

# WE CAN DO THIS: DIRECT ACTION AGAINST CAPITALISM AND U.S. IMPERIALISM

## AN INTERVIEW WITH INGRID CHAPMAN

**INGRID CHAPMAN** has been involved in direct action organizing for the past 4 years. At 23, she has helped pull off successful mass actions, worked with thousands of activists around the country and bases her work in the question, "How do we build broad based movements capable of challenging global capitalism and US imperialism?" While it is easy to get depressed about the state of the world these days, those in power would also like us to forget that the largest anti-war movement in history was mobilized this past year and that global movements for justice are standing up against capitalism. Ingrid Chapman is one of the many younger generation radicals developing visionary politics and strategic practice to build our movements.

BY **CHRIS  
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### **CC: How did you get into activism and radical politics?**

IC: Growing up in Yakima, Washington. It's a conservative town where being a liberal felt like being a radical. In middle school and high school I had feelings that things weren't right. I wanted to do something but didn't know how to fight back. So when I went to school at the University of Washington I joined a bunch of groups: Student Greens, Students for a Free Tibet, an animal rights group and Students Against Sweatshops. Then I started a group focused on global warming working to get the University to divest from the Global Climate Coalition. The GCC is a lobbying group made up of Exxon-Mobile and other big oil and energy corporations trying to keep the federal government from taking any action against big business (they funded science research arguing global warming doesn't exist). Sophomore year in school I got heavily involved with organizing students against the WTO summit in Seattle.

Organizing around the WTO Summit had a big influence on me. I worked with high school and college students in Seattle to get as many people informed and mobilized to fight against the WTO when they came to town. I worked with the Direct Action Network to actually shut it down. We weren't calling for reforms, but for the abolition of the WTO. Learning about the WTO and global capitalism and working with so many different people for the direct action protest really radicalized me.

### **CC: What does being radicalized mean to you?**

IC: I started seeing the connections between different issues (that others and I were working on). I started thinking about root causes and some of the main causes being capitalism, racism and the lack of real political power. It was clear that we could build power through organizing, that most people are denied power in this system.

Protesting in Seattle was my first experience with large numbers of people using their collective power to really fight back. After Seattle, I quit school and immersed myself in global justice activism. I went to DC for the IMF/World Bank actions and then to Los Angeles for the Democratic National Convention. At that time I was involved with a collective called Freedom Rising. Our goal was to support local organizing of these big actions by bringing skills and lessons learned from previous actions. LA was a big learning experience. Issues around racism and white privilege of white people like myself were brought to the forefront. There was also a big effort to fuse mass action organizing with community organizing by using the momentum of these large-scale actions to highlight and strengthen local struggles for self-determination and justice. The first time I started talking about issues of racism and white privilege in activism was after the WTO protests, but I don't think I really got it at all until I was confronted on it in LA. Working on issues of racism in the organizing was a priority of the local LA activists and organizers - many of whom were people of color. Ever since I left LA, learning about racism and white privilege and how it affects my own organizing and that of other white folks has been a priority for me.

to give power to a few whom are wealthy at the expense of the world's population. We must fight the state, which is the political entity supporting and maintaining these systems. The state that uses military, economic, political and social power to enforce the rule of the few.

An example of how these systems operate is how white women, white transgendered folks and economically poor white folks have been given some privileges to manipulate us into thinking we're superior to people of color. But we've never had real power. We will experience true power when we confront our superiority complexes and work in solidarity with communities of color fighting for liberation and justice. One of the main things we're fighting for, as anarchists, is for people to truly have power over their own lives and over their communities.

### **CC: How do you sustain yourself and stay active?**

IC: Part of how I sustain myself is that I have a vision of a better world and I have the hope that it is possible. Learning about all of the amazing historical and current struggles inspires that hope for justice in the US and around the world. I have to continually challenge a tendency to be driven by guilt and recognize that I am fighting for my own liberation. Also to recognize that it is ok to take time for myself, to hang out with friends, watch mainstream movies, play games and play soccer. I'm fighting for revolutionary changes and I know the changes I'm fighting for will take a long time and so I have to be able to sustain myself mentally and physically. I want to live in a world where I have real power over my own life, living free from these systems that say I am worthless, not consuming things daily that come from the exploitation of others and the environment. I want to breathe clean air, drink clean water, eat healthy and safe food and I want everyone to have this.

*For more information:*

*About anti-racism training: [www.activesolidarity.net](http://www.activesolidarity.net)*

*About direct action training: [www.ruckus.org](http://www.ruckus.org)*

*About the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty: [www.ocap.ca](http://www.ocap.ca)*

*About anarchism: [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org)*

tenants in the building or neighborhood to join together. We get in the landlords' faces and disrupt their lives to the point where they can't turn a blind eye to throwing people on the street. We've stopped a lot of evictions or won large settlements for tenants this way.

