

Organizing Against the G20 in Toronto

Interview with Mandy Hiscocks



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Amanda “Mandy” Hiscocks, a long-time activist from Guelph, Ontario, was centrally involved in organizing against the 2010 G20 summit in Toronto. Tom Keefer interviewed Hiscocks a week before she was sentenced in January 2012. She served her sentence in the Vanier Center for Women in Milton, Ontario and maintained a blog from prison, boredbutnotbroken.tao.ca¹.

When and how did the police monitor organizers and infiltrate the movement against the G20?

They sent undercover agents in way before the G20 activism began. The two agents that I'm most familiar with—Brenda Dougherty (Brenda Carey) and Khalid Mohamed (Bindo Showan), in Guelph and Kitchener respectively—came in around the time of the planning against Vancouver Olympics. Their focus only morphed into G8/G20 surveillance later. But even before that, in 2008, I was placed under surveillance by the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) because they claimed that I was involved in “extremist” Left groups such as the Central Student Association (CSA) at the University of Guelph and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). I'm not a part of PETA and, in any case, neither it nor the CSA are extremist groups.

What was perhaps more important for them was that they said I was involved in “Aboriginal support,” and that I was operating as a “bridge” between Guelph, Toronto, and Ottawa. It's been a recurring theme in the Crown's synopsis of events to talk a lot about Indigenous solidarity work. I think the cops had people who were keeping tabs on activists in Guelph and Kitchener-Waterloo for their involvement in supporting Indigenous struggles and that they moved to a focus on the Olympics and the G20 when the Integrated Security Unit came into being.

What kind of Indigenous movements were you involved with that they were concerned about?

At the time, back in 2008, I would say nothing particularly structured. I had gone to some demonstrations and there was an Indigenous Peoples Solidarity Movement chapter in Guelph, but it wasn't particularly effective. I was going to a lot of events and helping to run events through the Ontario Public Research Interest Group (OPIRG). There was some Six

¹<https://web.archive.org/web/20220312010443/https://boredbutnotbroken.tao.ca>

Nations solidarity work going on at that time, and folks were also doing Tyendinaga support work. I would consider myself pretty peripheral to that work at that time, but the radical community in Guelph as a whole was very much into that kind of politics. I'm not really sure that I was actually a bridge between Toronto, Guelph, and Ottawa, but I did know a lot of people in those cities who were doing that kind of work. The main thing that the police were worried about was settler communities working with radical Indigenous people, and they were also really worried about the more general networking that was happening in Southern Ontario. They didn't like that Kitchener, Guelph, and Hamilton were working really closely together and that there was a lot of anarchist organizing going on.

What kind of tactics and strategies did the state use to try to infiltrate the movement?

In my opinion, they did everything right. Khalid, the agent I'm most familiar with, came into Guelph and started working with the people opposing the Hanlon Creek Business Park development in Guelph. An above ground group called LIMITS, which held public meetings, organized petitions, spoke with city council, and hosted debates, had a big sign-up sheet, and wanted a really diverse group of people to join. Khalid started going to meetings and doing a lot of work, and then he met people in that group who were more connected to radical politics. There was crossover between that group and people who ended up doing an occupation at that site. He ended up at the occupation.

The occupation wasn't underground, but it was illegal. It was easy for him to slide into the other side of things. But at the same time, if we were to do it again, I'm not quite sure how we could prevent that. You do want lots of people joining your email lists and helping out, and if they seem solid, it's hard to justify keeping them out.

Were there things about his behaviour or activity that caused people to question whether or not he could be trusted or if he was a cop?

Yes, there were. I wasn't that involved in the Hanlon Creek occupation because I was on bail at the time and had a surety with money on the line, so I couldn't go to "unlawful" demonstrations, but I heard that there were people who didn't trust him. I'd hear people say, "Ugh, we can't be like

this about people, just because he's brown and older, people need to calm down and not be so suspicious.” So that debate was happening in Guelph, but eventually he did get kicked out of the occupation. I'm not sure about the circumstances, but I do know that it happened.

Then there was backlash because he allied himself with an Indigenous man and a couple of other people at the occupation to label the Guelph kids who kicked him out as racist. Either way, he did get kicked out and found his way to Kitchener and got involved in activism there. According to his notes in our disclosure, in Kitchener he established trust with a well-known activist by doing things like buying illegal cigarettes from a nearby reserve and doing illegal drugs with other activists. He used the trust with that particular person to get into an organizing group in Kitchener.

