The Israeli Military and the "Decommissioners"

written by James Bargent | July 2, 2010

On the 17th of January 2009, Israeli warplanes pounded the terrified inhabitants of the densely populated Gaza strip in over 50 air-strikes. It was the 22nd day of Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli military assault on Gaza that left an estimated 1400 dead, including over 300 children.
In the early hours of that morning on a quiet industrial estate 2000 miles away, six peace activists scaled the perimeter fencing of the UK factory EDO/ITT, which, it is claimed, makes vital components for Israeli F-16s – the backbone of the airforce bombarding Gaza. After entering the factory through a broken window, the six set about systematically destroying computers and machinery with hammers. When they were finished 'decommissioning' the factory, they had caused an estimated $300,000 worth of damage. They then lay on the floor and waited to be arrested.
The trial of the activists, who have become known as the 'Decommissioners', began a week after Israel once again caused international outcry – this time with killing of nine peace activists, whom Israel accused of being a violent 'lynch mob'. Like the attempts to defend the Mavi Marmara from Israeli commandos, the actions of the Decommissioners have sparked fierce debate over the line between passive resistance and aggressive action and how far it is reasonable to go in defying aggression. The activists stand accused of conspiracy to commit criminal damage. They are pleading not guilty on the grounds that they were acting to prevent a greater crime – the killing of civilians in Gaza. In a video statement filmed before the action, one of the six, Elijah Smith, said:"I don't feel I'm going to do anything illegal tonight, but I'm going to go into an arms factory and smash it up to the best of my ability so that it cannot actually work or produce munitions … [which] have been provided to the Israeli army."
The trial is set to last for seven weeks, during which time the defendents hope to prove that components produced in the UK factory are used by Israel in the occupied territories, a fact which the company denies. If they are found guilty they could face years in prison. The Decommissioners are supporters of Smash EDO, an often controversial anti-militarist campaign that has targeted the EDO/ITT factory in Brighton, on the south coast of England, since 2004. The campaign grew out of the disillusionment with the massive but ultimately ineffectual anti-Iraq war movement guided by the Stop the War coalition. Smash EDO spokesperson Chloe Marsh said: "If, when millions of people were mobilised against the war across the UK, we had looked at who the companies were who were set to make a profit from the war and targeted them, our resistance could have been far more effective."
But the decision to target individual arms manufacturers was not the only tactical break from the Stop the War campaign. Writing in British magazine Red Pepper, Smash EDO's Andrew Beckett said: "The whole thrust of the Stop the War coalition's approach was that marching from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square would ultimately compel the government to see sense. A march, a few speeches and a coach home … is it any wonder that our government felt safe to go to war?" Instead, Smash EDO's approach has been determinedly focussed on direct action.
The campaign announced itself with a rooftop occupation and has maintained pressure on the factory with diverse and frequently confrontational tactics – from noise demos and street theatre to lock-ons and the dumping of manure and concrete outside the factory. The tactics have often wilfully crossed the line of peaceful, legal protest, with the campaign insistent on differentiating between moral law and legal law. The factory and its investors have been consistently targeted for vandalism. Protests at the factory have seen activists bursting into the compound, smashing the windows and graffitiing the building, while street demonstrations have led to aggressive confrontations with police after their attempts to confine and control protesters. The relentless pressure has had a

serious impact on EDO. It has cost the company millions in legal costs, lost working time, security costs and property damage. One of the company's two premises in Brighton has already closed down, staffing levels are down and eight directors, including the managing director, have resigned since the campaign started.

The success of Smash EDO has also inspired activists around the country to set up similar campaigns. Groups in the cities of Nottingham, Manchester and Bristol have launched their own direct action campaigns targeting arms companies Heckler and Koch, Brimar and US company Raytheon. The proliferation of these campaigns has British activists talking excitedly about a new 'anti-militarism network' that gives impetus and energy to a peace movement that increasing numbers of frustrated activists are calling ineffective and obsolete.

However, the campaign's tactics have drawn heavy criticism, not only from a hostile media but also from many on the traditional left, who have accused the group of alienating the public with their aggressive street presence and property destruction. Milan Rai, co-editor of the British newspaper *Peace News*, wrote: "The question is whether the tactics that can win particular battles contribute to larger successes, or whether they may be undermining the building of the mass base of opposition that is essential to overall victory."

The activists behind Smash EDO hotly dispute this. Instead, they say, the barrier to building a mass movement is the belief that it is impossible to change anything, no matter how many feet march through the streets. Like the activists aboard the Freedom Flotilla, Smash EDO's supporters maintain that the only way to break through this barrier is with real, not symbolic action. Amongst British anti-militarists, no one has taken that idea further than the Decommissioners.

While opinions on the justification of their actions remain deeply divided in Britain, according to Ewa Jasiewicz, a human rights activist, journalist and eyewitness to Operation Cast Lead, people in Gaza are less equivocal. She recently commented: "I told many people in Gaza about the people's strike on EDO… When I recounted this action to people, I saw an expression come over their faces that I hadn't encountered before when talking about international solidarity. It was a kind of respect, a sense of surprised pride at a tiny move towards a levelling between the blood sacrifices and living hell of so many here, and sacrifices made by people in comparative comfort zones on the other side of the world – for them."