**CC: You mentioned anarchism earlier, why are you an anarchist?**

IC: Anarchism to me means organizing in a way that empowers as many people as possible. Decisions should be made by those directly affected by the issue because those who are most directly impacted by something are going to have the clearest picture of what's going on - it is their life, not a statistics report or some abstract theory. To me it is about self-determination. I'm against capitalism, against the need to compete constantly in order to get a job that pays you little to nothing.

We need a different economic and social system that is about working together to provide for individual and community needs. A system that does not quantify everything into economics but recognizes all of the important parts of making a fun, healthy, loving community like art, music, childcare and food production. Anarchism is a vision for a better tomorrow, a better next year, a better world generations from now.

One of the reasons that I'm not an authoritarian communist comes from having been born into a religious commune called the Love family, which was made up of over 600 people who were dissatisfied with the current economic, political and social system. Many aspects of the communal life I can appreciate, but I've always felt that the major problem was that there was a leader who had ultimate authority. As years went on, he became more and more corrupt and did whatever he could to hold onto his power. This led 75% of the people leaving the family, giving up what they had built together and going out into the world with nothing but their children and the clothes on their back. Even though this was on a small scale, I think it reflects what can happen when one person with good ideals has all the power as opposed to power being held in many hands, when people are accountable to each other and empowered to support themselves and their community.

**CC: What contributions do you see anarchism making to build movement for collective liberation?**

IC: Anarchism to me is mainly vision and principles to guide organizing. I don't feel the need to only organize with other anarchists because I feel I have as much to learn from people who don't identify as anarchists. I've also worked with many people who share the same principles but don't identify as anarchists.

I think there are principles of anarchism that will help us build movement. For example, fighting institutionalized hierarchies. We must fight white supremacy that manipulates and privileges white folks at the expense of people of color and ultimately gives real power to a small number of wealthy white men. We must fight patriarchy that privileges and gives economic and political power to biological men over women and transgendered folks. We must fight heterosexism that privileges straight people and attacks all of us who are queer in the many ways that we express it. We must fight capitalism that works in conjunction with and supports all these systems

In 2001, five young white folks from the global justice movement formed a collective called Active Solidarity. We formed to create Challenging Racism workshops geared towards white activists to explore how racism impacts our social justice work. The workshop was originally created for the Institute for Social Ecology, a radical school in Vermont where we had all attended summer programs. Our collective settled in the Bay Area and we took the Challenging White Supremacy 15 week workshop series and formed several study groups to better understand how racism functions in white sectors of social movements. Many white activists heard about what we were doing and asked us to do the workshop in their town and for their group. We became more organized and we created an accountability council of organizers of color and experienced white anti-racist organizers to give us feedback. This came from a recognition that as white folks we do not have the best understanding of how racism functions. Then we did a spring and summer tour in 2002, doing workshops with activist groups on the East Coast and in the Mid-West.

**CC: What were you trying to accomplish?**

IC: Racism acted out by and perpetuated by white folks has historically and currently divided movements for social justice and if we're ever going to really build a mass movement that will truly challenge this fucked up system then we must confront the racism within it. As white folks we must take responsibility for challenging each other to confront our own internalized racial superiority. That superiority stems from schooling, media and everything in the dominant culture pushing the idea that white is right, normal, the best. This can transfer to predominately white groups thinking their way of organizing and activism is the normal, right, best way and not recognizing all of the important community and political organizing within communities of color. This must be done if we want to be part of a mass-based movement that really comes from the grassroots.

**CC: You were heavily involved in the anti-war activism in the Bay Area that shut down the financial district the day after war was announced. How was that organized and what were the actions like?**

IC: The action was organized through a spokescouncil model based on affinity groups (AGs), which are small groups of people who feel they can trust each other, work well together and share common goals. A call had been put out months in advance for massive direct action the next business day after Bush declared war on Iraq. The goal was to stop business as usual in SF's financial district. Many of us had gone to a lot of the big marches and felt they were good, but that we needed to escalate our response to the war. The call was put out by the spokescouncil, Direct Action to Stop the War, with a menu of different key intersections and corporations profiting from the war. People were asked to form AGs and pick a target that they would disrupt. People also formed clusters, which are groupings of AGs that choose to work together. At spokescouncil meetings, which have spokespersons from all of the AGs, coordination of the overall action took place: who would be at which target, what kind of action would it be, what was the tone at the action, did they want support and so on. There were also working groups that took on logistical tasks that were needed for the action to be effective. Such groups worked on outreach, setting up the spokescouncil meetings (finding spaces, developing agendas and recruiting facilitators), legal support, medical, media, communications, and an orientation group that helped orient new

people to how the organizing functioned and how to plug in before the action as well as the day of. The spokes met every week for months leading up to the day of action and each week more and more AGs were forming and plugging in. Involvement ranged from faith-based groups, to radical queer groups, to community based organizations, to people who had never been involved in direct action before. There was one spokes meeting at a union hall right before war was declared where over 250 people showed up, many representing AGs and working groups.

