Hannelore Tölke facilitated, and she decided to take one female for every male speaker from the floor. This enabled many more women’s voices to be heard (by no means all feminist, of course), and there were several strong statements by women. A specifically feminist intervention from the podium by Christiane Reymann of El-fem (the feminist initiative of the Party of the European Left) was inspiring. From the floor Kate Hudson of CND UK took a vehement position against the previous day’s violence. And it was good to hear an interjection from the floor by one of our group, Marlene Tuininga (French President of WILPF) commenting on the bias of the media, and explaining the previous day’s violence among the demonstrators by the lack of policy in France for disadvantaged youth.

I also found the courage, in the improved atmosphere, to take the microphone and tried to insert a feminist antimilitarist 'take' on the previous day's violence. I said (not as coherently as I would have liked) 'In our feminist antimilitarist groups, because we understand patriarchy to be part of the problem, we think *anti-patriarchy* has to be part of the solution. So, our movement against war must be antipatriarchal as well as anticapitalist and antinationalist. Unfortunately yesterday we saw a lot of *patriarchal masculinism* in our movement! We want a movement that is not merely an antiwar movement – we want a *peace* movement.'

There were however, even on this second day of the conference, still some men taking the high ground and polemicizing against the French police and state (and reminding us that *NATO* are the main perpetrators of violence). Reiner Braun, the secretary of the International Co-ordinating Committee of No-to-NATO, did not appear to be in any way apologetic about possible failings of the ICC in regard to Saturday's events (IH, CC). Petros Constantinou of Stop the War Coalition, Greece, appeared to be celebrating demonstrators in Greece who on a previous occasion had attacked police stations. This provoked Lisa, a young woman from Edinburgh CND, to leap to her feet and shout 'Young women want peace!' (CC).

So, did we make our feminist antimilitarist presence and analysis visible and understood in the conference? 'We did so by our numbers, our very presence (ND)'. 'We brought [to the event] a good dose of alternative thinking, very much our own and very different from the other participating groups. All the same, our voice didn't have the space there from which to be heard by everyone' (SS). 'In patriarchy the space for the equal treatment of women does not exist' (UG).

The workshops

There was an impressive range of workshop topics that included some focused on *NATO* itself (e.g. its enlargement to the East, its relation to the European Union, its war in Afghanistan), others on specific issues like Palestine/ Middle East, a review of the *NATO* bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, and the significance of the current economic crisis. A workshop that had speakers from Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia was specially appreciated (AV). The lack of simultaneous translation in the workshops was a serious problem for many participants however.

Our own feminist workshop: "NATO = Security? Gender Questions"

The space we were allocated for our workshop was truly terrible – one third of a massive sports hall, curtained off, with poor acoustics and hard benches to sit on. At our own request, it was scheduled rather late in the programme (6 – 8 pm) to accommodate some women who could not arrive earlier. But by this time people were tired, and we had to hurry away to catch transport back to the city (UG). We estimate that there were about 40 participants. The great majority were women of the initiating network of Women in Black, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and Women and Life on Earth, with a good input from 5 members of the World March of Women. Other women coming to the workshop 'cold', so to speak, from the conference as a whole, were a minority but it was a valuable opportunity to meet women such as Christiane Reymann, a

journalist active in El-fem, the women's initiative of the women's initiative of the European Left party; and Annette Groth, a politician from the German party *Die Linke* (UG). For the World March of Women, the workshop 'was an opportunity to get to know and appreciate activists from the associations we hope to mobilize in 2010' (NM).

Having learned a lesson from the WiB encuentro the night before, and from the language problems we observed in other workshops, our opening words were 'We will first address the question of language'. This phrase was repeated in Spanish, Italian, French and German. We then held up signs, one proclaiming each language: "Hablamos español", "Ici on parle Français" etc. We asked people to cluster in specific areas of the room, around these cards. A given language group would contain both those for whom this was the language of choice and others, multilingual 'friends' of the language, who could help translate it into and from English. We then asked each group to appoint an informal translator or translators who would be willing to give whispered translations for the remainder of the workshop, and to be the spokesperson in English for that group. And so we proceeded...

Although it was certainly a strain to understand each other, comments on this process were positive. Those who experienced other workshops said that ours shone out for the real effort we made to maximise our own language capabilities. 'All of us found a way to understand each other, even if our interlocutor didn't speak our language...I spoke with a lot of women and understood all of them, even if some of them spoke very bad English or French' (ND). 'All the women we were with...made an effort, really trying to understand us, so we had the feeling of wanting to reciprocate....we were and still are very touched' (SS).

We had received 12 written submissions in advance of the workshop. Two came later, too late to introduce, but subsequently gathered with the others and now lodged on our website (www.wloe.org). It would of course have been far more satisfactory for those who had written the papers to be able to present them verbally and obtain a good discussion of their ideas. However time was strictly limited (we had two hours). And in fact, inevitably, there was quite a lot of overlap and repetition in the papers. Thus the planning group of four supported Cynthia's suggestion to summarize the content of the papers under four themes, which were presented at the workshop as: the feminist case against NATO as an international actor; the feminist case against NATO, national and industrial military installations in our countries; the feminist case against NATO and the EU for their militarization of everyday life and culture in our countries; and the feminist case against NATO as a perpetrator of wars.³

Comments on our compromise solution were favourable. 'The many papers diligently prepared for our workshop and the no less challenging "bundling" of them for presentation are good stuff to work with for the less able like myself' (HB). 'Already that the workshop existed was good, but the distribution [of the material of the papers] into four 'cases' was fine!' (HM).