What strategy did the police agent known as Brenda Dougherty use to get into the activist movement?

She came into Guelph in late 2008 or early 2009. She had instructions from her handlers at the OPP to go and just sit at the Cornerstone cafe because a lot of lefties hang around there; they thought that she should be seen in a cool, progressive coffee shop. (She was getting paid to eat her lunch!) She read books like *Animal Rights and Human Wrongs* by Peter Singer and *One Dead Indian* by Peter Edwards. She watched the film *Trans America* and other really mainstream stuff to get a sense of the politics of the movement.

She had a list of people—targets—and she went to events, starting on campus, to look for people. She had photographs and was looking for “face time with targets,” which is her quote from the disclosure. She went to an International Women's Day event, did some other stuff, and eventually wound up at a Guelph Union of Tenants and Supporters (GUTS) meeting when they were trying to branch out and recruit on campus. Hardly anyone showed up to that meeting, so she was one of maybe four new members of the group. She started working with GUTS, which was doing very legal things like tenant advocacy and serving meals on the street. She got in by cooking and doing grunt work in a totally non-sketchy way. The cooking was done at people's houses and people became friendly and comfortable talking while she was in the room, and it transitioned into people talking about the G8/G20.

It wasn't even that activists were saying sketchy stuff—more just that she thought, “Okay, these are the people. I've hit the jackpot with this network, and I'm going to get to know these people a lot better and follow them.” I don't know how she got to that first anti-G20 meeting in Guelph. I was protesting at the Olympics in Vancouver at the time, so I don't know if it was an open meeting or if she had been invited because she was around for long enough that people trusted her. But she ended up at the first meeting of what would become the Southern Ontario Anarchist Resistance (SOAR) before a vouch system was place. And then she breezed through all the rest. I don't think anyone ever sat down and asked, “Who here is officially vouching for Brenda?” But when there was an official vouch system, I vouched for her at a meeting months later—to my eternal shame. I think she got in because she had done so much work and had been there from the start.

How important were things like Facebook and social media to the work that the undercovers were doing?²

There were cops whose only role, it seems, in the whole operation was to make fake Facebook profiles and add themselves to events, and get information about the events. And Brenda and Khalid both had Facebook profiles. So I guess they would just get all of the events. I guess there's also a thing of “all of my friends are friends with this person on Facebook so I may as well just add them”. If they read my Facebook profile they've got a pretty good sense of my politics, but other than that... I know they used social media, but I wouldn't know how useful it was to them.

So they went on to infiltrate the SOAR meetings and Brenda was wearing a wire to some of these meetings and recording stuff that was said at the meetings?²

Only the last one, and they had to work pretty hard for that wire. They had to create a document a hundred pages long in order to justify it. And she just wore it to the last meeting. I don't know if the device was broadcasting in real time or if it was just recording onto a tape.

²No Trace Project note: This answer was not included in the original transcript and was transcribed by the No Trace Project.

One of the conditions of your bail prevented any of the co-accused from contacting one another. In retrospect, do you think it made sense for you to have accepted the non-association conditions that were required to get out of custody after you were first arrested?

Well, I can say that I'm never doing that again. I will not take non-association conditions again, and I will not go into an arrestable action without understanding that I could be in jail for months and months. I can't speak for other people, but I think that what set the tone for the conditions we got, more than anything, was the fact that we had lawyers. The lawyers wanted to get us out at any cost and were willing to agree to pretty much anything. If we had refused lawyers, they wouldn't have been able to put non-association restrictions on us, because we would have had to communicate for the trial.

Ideally, we should have said, "We all get out (or not) but we have to have a way to meet." If we had stayed in jail, all the women would have been able to meet together and all the men would have been able to meet together. We were all on the same prison ranges. We would have had a little bit more time to have conversations. The way it turned out, we never had time to talk. We weren't a group of 17 people with a plan, so we didn't have time to properly discuss things like, "How do you feel about non-association?"—since we'd never done that kind of pre-arrest stuff that you do if you're doing a cohesive action with a group of people. If we had not signed the non-association agreement and if we had stayed in jail, we could have done that.

I remember arguing with my lawyer about this, and he was adamant: "No, no, this is okay. They're just playing it up because of the media, everything will die down, just keep your heads down and in a few months we'll sort it out." And I should not have believed him! It's been my experience that it's really hard to change bail conditions later. Most people in jail wanted to get out quickly. We didn't have a real discussion in jail that I can remember about whether we should stay there and work as a group to get better conditions later. People hadn't prepared for that. People had stuff at home that was hanging over them; people had work; people hadn't thought this stuff through.