In the evening of March 19th, Bush announced to the world that war had began. With intense emotions of anger, sorrow, guilt and fear, an emergency spokes was held to coordinate last minute details. At dawn on the 20th, over 100 AGs moved into positions throughout the financial district. Groups used various tactics. For example, radical queer group Gay Shame and Freedom Uprising, a majority people of color cluster, blocked freeway on and off ramps with furniture and their bodies. The anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist cluster and many others used lock boxes to blockade intersections and corporate entrances. Many people locked arms to form blockades. While dozens of actions were taking place around the city, one of the most effective tactics used by many was to rove in groups of 10-400 people shutting down intersections, recruitment centers and corporations. This forced the police to move all around downtown, frequently helping us blockade streets trying to keep up with us.

By 10am it was clear that we had stopped business as usual. The SF police chief declared that anarchy had broken lose and that people should avoid the area. He was right: there was anarchy on the streets, and it was highly organized. There was no one person calling the shots, but thousands of leaders and individuals empowered to make on the fly decisions about how their group could help make the action successful.

One of the great things about this mass action, in contrast to many of the recent summit convergences, was that the majority of people involved were from the same area. The response was immediate and there are opportunities to continue working together against war and on local struggles for justice.

Within the spokescouncil, there were a number of AGs who played leadership roles in bringing the message of fighting the war at home and abroad into the mass action. On May 19th, the Racial Justice Day of Action, different groups including Freedom Uprising and Global Intifada took it a step further and focused the anti-war direct action mobilization on the war at home on low income communities and communities of color. The actions focused on cuts to social services making the connections to how war spending is hurting communities of color in the Bay Area. There was also an action at the Oakland Police department linking military and police occupations of low-income communities of color in Oakland to Iraq and to the PATRIOT Act and INS Raids. The day also included an action led by radical Jews and Palestinians protesting US tax dollars going to the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

One lesson from this work is the importance of connecting the issues at home and abroad. If the focus is only on the impact of the war abroad we're never going to build a movement strong enough to stop US imperialism. We have to connect with how people are impacted locally, and fight against the attacks on communities of color and low-income white communities. The struggle must be on a local and global level.

**CC: You're an anti-racism organizer and trainer and you are a direct action trainer with the Ruckus Society. How can anti-racism and direct action strengthen each other? But first, what is Ruckus and what do you do?**

IC: Ruckus is an organization that provides skills based training on direct action. This includes direct action planning, blockades, media, political theatre, climbing, radio communications and in the past few years challenging racism and organizing workshops have been included. I've been doing climb training since 2000. I also do radio communications and anti-racism workshops. One of the main things I've been focused on is helping build a commitment to anti-oppression politics within Ruckus.

**CC: What does that mean?**

IC: Working with other trainers to reflect on and challenge the ways that racism and oppression impact the trainings, camp culture and how white Ruckus trainers interact with different movements for social justice. It means understanding the importance of Ruckus looking to the leadership of organizations and communities most negatively impacted by injustices that Ruckus is working against. This includes developing accountability with those groups and communities.

The FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) camp that was recently held in Oct. in Florida brought together community organizers of color from NYC to Oakland, Indigenous and First Nations activists representing several Nations in Canada and the US, organizers from Costa Rica, Panama, Brazil as well as white activists and organizers in labor, environmental, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggles. The camp brought together all these folks to share skills, experiences, lessons and build alliances and relationships to help build stronger movements against the FTAA, global capitalism and US imperialism. This was another step in a long process of Ruckus' transforming to serve and support broad-based movements for justice.

So back to anti-racism and direct action. Direct action as a tactic can't be seen as something only economically privileged white people use, because that's just not true. Direct action has been and is used by people hit the hardest by capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy. The Civil Rights movement, First Nations youth in Canada doing land occupations, people facing evictions confronting their landlords. At the same time it must be recognized that the risks for peoples of color and working class people are different than it is for economically privileged white folks.

I think OCAP (Ontario Coalition Against Poverty) is an inspiring example of using direct action to fight for people's basic needs and rights on issues of housing and immigration. I've been working with an organization called the Campaign for Renters Rights that is modeled after OCAP. We use direct action casework to fight evictions and for safe, affordable housing, empowering people to directly fight back against those oppressing them. We work with people in Oakland who are facing evictions or being screwed over by their landlord. Many people come to the CRR because they don't have much chance to win alone or can't afford to fight in court. Property owners write most housing laws and most judges are property owners and they all mostly favor landlords. We use collective power of the tenants to fight evictions, which usually means putting pressure directly on the landlord. We use tactics such as picketing the landlord's home, business or church, and organizing other