³ Please see the text already circulated, 'The Feminist Case against NATO and EU Militarization', compiled by Cynthia Cockburn, 3 May 2009. On-line at: http://wloe.org/fileadmin/Files-DE/PDF/Themen/NATO_April_09/FEMINISTCASEx4.pdf

The presentations were followed by brief questions, and then we split into the small language-based groups for a discussion, not of the papers, but of *future strategies of action on NATO and European militarization for our groups and localities in the immediate future*. A rapporteur from each group reported back briefly to the whole workshop, using a flip-chart. Evaluations of this choice to spend the small-group time addressing our own strategies of opposition to NATO were positive. Italian Women in Black had noted during the workshop that this was the first time they had really put their minds to NATO, despite its clear significance in their region. 'The workshop offered...many examples, arguments, types of communication that will be useful for our actions here in Italy to continue' (AV). And a Japanese participant living in Germany wrote, 'Honestly speaking, I didn't pay much attention to NATO when I was in Japan...Japan isn't a member state. But [I see now] that doesn't mean Japan has nothing to do with NATO. Directly and indirectly our country [is] a party to the militarist system in the world... we too have to take into account NATO's militarism' (AS).

One participant at the workshop concluded that 'it was a triumph... Language difficulties were overcome and a thoroughly successful promotion of a feminist perspective on militarism achieved' (DB). Another was that 'despite the brief time we had...the form in which [the workshop] was carried out was a total success, enabling us to reach an understanding of each other and to draw out conclusions' (SS). Several women said they went home strongly motivated to put effort into learning one or more foreign language.

E : The day of action, Saturday 4 April

The International Coordinating Committee of the *No-to-NATO, No-to-War* events to protest the NATO summit in Strasbourg on the weekend of 3-5 April had a protracted and fruitless struggle with the French authorities to obtain permission for a rally and march within the confines of the city of Strasbourg. The field for the peace camp, at La Ganzau, and the site designated for the rally, at Port du Rhin, were about 7 kilometres distance from Strasbourg, at some distance from each other, south and east of the city.

The city was largely closed by the authorities, not only to demonstrators but to all visitors, for the duration of the summit by a number of measures. Inward flights and train services appear to have been delayed or impeded. Trains to the city did not run according to normal schedules. Major roads were closed by police checkpoints some kilometres from the centre. 'Red zones' established in the city centre were subject to yet more drastic controls. Very large numbers of police and police vehicles were present in and around Strasbourg, and many of the police wore black padded riot gear. The officials had put out information, picked up and amplified by the media, that led local people to expect 'trouble' from demonstrators and warned of intense policing. Citizens were indeed highly inconvenienced, but more by the NATO summit itself and the accompanying security measures than by opponents of NATO. Many residents 'got the message' and left the city for the weekend, while others stayed indoors.

Civil disobedience

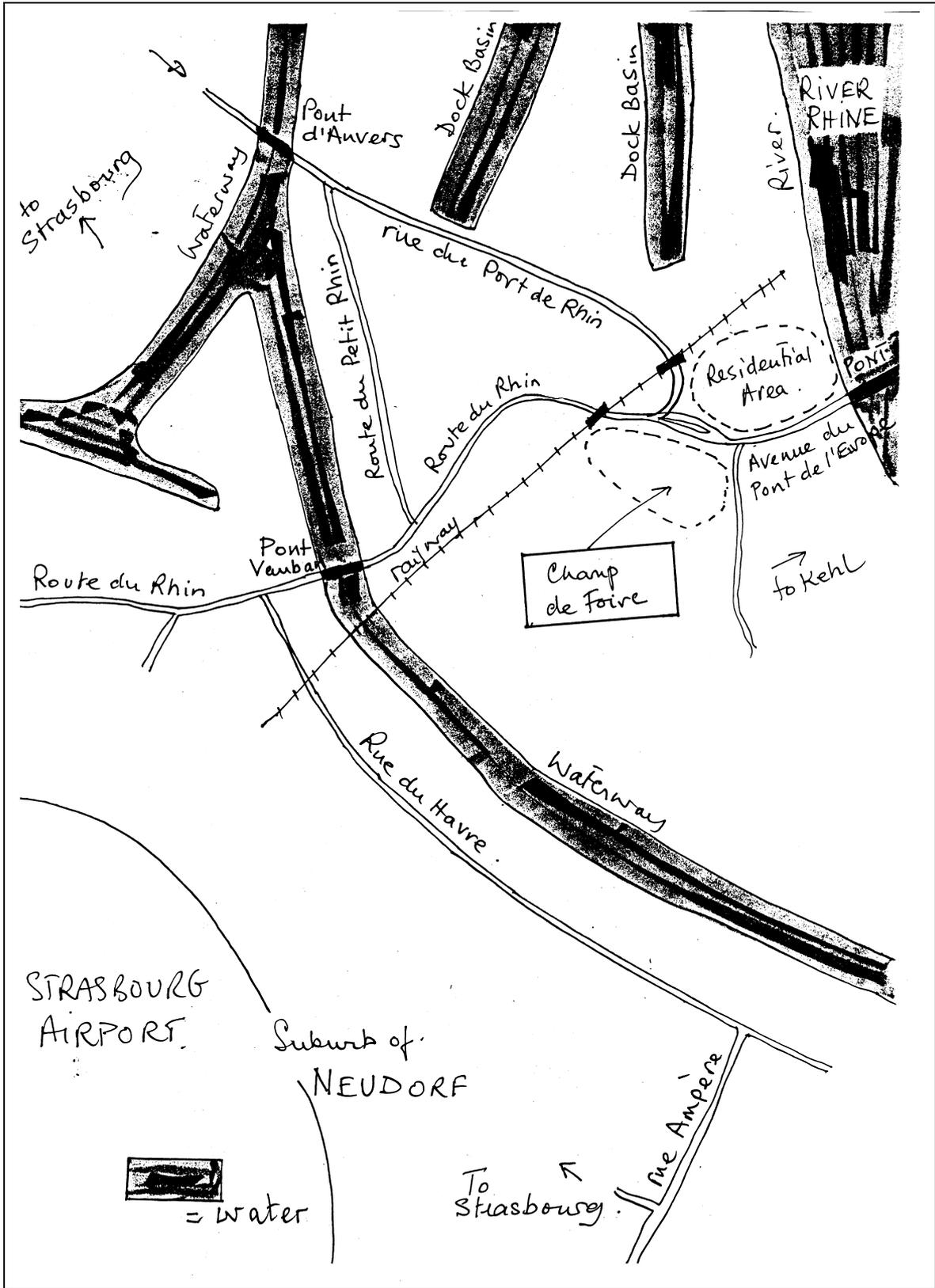
Before embarking on the story of the demonstration, it is worth remarking that there was some very commendable civil disobedience carried out by nonviolent direct activists on the morning of 4 April, before the demonstration began.