What about the publication ban?

Once our lawyers got the publication ban in place it was really hard for people to know what they could do on our behalf, and it also meant there were a lot of complications with organizing any kind of protest. One problem was that people didn't know what they could say, or even if they could say anything. Another was that there is this weird kind of loophole in the conspiracy law that seemed to mean that if you were alleged to have been part of the conspiracy, and if at a later date in court you were deemed to have actually been a part of that conspiracy, then anything that you said, even after your arrest, is assumed to have been said by anyone in the group. So, everyone was scared to speak without the consent of the group, which we couldn't get because we had non-association conditions. There was also this idea of the "unindicted co-conspirator": someone who hasn't been arrested but is considered by the Crown to be part of the conspiracy. That loophole would also apply to them, so no one who thought they might be an unindicted co-conspirator wanted to speak either. It was surreal and confusing. We didn't understand it and we couldn't get a straight legal answer. Someone needs to study this stuff and see what the law actually says and what the restrictions are, so that we know it better for next time.

Do you feel like there were ways in which the activists organizing the protests could have conducted themselves differently to be able to avoid the kind of state repression that they faced?²

Well, it's hard to say. I think that what didn't help us was the posturing, people being not very smart.

For example, we had a brainstorm one time where we were just throwing out anything, like you do in brainstorms. There is a problem between people talking all big and trying to one up each other, and this huge culture gap between police and activists. We know that most of the shit on a brainstorm board is not going to happen, and that most stuff is kind of a joke, or can be.

In one example, we were talking about potential things that could be done around the delegates arrival. One of the things that got thrown out was, how could we make it so it's impossible to land at the airport, what would set off an alarm at the airport? Kind of the same things that people do when there are deportations about to happen. And one of the ideas was: yeah we can get a really shitty car and run it through the chain-link fence.

Obviously, we were probably not going to do it. It's not going to happen, but in a different world, in a different time, with different resources, it's a tactic that we would consider. Maybe it could work. That's in the disclosure: I think that the cops actually thought that this was something that we were going to do. And if that's what they thought about all the things like that, we looked like we had a lot more resources and capacity than we actually had. It's not that I don't approve that tactic, we just couldn't do it at that time. So a lot of things like that were taken as possibilities when they really were not.

And then there is other stuff, really outrageous, like machos talking about "what they would do with the cops if they had them". I don't think they would do that, and it's not useful to the conversation, it's just chatting. Those things got recorded too, and everything was taken with the same value. It was not interpreted, not followed by mentions like "everybody laughed!". There's no tone of voice in the disclosure, there's no qualifying remarks.

I mean, I don't think that you want to act all the time as if there's an informant in the room. I think there's a distinction to make. A tactic of going through a chain-link fence, setting of an alarm at an airport, to stop a plane from taking off for deportations, there are times when it could be done, that's valuable. Those things can get you in trouble but I'm not sure it's the best course of action to never talk about them in case someone is listening. But I think there's a lot of stuff that really didn't need to be said, wasn't useful, apart from making you look a little tougher.

What do you think the level of fallout has been on the activists involved in G20 organizing? Have people been scared off or has this process strengthened people's understanding of what's at stake and what's required?

I really don't know. I know what I'd like to think: I'd like to think that people are having better conversations about what they're willing to do, about what they're willing to give up. One of the goals of the Toronto Community Mobilization Network (TCMN) was to use the G20 to get people excited and to join groups that were organizing in the city. To some extent I think that happened.

I also think that if you were one of the people who got attacked at Queen's Park on June 26th, you have a pretty different understanding of riot police now. That can be a powerful moment, when you see the state for what it really is. Hopefully people who were there have a better understanding of the state and the police, where they fit, and what the right to protest really means. Hopefully it made people angrier and not more fearful of state repression. But I don't have a good way of knowing if that's the case. In terms of prison solidarity, it's done wonders. The number of people, even just people connected to me on Facebook, who are involved in letter writing, in posting information about Bill C-101 and programs in prisons, and disseminating information that they wouldn't normally, has grown exponentially. I don't know if that's taking away from other work, but it seems that there is more of a focus on prisoners as a political issue.

How would you respond to the critique that a proponent of non-violent direct action might make, where everything should be organized transparently and people should only engage in civil disobedience so that no one can be portrayed as a terrorist or as being violent? Has that made you reconsider your position on questions around violence or fighting the cops?