Most of those intending to participate in civil disobedience had stayed in the peace camp, on farmland at La Ganzau, south of the city. None of our women were involved in the civil disobedience. In fact none had stayed at the camp – partly because we had encouraged them to cluster in adjacent hotels to be close to each other for our planned events. Two had visited the camp however and found it impressively international, creative and really peaceful (AS).

The camp had been beset by black block youth spoiling for a fight already from early in the week, and this drew tear gas attacks on the camp from the police at several moments in these days. Reports by Angie Zelter (www.wri-irg.org/note/7468) and Andreas Speck (www.wri-irg.org/note/7275) show that continual efforts, to some extent successful, were made by the nonviolent civil disobedience coalition Block-NATO, and in particular by one of its component groups, NATO-ZU/Shut Down NATO, to de-escalate the violence. They also show that three separate blockades, involving 1000 people in total, succeeded in closing roads to the Summit conference centre from 7 am, significantly disrupting traffic throughout the morning, till at 12 noon they disbanded voluntarily. These blockades were the positive result of several days of painstaking organization in the camp, during which affinity groups formed and came together in spokes councils to coordinate decisions. Intensive trainings were mounted by the organizations linked in NATO-ZU (including War Resisters' International) and there was a productive meeting with the police, in which the activists told them in advance of their plans for blockade. There was no violence, either by demonstrators or the police in connection with the blockades, which were by all accounts good humoured and even enjoyable. This is in contrast to the sporadic violent and destructive clashes between the police and black block which had occurred in the city from as early as April 1.

The rally

And it was certainly in contrast to the mass demonstration in the afternoon. This was intended to comprise a rally followed by a march. The designated site for the rally, as mentioned above, was a large gravel-surfaced space known as the *champ de foire* (fair ground) adjacent to the highway that leads to the Bridge of Europe, the busy motor bridge that links Strasbourg to Kehl on the German side of the River Rhine (see sketch map). The western end of this road, coming from the Pont Vauban, is called the Route du Rhin, but as it approaches the bridge it becomes the Avenue du Pont de l'Europe. The *champ de foire* is in the middle of a desolate area of river docks, railway lines and goods yards known as the Autonomous Rhine Port. In the middle of this dying industrial area is a small district of working class housing, with some flats, two hotels and a couple of churches (see 'residential area' on the sketch map). It is connected to the city of Strasbourg by the aforementioned main road, along which run a couple of bus



Sketch map of the area of Port du Rhin to which the demonstration was confined

routes, but no tram. The *champ de foire* is separated, all its length, from the residential area by a high brick wall. On the other side is a wilderness of railway sidings and waste ground. The organizers had obtained permission to mount a stage with loudspeakers at one end of this gravel yard, the end furthest from the main exit onto the Route du Rhin.

Demonstrators assembled gradually during the rally, but far fewer than expected, as many were prevented from reaching the site. Of the numerous buses organized by antiwar movements in different countries, some *en route* for more than 24 hours, an estimated 20 were held outside the city limits. Between five and seven thousand peaceful German demonstrators were held back (by French police) on the Kehl side of the Bridge of Europe. Those trying to come from Germany to Strasbourg on local trains found them cancelled. Many people walking from the city centre or peace camp were impeded by police barricades on bridges across the port's various wide waterways. These bridges alone provide access from the central city to its southern and eastern edges. All these impediments drastically reduced the number -- at most 10,000 -- that eventually assembled in the Port du Rhin area .

At around 1 pm a plume of black smoke rose from the other side of the long high wall along the east side of the *champ de foire*. Speeches and music continued from the stage, while sandwiches and bottled water were sold from a couple of vans. A police helicopter circling low overhead drowned out the voices (perhaps intentionally). By 2 pm there were two more plumes of thick, coiling black smoke that drifted low over the crowd, causing fear and discomfort. Added to this, the police now appear to have fired tear gas into or near the demonstration.

The non-existent march

At a certain moment Reiner Braun, the facilitator of the ICC, called on the demonstration to wait no longer but to set off towards the road. (To our chagrin this abrupt departure interrupted the speech we had been waiting for from our Marlene Tuininga.) The crowd with its many banners set off quickly, less as a march than a disorderly mob. People left the *champ de foire* by the only feasible exit, either funnelling under a narrow rail bridge or scrambling over the high railway embankment and across the tracks. It then scattered in groups. In light of the violence that followed, it is ironic that the *champ de foire* is marked on the map of Strasbourg as the 'Square des Fusillés de 15 Juillet 1943', commemorating a World War II massacre on this ground. Leaving this bloody historic site, then, some went left along the Route du Rhin towards the Pont Vauban, then along the Route du Petit Rhin and the Pont d'Anvers. Some exited right, towards the residential area and railway station. Of these some filtered towards the river and the blocked Pont de l'Europe. Ultimately many drifted into the vast expanse of waterways and docksides beyond the railway line. However no exit was possible from this whole area. The three bridges were blocked by large numbers of police and police vehicles. All other roads towards the city were barricaded.

It now appeared that while we had been waiting in the *champ de foire* between noon and 2 pm, numbers of youths associated with the demonstration, wearing black clothing, with hoods and scarves masking their features, had been

rampaging in the residential area, breaking the glass of bus shelters and petrol stations, ripping out street signs, barricading the bridge highway, and setting fires. The three plumes of smoke came from an abandoned border post building, one storey high but of considerable area; another was the local pharmacy; the third was the Ibis Hotel, four storeys high and still in use. These three buildings were totally burned out in the course of the afternoon. Neither the police nor the fire brigade intervened.

As the demonstration milled around, trying to find its way through this industrial desert, trying to predict a likely route along which a 'march' of some kind could proceed, the black-clad youth mingled with the crowd. The police closed in and began firing tear gas canisters and stun grenades indiscriminately. Some demonstrators tried to get out of trouble by climbing up and across the railway line, or crawling under stationary rolling stock. Youths threw stones down from the two railway bridges indiscriminately on police and demonstrators. At certain moments a group of a few hundred demonstrators would manage to form a respectable 'march' and set off again. But on meeting one or other bridge in order to exit from the Port du Rhin they would come up against ranks of police and anti-riot barriers, and were subjected to tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets, with some missiles descending from helicopters. Effectively all the demonstrators who were within the area were 'kettled' for the entire afternoon, with a certain space for manoeuvre, but no exit. Gradually, as evening approached, the police allowed people through, a few at a time. But it was late in the day before demonstrators arrived back on foot at the camp or, in our case, to our hotels in the city.

Memories of the 'demonstration'

Accounts from our women participants describe an afternoon generally remembered as disastrous – unpleasant, dangerous, wearisome and unproductive – even counterproductive.

For two of the younger women in our group this was their first demonstration. Both had felt some concern before hand, knowing there would be a high police presence. Their fears were well borne out. 'Honestly speaking, it was the first demonstration in which I took part in my life and I had never expected that I would come across such horrible situations' (AS). By the railway bridge in the residential quarter of Port du Rhin at a certain moment there was 'a stampede. A lot of people climbed the railway bank and gathered on the railway track above. I saw a very elderly Woman in Black, English, and I told her it was unwise to stay there. Those on the bridge started stoning the police forces below. Soon tear gas was pouring down. It seemed to me that incandescent grenades were being thrown from the helicopters. It was untenable! To escape the gas, and seeing no other exit, I set off with some other people on a railway line running along the dockside. But pretty soon I saw it was a cul-de-sac, and retraced my tracks...' (EJ).

One of our women has a disability that means she must walk with crutches. The following is part of her story of that afternoon. As the demonstrators rushed away from the *champ de foire*, they tried to find and join the banners of particular organizations. 'But everywhere we looked suddenly there was nothing but people in black...I took [my friend's] arm and stayed on the edge so as not to

be trampled in the rush. Suddenly, we could no longer move forward. We were cornered. We tried to go left, then right. Impossible. All around were people trying to find a way forward. We were in a crumbling mass of huge blocks of concrete. A railway embankment stretched ten metres above us. We climbed up it, slid, climbed again. We got out of the debris to find ourselves nose to nose with police lorries with immobile police officers inside them. Suddenly a lorry set off at speed. We jumped onto the pavement to as not to be hit. Then we passed a destroyed petrol station. ...' This woman, with three others, all over sixty, arrived exhausted at the bridge (Pont d'Anvers). They sat on the grass, worn out. There were flashball explosions and tear gas grenades all around them. Other demonstrators, worried to see them sitting in the middle of this unfolding violence, offered them something to stop their eyes smarting (MT).

Some of us, perhaps most of us, were lucky enough to be able to keep contact and company with at least one other woman throughout the events. As we struggled through the afternoon we worried about women who might have got isolated, 'when the crowd was in total panic and stampeded.... I can't imagine how uneasy and terrible I would feel if nobody had accompanied me' (AS). And indeed, one woman came across another, alone, 'almost in nervous breakdown, panicking when she saw the trap she was in, the tear gas, the impossibility of getting out of this demonstration' (EJ).

The police were not universally unfriendly or unwilling to help. But the way the police strategy had been designed there was little an individual policeman could do. At one point, for instance, a little group 'tried to convince the police to get our colleagues out from the island. Some of the policemen listened to what we said, but unfortunately they could not help us' (ER).

For some, the day was entirely saved by the kindness of local Strasbourg people that they met on their wanderings. Three women making their way on foot by a circuitous route to the city centre had the following heart-warming experience. 'A French couple invited us home where we were introduced to their three daughters. We had a nice chat, people became interested in WILPF. They looked us up on the Web. The father told his children that the girls should follow our footsteps. We were perceived as brave and courageous peace activists. We enjoyed excellent cake and refreshments. In the end the couple drove us back to our hotel. No wishes [unfulfilled]. On returning home I had an e-mail from them asking whether I am safely back' (UG).

What went wrong?

The No-to-NATO 'mass demonstration' has been generally pronounced a disaster. This is not only our judgment, but is a theme in evaluations we have received from many other sources including two cogent reports by women, Elsa Rassbach who was there ⁴, and Diane Johnstone who based her article on a verbal report from Karen Sharpe who was present.⁵ It really cannot be said that any part of the event was enjoyable, and much of it was positively unpleasant. Women variously blamed and criticized (1) the French authorities and particularly

⁴ www.gipfelsoli.org/Home/Strasbourg_Baden-Baden_2009/NATO_2009_english/6706.html

⁵ www.counterpunch.org/johnstone04072009.html

the police force, (2) the violent demonstrators, (3) the organizers of the demonstration and (4) themselves. Most of us felt critical of all of these.

The French authorities and police force

For a start, the closure and occupation of the city effected by the authorities and their security forces was an expression of contempt for the lives of its inhabitants (SS). For instance, it was not only demonstrators but also local citizens who were obliged, with their children, to get off buses at checkpoints, who had identify themselves and show their papers (MT). The interruption of all public transport services was 'a scandal' (HM). Some local residents that women spoke with expressed anger with 'their' police and the Strasbourg authorities for the way they handled the event (HB). The authorities seemed to have condemned the already blighted working class neighbourhood of Port du Rhin and its public property to destruction. Meanwhile the 'property of the haves' in the city of Strasbourg was fully protected. 'A poor neighbourhood counts less than rich quarters' (UG).