No, not at all. I would have liked everything to unfold as a cross between an autonomous black bloc and the way that affinity groups were organized in the anti-globalization movement days. Like the pie chart in Seattle, divide the city: "Is there an affinity group that can shut down this part of the city? Hands up. Awesome—there's 10 of you, great. Do you need more people? No? Okay, go to it; go do your autonomous thing." The idea behind SOAR was that it would allow for a little more cooperation between affinity groups so that there weren't just a random bunch of affinity groups doing whatever. If one affinity group was doing a particular thing, maybe another affinity group could assist, through a complementary action, or use their own action as a decoy, and so on. That's not the way it panned out, but that was the idea that I had, and that was the idea behind the spokescouncils of affinity groups that made up SOAR.

In the end, all of the "ring-leaders" in SOAR were in jail, and completely different people took the lead on the day of the march and put up a flare and a bunch of people followed them. It was just a standard black bloc:

people wearing black—people who knew and trusted one another—went and engaged in some “criminal activity.” The militant action ended up being less organized, but it happened and I think it accomplished what it was meant to. And all of that organization that went into SOAR, all of the time and the energy, was maybe unnecessary. I don't mean that the idea of more coordinated affinity group actions should be abandoned, or that it's a bad model, just that it didn't work this time and we need to think it through more.

If the state of the movement right now was such that another Seattle could happen, or that there were reduced affinity groups out there who acted with no bandanas, who did things like hard blockades, who knew how to do those things, who had the equipment, and were willing do them, I think we would have had a really different situation. The assessment that I and that most people have, however, is that that doesn't exist here. People don't do those things. It's not the Pacific Northwest; it's not the anti-logging stuff; it's not the anti-globalization days.

I walked into those meetings in Toronto and looked around and thought, where is everyone? Where are the people who have these skills and know how to do this stuff? They weren't there. And I remember speaking with a friend of mine—who is completely pacifist, and does only non-violent direct action and does it really well and coordinated—who asked me, “Are you going to be here? Can we have some yellow actions?” But there just weren't those things. I think that's a problem. Because we have really boring, not very useful, union/NGO-style marches or black bloc actions and nothing in the middle.

It's important to note that it wasn't only the radical anarchists who were infiltrated. Greenpeace and the Vancouver Media Centre were infiltrated too. A lot of pretty mainstream groups who do mostly non-violent civil disobedience (if they do anything illegal at all) were infiltrated. I don't think it's true that the infiltration wouldn't have happened if there wasn't this idea of “violence.”

It seems, in some ways, that black bloc actions have become symbolic and that “it's not a good summit protest unless something is burning.” Each act is seen as a victory in itself, even though it's just symbolic and

ultimately resulted in the trouble that you and a number of other people went through—all the trials and all the jail time.

The thing is, we knew that the black bloc was going to happen, because it always happens. SOAR or no SOAR, there's going to be a black bloc. And so the question that we had—in SOAR and the TCMN—was how can we use diversity of tactics to separate the labour march from another march where people can be more “militant.” The original idea was always that shit is going to happen—it always happens—and organizers can't and shouldn't control what people are going to do or not going to do.

It's a fair bet that there's going to be a black bloc and there are going to be smashed windows. How do we make sure that that happens in a place and in a way that doesn't affect the green march or the low-risk march? That was the intention and it didn't work out that way, and it kind of didn't work out that way because of a lack of respect for a diversity of tactics. If there had been a friendly, cordial, “We don't agree but we recognize that some people want to do different things,” message from the labour march, I think it would have turned out really well.

As for the value of having a small black bloc that runs amok in the city—I haven't decided either way on that. I think there is some value to showing any kind of resistance that is militant, that's in your face, that says, “No, you can't scare me with your tear gas. You can't scare me with your guns. Fuck you.” I think that's really important in ways that can't necessarily be assessed. And I don't think the window smashing matters. I don't think the smashing cop cars matters. I think that whatever gives an aura of militancy in the street is really valuable.

I don't know that a civil disobedience “lie down and let's get dragged away” action does do that. I think it does a lot of other great things, but it doesn't inspire the same people as a more confrontational action does. When I was in jail, the general consensus on my range was, “That was fucking awesome.” People who have been constantly harassed by cops, whether they have a really good class analysis or just plain experience, thought it was great. People who hate the power structure but don't really have a background or academic understanding of it were drawn to the militant actions, and that was positive. So I don't think the bloc should

be assessed in terms of people getting arrested, or whether or not we shut it down, or if the unions are mad at us now.