Secondly, the demonstrators were not being accorded their rights. The authorities controlled a legal demonstration by means that to say the least were 'irregular' (UG). We were deprived of the right to meet and manifest our pacifist position against the heads of NATO states who were meeting during these events (HM). A woman of Women in Black who lives in Strasbourg wrote of having 'the disagreeable feeling of not having been able to freely exercise my right to demonstrate against NATO, having been subjected for no good reason to tear gas, put in danger by the forces of law and order, penned and held for long hours in the Port zone from which it was absolutely impossible to get out before the evening' (EJ).

Third, not only the police numbers but their methods and style were criticized. They were intimidatingly dressed in riot gear and protective clothing. 'I felt great discomfort facing these robocops – it seemed to me they could attack at any moment. I looked for a getaway...' '[But] they were unfolding razor wire to stop us getting out' (AV). The police were 'particularly violent, with excessive numbers and weapons, ceaselessly throwing tear gas and flashballs into the middle of the crowd, wounding and panicking a number of demonstrators with no means of escape' (NM). 'I personally didn't see any police violence but they were about the city in huge numbers and appeared menacing, and totally against us' (DB). 'We were treated as enemies by the French police, not as civilians' (IH). One young woman wrote, 'It was the first time for me to join a demo'. She had been worried before hand. And was indeed shocked when she saw how 'the police did such terrible things against handicapped, old people, pregnant women as well...Did they really have to [do this] in the situation? There must be better, peaceful alternatives. There is no question that the will of many people who got together only to wish for peace [using] nonviolent, peaceful ways was spoiled' (AS).

The authorities did not intervene where they usefully could have done, for instance in response to the fires. They were apparently unconcerned about the blaze spreading or their citizens being injured. 'Nobody, neither police nor firemen, came near the burning hotel during the more than half an hour we spent there...They just let it burn, and watched' (HM). Some deduced that the buildings

had been deliberately left to burn to the ground. 'I myself could approach the burning scene and nobody, no firemen or police, tried to stop me from taking pictures nor was interested to protect me from the burning materials' (UG). 'That's what the French wanted – they wanted to...let this part of the city be destroyed to prepare it for investors – that's what I heard' (HM).

Finally, it was felt that the police violence had the specific aim of dividing the demonstrators from each other, and discrediting them in the public eye by guaranteeing a high and visible level of violence at the event. 'I understand now what happened – how the police voluntarily did everything they could to sow this confusion and violence, and if possible to divide us' (MT). 'Why did the peaceful marching demonstrators have to be exposed to tear gas? If [it] was to punish the people who set fire to the buildings [it] should have taken place earlier....[it was] to distract the group and to cause disorientation' (UG). 'The strategy of the French police and politicians was 'scandalous', it was 'a provocation, a total lack of democracy and human rights as well as of sensitivity and basic logic....It was their fault that aggression could happen on such a scale' (HM).

Criticisms of the violent demonstrators

The following are some of the experiences women had of the activities of violent demonstrators. 'The demonstration in Strasbourg on 4 April was a show of force and brutality between two extremely violent groups fighting each other like two gangs of "lads", each with their weapons and tactics, with complete disregard for the thousands of people trapped in the crossfire. There were children present, with their parents. There were old people, blind people, people with crutches, disabled. They had respect for nobody. Each person had to get out of it how or where they could, now hiding, now pleading with the police at the barriers, raising their hands above their heads [in surrender]...Can you imagine that it was more terrifying to be surrounded by the black block than by the military?' (SS).

'Large numbers of black block people poured down from the bridge and ran into our march, followed by the police, explosions and teargas...the march was effectively wrecked. I understand that the black block had attacked [an anti-NATO] march in the same way in Baden Baden the day before' (DB).

Two young WILPF women from Stockholm, who missed the *rendez-vous* with the other women prior to the rally, were wandering on their own around the Port du Rhin residential area. Fed up with 'hanging around black-dressed aggressive teenagers' they decided to go into a hotel, the Ibis, and wait for the wave of aggressive youngsters to pass. 'However some activists decided that this hotel was an evil one for unknown reasons. They threw stones towards the windows and tried to break into the hotel's main entrance by forcing a barricade fence into the door. This made us and the hotel crew feel uncomfortable and unsafe, since we were standing in the entrance of the hotel....eventually we found out that they came back, and that was one of the hotels that was burned down' (ER).

Another, older and more experienced, woman activist was also caught up in the violence. 'A young man in black was kicking hard at a sign post with a bus timetable. Once more we were in the middle of the black block.' Having been at the notorious demonstration in Genoa some years back, she was able to put the

experience in historical context. However she had never felt, as she did here, 'trapped like a rat'. In Genoa it had been possible to keep out of the way of the black block. There had been side roads by which you could escape. But 'in Strasbourg, from the moment we moved off with the demonstration, they were all around us, without the least regard or respect for other demonstrators.' She added, 'It was a particularly gripping contrast for us who, just the day before, had attended our women's workshop, when we had been talking about how the patriarchal and capitalist systems reinforce each other and naturalize violence!' (MT)

It was not easy however to apportion blame to this thing called 'the black block'. First, there was not an altogether clear dividing line, it seems, between the so-called black block, and other youthful demonstrators who were not wearing black hooded cagoules and scarves hiding their faces, who nonetheless supported and cheered the violence. For instance, at a certain moment, not far from the burning Hotel Ibis, a trade unionist of the French CGT tried to calm the demonstrators. He asked some to form a chain to protect the pacifist demonstrators from the most violent actions. 'But where I was standing this was very badly received by the youth, who didn't agree on dividing the demonstrators in this way' (EJ).

There was, besides, the question of whether these really were *bona fide* demonstrators, or whether they were actually police in disguise, *agents provocateurs*. 'I must note that some "antimilitarists" were not real antimilitarists!' (ND). There were reports later from other sources of black block youths in friendly interaction with the police, even being transported in their vehicles, giving rise to the belief that they were in fact an intrinsic part of the so-called 'forces of law and order', placed among the demonstrators to foment trouble and discredit the anti-NATO movement. In this case, it was not the 'those among us' but 'the authorities' on whom the whole blame might be placed. Nonetheless it is the presence (and disguise) of an actual black block that enables police infiltration.

Whatever its origin, the effect of the violence emanating from the demonstration itself was to deeply depress many women, to make them feel silenced, their efforts for peace undermined. The women of Women in Black in Torino, Italy (AV), expressed these accumulating feelings of alienation most clearly.

'In the midst of "the casseurs" armed with sticks and heavy rucksacks, with scarves hiding their faces – even some women – I had a feeling of irrelevance. What am I doing here? I was afraid, certainly. But also [the actions seemed] meaningless. Breakdown down street lights, the clapping of people watching the destruction, the smoke and fire... In that situation all I wanted was to go away'. 'What could we say, in that position, of our case against war and violence? Amid nothing. To whom? To people who don't share our ideas (the police and the casseurs) and don't want to listen to us? Or to people who do share our ideas and, like us, came and got trapped here? I found no other answer than to climb beneath some stationary wagons of an abandoned train, and go away'. 'The protest became a war between gangs, one worse than another'. It even made the NATO summit look good. "After all," a lady we met on our way back said to us, "the leaders of the nations gather to try to solve problems".' 'They

silenced me, they took away any possibility of saying or showing what I think. I know I don't want to be in any such situation again. It is useless, it may be counterproductive, and it's energy-consuming' (AV).

Reading this woman's account made me think of the Ali Burns song Penny and Lisa taught us as we stood on the Bridge of Europe the next day [see below] (CC).

I won't fight with you any more
 'Cos the road is long and hard
 And I need all my strength
 To keep on walking

One effect of experiencing this gratuitous violence was to affirm in some women their commitment to nonviolent means. 'If the alternative to war is respect, love and nonviolence, we can only [effectively oppose war by] being respectful, full of love and without violence...I am really convinced that violence is the creator of new violence, never a solution' (IH). But it also gave rise to serious practical questions about how the violence could be avoided on future occasions. She went on, 'They used us as a protection shield against the police, putting people's lives in danger. How can we prevent them instrumentalizing us?' (IH). Some in the organizing group of No-to-NATO, after the event, called for the black block to be 'organized somewhere else' in future, just so long as they kept away from the orderly and peaceful demonstrators. But this (as IH shrewdly pointed out) is no more than 'an outsourcing of the violence'. Most women felt that we needed to think long and hard, for ourselves, about how to address what is in effect a sabotage by some in the movement of the work of the majority for peace. 'As activists in nonviolence we need to stop and analyse this other form of activism, this patriarchal violence by organized groups that neither value nor respect the work of so many people... over decades to put an end to just this' (SS).

Criticism of the organizers of No-to-NATO

Most women in their evaluations of the event felt critical of the organizers of the demonstration. They should recognize honestly that while they can legitimately blame the police for many things, they cannot blame them for their own decisions. Both the French and German police had been perfectly frank about what we could expect. They never told us 'the bridge will be open', or 'you can demonstrate in the city' (IH).⁶

The organizers seemed to have allowed themselves to be 'taken for a ride' by the authorities. For example, the site the Strasbourg Prefecture authorized for the rally, the *champ de foire*, was actually a trap. To get out of it you had to pass

⁶ The minutes of the ICC meeting held in Strasbourg the evening before the demonstration shows that there was strong, almost irreconcilable, disagreement on the Committee between those who believed they must, in the interests of safety, accept the marching route designated by the authorities (that is to say, a route which did not approach the bridges into the city) and those who were determined to the bitter end to assert 'our right' to march in the city, and planned that the marchers should be led to confront the police on the bridges. A compromise was apparently agreed – but nobody, when it came to it, was in a position to control any of the demonstrators' movements (CC).

under one or other railway bridge which became dangerous bottlenecks, patrolled by the police below with tear gas, and beset by the black block above hurling down stones (HM). And beyond the *champ de foire*, that route for the march (whatever it precisely was) through the barren zone of the Port du Rhin? The authorities probably knew full well that the organizers could not hope to confine the demonstrators to a politically meaningless route round the docks (CC). Whatever the case, those controlling the microphone on the stage at the rally did not behave responsibly in calling for the demonstration to advance not as an orderly march but as a stampede from the rallying ground. 'The "order" of the organizers to pursue the demonstration seemed to me stupid because I knew already that several ways had been closed off. It seemed to me the demonstrators were sent into "nowhere" just to do something with them. "Let the crowd move!" This was unacceptable in my view' (UG).

It was also felt that the organizers could have known full well that violent demonstrators would be active there. There is after all plentiful experience by now of the wrecking potential of certain *autonome / autonomen* groups, it had been extensively discussed in the ICC's planning meetings, so surely 'the organizers should have prepared us for this' (DB).

Any responsibly-organized demonstration would have numerous trained and identifiable stewards, first aid units and legal advisers. When a demonstration is likely to meet serious opposition from police and disruption from violent elements, such facilities become doubly important. Yet as several women noted, there appeared to be no stewards. 'I never saw one' (IH). 'The ICC organizers seemed not to have arranged for stewards, only a van with a loudspeaker, so that later when we ran into trouble there was no guidance or direction' (DB). Also, in the circumstances, given the distances and interruption of public transport (forewarned), the organizers should have assured that some kind of emergency transport would be available for elderly or infirm demonstrators (IH).

All in all, on the day, the leadership seemed to be masculine and belligerent in tone. It did nothing to counteract the increasingly violent atmosphere. 'Male dominance seems to persist even when the common purpose is struggling for peace and disarmament' (UG).

And finally, what did we do wrong ourselves?

We should most certainly have been more sceptical of the organizers' assurance that this was to be a peaceful, legal demonstration. It is perhaps the small group of four organizers of the women's presence at No-to-NATO (Anna, Marlene, Irmgard and Cynthia) who were most self-critical afterwards. Certainly I blamed myself, regretting very much what I felt in retrospect was my gullibility, even negligence.