I just wish that there had also been a middle ground. I wish that there were people saying, “We're going to lie down on the Gardiner Expressway,” or saying, “We're not going to let the delegates through,” or “We're going to put a tripod in the middle of the entrance way,” or “We're going to lock down at the fence.”

One thing that I learned was that you can either be part of organizing the structure—making the posters, making the timelines, getting the convergence space—or you can be part of a group that's going to be doing an action, but you can't do both. There is no way that my affinity group could have actually planned a really solid action while we were also doing all of the structure stuff. That was the main drawback: that there were not enough people in the city who were willing to give enough of their time to allow people who were part of the TCMN to also plan actions. In hindsight, we needed the people in the TCMN to just plan a big militant action. No one else was doing it and SOAR ended up taking it on.

It's almost a reflection of the fact that the balance of forces has changed since Seattle and the G20 in Toronto.

It seems that there are fewer people participating, and that people from both sides of the “violence” debate are scornful of the middle. There are people who are only willing to march and will not do anything illegal. And then there are people who are like, “Fuck this non-violent direct action shit, I want to break some windows. I want to do something that feels strong and empowering. I'm going to dress all in black and be part of the black bloc.”

Neither side is interested in the classic mass civil disobedience actions. If there was a middle force between these extremes, maybe there would be more people and if there were more people, maybe there would be a middle.

But yeah—it's definitely different. But it's not just time; I think it's also location. I think if the G20 had happened, for example, in Montreal, where there's a different political culture, it would have been totally different. There you can be part of a militant march that will confront the

police, or at least defend itself against the police. Folks there will attack a fence or a structure; they do that kind of thing on a regular basis, and don't dress all in black in some kind of cliquy subculture. If the G20 had met in Montreal, I don't think the weird conflict between the union and the break-off march would have happened. People would have said, "Of course we will do a militant break-off march."

My really over-simplified analysis of the black bloc—or the kinds of things the black bloc would do—is that we've been doing it backwards. For the last decade, since Seattle, people have been trying to normalize the black bloc. Our thinking was that the more we do it, the more people will get used to it and the more appealing these tactics will become.

But we should be looking at Egypt. The protests in Tahrir Square were always called peaceful protests. There was the classic "women and children" line: it was peaceful and it was meant to be peaceful, and in the interviews everyone said how peaceful it was and that they just wanted a peaceful demonstration that was massive, to just make their point. But when the police and Mubarak's people attacked, there was not a lot of conflict or tension when people started defending the square and the protest against the state's forces. Hundreds of people were doing things like burning down police stations as well as climbing on top of tall buildings and throwing molotovs down when the cops came!

It's almost as if black bloc activists need to bide their time and practice their tactics, but not in a public way—because the only time it's going to be acceptable here is when people feel threatened. If the cops had attacked the labour march I don't know that the unions would have been so upset about a bunch of people fighting the cops; maybe then they might have thought, "Oh yeah—this is okay. My four year old is here and it's great that this person in black is preventing the cops from getting too close." People almost do politics as a hobby, like, "Let's go out for the day and march around with the unions," so they might not see the value of the black bloc. But they would if they faced the risk of police violence themselves. Because non-violent rallies are not a threat to the state, the state doesn't respond with violence. And in my mind, a defensive black bloc that contributes to a larger action is more useful than one that goes alone and engages in small scale property damage.

As you prepare to do 11 months in jail, is there anything that you want to tell people, or are there ways that people can support you in jail, or ways that you can work with prisoner support movements?

The one thing I would like to tell people—because I think people have a really skewed perception of what jail is—is that it's not really going to be that terrible. I think that it's really important for people to know that this is something we can do. People have this idea that jail is to be avoided at all costs and it's the end of the world if you have to do time. I'm hoping that my experience, when I can share it, will demonstrate that it's not so bad. You can still do important things on the inside and you will still have contact with the outside and it doesn't take a particularly strong person to be able to get through it.

So you see it as part of the political process, if we're serious about changing the world?

Exactly. It's not like they're going to stop arresting people. However, there are only so many times that you can do time in your life, so I think those times should be worth it. If you are going to put yourself out there knowing that you could potentially do time, then just make sure that your actions are as efficient and effective as possible.

Amanda “Mandy” Hiscocks, a long-time activist from Guelph, Ontario, was centrally involved in organizing against the 2010 G20 summit in Toronto. This interview deals with instances of state repression against the opposition to the summit, including tactics and strategies used by the state to try to infiltrate the opposition.



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