No sooner had we reached the *champ de foire* than we realized we should have prepared as if for an action, in the way many of us are well familiar with. We should have taken steps the day before to form affinity groups of three or four women. We should have discussed together the potential dangers of such a demonstration, the possibility of violent incidents, tear gas attacks, and the possible lack of water, food and first aid (UG). We should have organized a training to prepare us for dealing with the police and violent demonstrators, 'some

role play for instance' (UG). We should have determined, if not a 'chain of command' at least a 'chain of communication' and means of making speedy decisions. We should have each had a list of each others' names and mobile phone numbers (HB). We should have learned the geography in advance (distances, short cuts), made sure everyone had maps (UG). We should have prepared for tear gas with masks and scarves. 'The teargas affected our eyes and throats... Two guards [stewards??] advised us to get some, but then discovered there were none left' (HB).

At the time, during the rally, we should not have simply obeyed the organizers' instruction to move off. We knew by then that the exit routes had been closed against us. 'We should not have followed the orders of Reiner Braun' to march into chaos (UG). Right from the start, during the Women in Black *encuentro* on Thursday night, we had been 'undisciplined' in our multilingual cross-cultural relationship with each other. This 'failing to listen to each other' cost us dearly on the day of the demonstration, as each woman went her way with whoever she happened to be with, regardless of the wellbeing of the ones she could not see, was not in touch with, or whose language she could not speak. Individuals certainly took a kindly responsibility for, or accepted assistance from, those they encountered, but that was not enough. We should not have allowed ourselves to be scattered. 'The biggest mistake was not to stay together as a group. This would have required strong leadership' (UG). However, strong leadership is something that feminists are, for usually very sound reasons, unwilling to assume or tolerate.

Basically, we had not had enough time together, as a group, to prepare ourselves for what proved to be a very challenging situation. 'It's a pity that all of us couldn't have had longer together, a dinner or social together [ie. not just WiB], to get to know each other better and build stronger relations' (ND). Ultimately, feeling powerless, feeling in danger, made me personally question whether we had been right in the first place to put out the call to women to come to No-to-NATO (CC). And I was not the only one. Another of the group said afterwards, 'I reflected on the responsibility of the peace movement, and my responsibility too, because we tried to get as many [women] to Strasbourg as we could' (IH).

F : Some lessons we felt we had learned

In their evaluations, women asked some hard questions about means and ends. Were we sure what we actually wanted of out this demonstration? Was it to force the state to withdraw its restrictions? Or was it to convince the public of the justice of our position? Give the violent posture of the state, was it ever going to be possible to make our case against NATO visible and understandable to the public in Strasbourg or the wider world? In the circumstances, was a mass demonstration the right way to go about it? How important was our aim of asserting our right to demonstrate? Can we in fact forcibly assert our right to demonstrate while at the same time ensuring the safety of the participants? This was expressed with some poignancy by one of us. 'So, in my case, I'm 68. I have difficulty walking because of my disability. But a democratic country is one in which even old women with disabilities have the right to demonstrate their difference of opinion! (MT).

Here are some of the alternatives women later imagined...We could have 'joined up with the women from the Japan Council against Atom and Hydrogen Bombs and done something somewhere else' (but where?). We could have had 'a peaceful demonstration at the European Parliament' for instance' (but when?) (UG) With the help of the French Femmes en Noir and WILPF we could have organized our own press conference and offered ourselves for interview, getting our ideas across that way (UG). If we had thought about it in advance perhaps we could have made the choice to stay away from the rally and demo altogether and instead 'walked around the city, with our placards and other materials, approaching each police barrier, one after another.' We could have 'stood in front of them, simply being there for a while, addressing them in our own language... with our weighty silence, our black grief for the situation...making them feel ashamed, if possible' (SS).

In our groups it seems that 'organizational development' needs to go hand in hand with our political development, concluded one participant (HM). And our organizational development seems to suggest, if nothing else, better strategies of communication. First with the authorities, we should 'learn how to address authorities in such a way as to be taken seriously, think harder about how to express our feminist and nonviolent convictions so as to [achieve] good dialogue'. Second, with the press and TV: 'how to catch the eye of an already inundated media' (HB). Third, our strategies must include communication with the police and military. We should 'take responsibility' for addressing the violence of the police. 'Some police are far better than others at sensitive and democratic policing of demonstrations, e.g. those in Copenhagen and Stockholm. We should work locally with our police forces everywhere to ensure that this knowledge is part of their training' (HB). And finally we need a strategy of communication with potentially violent groups. Rather than cast them out, disown them, exhort them to 'do their thing somewhere else', surely we should remember that in women's perception violence starts 'at home', it starts right where we are, in ourselves or in the man standing close to us, so we need to learn ways of substituting nonviolence each time, and in whomever, it arises. Even the so-called black block is 'our business' (CC).

One of the women among us clearly felt this more than anything, for she devoted her whole reflection on the event to this theme. Addressing the youths of the black block directly, she wrote, 'I appeal to those who joined black block to use the anger you feel to empower the peace movement...I feel your rage, but give peace a chance, and believe in your energy enough that you can protect and fight without laying a finger....We are interconnected and we need you now more than ever. You too were infiltrated and exploited...You were like an army just like any other. You and the police must have felt very hard with all that gear on. I just couldn't get the image out of my head. Ninja turtles to the left. Balaclava-ed ninjas to the right. Peace stuck in the middle, giving birth' (SQ).

She addressed men too. 'Men, I implore you to step up and take your real role in ending violence against women in the home, through the media, through education and through war. Stop ignoring women's human rights, be she in France, Italy, Germany, London, Greece, Afganistan, Saudi, Ireland, Pakistan or the Congo. I won't go on - but men in Afganistan stop! Men in France stop! Nato stop! Black Block stop... and the small minority of women who support them, stop! Because you have done enough damage' (SQ).

G : Some conclusions we drew from our participation as women's groups in No-to-NATO

I think most of the women who wrote their reflections valued some parts of the No-to-NATO weekend but were very distressed by the combination of powers that had prevented us (or that we had allowed to prevent us?) being visible, to the public in Strasbourg and through media reports, with our message of women's opposition to NATO and European militarization. We had had a careful plan for a large and joyous presence of women in the heart of the demonstration – that came to nought. All our placards and banners prepared with that in mind were wasted (CC). 'Our plan was totally spoiled' (AS). 'We had no chance to be visible and to argue for our cause. And in addition we put ourselves in danger' (UG). The experience of violence had been ugly. 'We conclude first and foremost that we must never repeat this experience...we must never again fall between two forces of violence' (SS).

Worse than that however, what happened (what we allowed to happen? what was done in our name?) had the effect of discrediting the peace movement (SQ). Certainly the authorities intended us to be discredited, and chose means by which we would in fact discredit ourselves. We were (we allowed ourselves to be?) dragged into the media limelight as 'violent demonstrators', affirming those who believe the antiwar movement to be irresponsible, violent and wrongheaded. This was 'to destroy so much in so short a time...it was a step backwards for the nonviolent movement' (SS).

Despite all this, quite a few of those women who wrote their reflections said that they came away with renewed convictions. 'People had come in their droves from all over Europe for peace. We are strong together and we live to learn from the experience. I for one feel empowered by [it] and believe more than ever that peaceful resistance is the answer. We have to peacefully resist *the police, the black block and NATO*' (SQ). 'Yes, we were afraid at times. But in the end we didn't regret having come...because we unreservedly support the reasons for the mobilization' (NM). The workshop had clarified for us 'why, as women, we are fundamentally opposed to NATO, the armed wing of a patriarchal and capitalist society' (MT). 'We mustn't fall into the trap of the government, focus on police violence and forget the reasons we came to Strasbourg. Militants of WILPF, WiB and La Marche Mondiale, we are resolutely opposed to NATO. Not just against France rejoining the military command structure but its very existence...a war machine in the hands of capitalists, especially the USA' (MT).

So, what next? 'The Strasbourg events should be a kind of electric shock to jolt us and make us think of other ways [of protesting]. What ways? I don't know. But we can't just set off again...as if we didn't know' (MT). There are several things to discuss between us now.

First, we could reassess the value of participating in mixed, mass demonstrations. We should debate 'whether it's necessary or productive, and under what conditions it may be justifiable, in future to join in events' such as the mass demonstration of 4 April (SS). Certainly there is nothing to stop us in future, wherever we find ourselves, choosing other forms of action that are more sympathetic to us. It was pointed out by several women that, for instance, the

joking presence of ‘clowns without borders’ in Strasbourg had been ‘refreshing, novel, joyful and creative’ (SS). They took an entirely different approach and had succeeded in reaching the public with a peaceful message, ‘talking with people walking down the street’ (AS). ‘Street theatre’ of this kind is much closer to what many of our women’s groups do back home.

The antiwar, antimilitarist and peace movements, though they overlap, have different boundaries and different membership. So, secondly, we could ask ourselves, where are feminist antimilitarists in this amalgam? (CC) Do we want to be part of the ongoing debates in the wider movement, including the sometimes bitter strife (and there was a lot of it in the planning for Strasbourg!) between ‘peace’ organizations and ‘anticapitalist’ organizations (although all such labels are ambiguous and contested!). ‘Leaning on what happened, we could now discuss among us [ie. all the participating parties and organizations], with the greatest mutual respect, without trying to caricature each others’ positions, what we can and cannot do together. It is difficult, but it’s necessary’ (MT).

Third, we need to debate whether we want to continue to participate within the frame of No-to-NATO and its International Coordinating Committee (i.e. alongside men), adding our otherwise lacking feminist antimilitarist analysis, casting in our lot with the nonviolent advocates within it, while avoiding in future joining mass demonstrations or indeed any event that cannot guarantee nonviolence. For instance, do we want to go to the October 10 international meeting being organized by the ICC to plan the next phase of activity? We have been explicitly invited by the Committee to do so. The alternative is to withdraw from the framework within which we came to Strasbourg. As one woman put it, ‘a principle question [is] whether we as feminists and active members of women’s organizations should create our own platform of peace, disconnecting us from the general movement we can’t control’ (UG).

I think that there is a general sense that NATO and European militarization *are our problems*, and that we have perhaps neglected them in the past. This has been, perhaps, because we are continually challenged by the demands of ‘fire fighting’ – opposing this war and that, supporting women in war zones, or tackling our local problems (like the UK’s nuclear weapons programme). And there is a sense that we would like to put a little more of our energies into addressing them, locally and Europe-wide (CC). One proposal (it comes from IH) is that we women should organize a review meeting in six months’ time, picking up on the initial thoughts on strategies against NATO and EU militarization that emerged from our workshop, and reflect on what we learned from the Strasbourg experience.

H : A positive, even musical, coda

And here is my own account of something that happened the day after the demonstration. The horrible experience of the demonstration was, for me, redeemed by the initiative of two young women, Penny and Lisa from Edinburgh Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. They put out a call for others to join them in going to the Bridge of Europe, now opened as usual to transport and pedestrians moving between France and Germany. We could have a different kind of demonstration, they said, an act of peace.

So Penny and Lisa organised a few cars. Ursula Gelis came too, the only other one of our group of women who was there at that moment. Around 14 or 15 of us walked up onto the bridge and stood in a line along the pavement. One of us had a baby in a sling. The green river coiled below us. Traffic streamed both ways across this border between France and Germany. There were a lot of Sunday trippers, come on foot to stare in amazement at the still-smoking ruins. We held our rainbow banners, *PACE*. We sang some gentle songs, and we spoke quietly to the passing pedestrians and families in their slowly moving cars, windows open on this sunny afternoon. We said "refusons la violence", "non à toute violence". Some frowned and looked away. But more smiled and nodded. We only stayed about fifteen minutes. Then we went home by bus and tram through a city that had returned to perfect normality (CC).

Compiled by Cynthia Cockburn from 14 texts, reflecting on and evaluating the events of the No-to-NATO mobilization in Strasbourg, submitted by women who were present as part of our initiative.

London, 14 May 2009