

Valerie Morse has been a central figure in organising anarchist spaces, organisations, and actions in Aotearoa New Zealand for the past two decades. A core part of that work was the establishment of nationwide peace-action groups, in particular, Peace Action Wellington and Auckland Peace Action. Morse was the author of *Against Freedom: The War on Terrorism in Everyday New Zealand Life* (2007) and was the principal writer of *Profiting from War: New Zealand's Weapons and Military-Related Industry* (2015). She is perhaps best-known to a wider audience in Aotearoa New Zealand in connection to the Operation Eight case, for which she was never put on trial, and the trial for burning a flag on Anzac Day, for which she was eventually acquitted. Trained as a historian, employed as a librarian, and based in Tāmaki Makaurau, she sat down at Rebel Press in Te Whanganui-a-Tara/Wellington with Murdoch Stephens to discuss organising in Aotearoa New Zealand. From that discussion came these questions and answers.

## Interview

# Peace, Action, and Anarchist Organising for Aotearoa

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VALERIE MORSE

**MURDOCH STEPHENS** – As we first met through Rebel Press, perhaps we could start with a slightly sentimental exercise. What is Rebel Press, how did it come to be, and, from your memory, could you describe the room for our readers?

VALERIE MORSE – Rebel Press is an anarchist publishing collective. We—Torrance Hodgson, Ali Egoz, and I—started it back in 2007 with two publishing projects. The first was *Down with Empire, Up with Spring*, an anarchist journal from the UK that Torrance wanted to make available here. The second was my first book, *Against Freedom: The War on Terrorism in Everyday New Zealand Life*. We initially bound books by hand with PVA glue and lots of bulldog clips! Fortunately, that stage didn't last too long before we bought a small, perfect binder. We were gifted an enormous old-school guillotine and we moved into the office at Trades Hall. The office is a dingy, dark, and frequently cold space with ancient moth-eaten carpet. It's located on the south side of the building with a view of a bland apartment block. It's pretty well littered with the ephemera of my organising activities over the past 10 years or so, including a small picture of a pig with wings trying to get off the ground that says, 'Operation 8—it'll never fly'. Funnily enough, the office still has the 'Farrowing Crate' animal-rights poster in

the corner detailing the horrors of imprisoning pigs in small cages, left behind after the Wellington Animal Rights Network office was raided here in December 2006.

**In our conversation you described some of the benefits of non-violent direct action (NVDA) for activists blockading the Weapons Expos and the Petroleum Summits. Can you tell us a little more about the recent role of NVDA in activism in Aotearoa New Zealand and its relation to building organising capacity?**

Just for a bit of context, the Weapons Expo (Defence Industry Forum) and Petroleum Summit are large industry lobbying and networking conferences for their respective business sectors. They are typically held in large conference centres over several days, with a trade-show component, and frequently with a minister of the Crown speaking in support. The blockades have been explicitly organised as NVDA events, and the campaign lead-ups have included community training and legal advice.

I think one of the really powerful things about direct action at this point in history is that it gives people a real awareness of their own collective power. It connects disparate tendencies in the heat of on-the-ground struggle: for example, the Wellington Organise Aotearoa branch forged connections with the Catholic Worker group based at Berrigan House from their shared experiences opposing the Weapons Expo in 2018. We live in a time when collective institutions are being eviscerated, if they aren't already dead, by the forces of neoliberal capitalism. And the opportunities that people have to participate in meaningful political action are few and far between; going to the polls once every three years is about the extent of it for most and, for a smaller subset, signing an occasional petition and maybe going on a march. So I feel like there is a real hunger for some people to actually be meaningfully involved in creating a better future and resisting the forces that they can clearly see are destroying life.

The kinds of actions we've been organising require people to act collectively, to learn new skills, and to take initiative. These are all very

different and potentially transformative processes in terms of participation in social change. They are prefigurative insofar as they require the active and informed decision-making of participants to co-create these events. The challenge with direct-action movements is translating those moments of resistance into sustained organising forces, because organising is work, and it requires a significant commitment, which is a struggle for lots of people, largely because of those very same economic forces. Across New Zealand society there is significant and sustained decline in people's participation in collective projects of all kinds, from sports clubs and tramping clubs to unions, community organisations, and churches. Much of this can be attributed to neoliberalism: the rise of individualism, the availability of cheap consumer goods, the proliferation of consumer culture, and, perhaps most importantly for this discussion, the development of the precariat. In this environment, sustaining movements over time is a major challenge.

**The Weapons Expo blockades began in the mid-2000s but were then dormant for almost a decade. In the second wave, beginning in 2015, there was a far-stronger attempt at public-relations outreach which has drawn in much broader bases of activism. The conference is looking likely to go ahead again this year. Are these protests something that can be won? And what would success look like to you?**

I find myself comparing the situation we are in at the moment with some of the mega-protests of the early 2000s around the globe. Activists descended on major economic meetings of heads of state like the G8 or WTO and mass protests ensued, the result of which was a major ratcheting up of policing and surveillance. Another result of it was a much more widespread understanding of the economic agenda of neoliberal capital and the bankruptcy of those ideas. So the effort had some very positive effects, but it was ultimately unsustainable over the long term.

In a much smaller way, the Weapons Expo bears some similarities: the campaign has been really successful in driving the event out of Wellington, raising the profile of the issue, and imposing some economic costs on

the local arms industry. At the same time, the event has radicalised many people—in a sense, stripping the polite face off of many of New Zealand’s most well-known companies and encouraging more radical action. On the contrary, though, the nuts-and-bolts of the organising of the campaign has largely been carried by a small number of people and that is difficult to maintain over time, particularly when you throw long-lasting and expensive legal struggles into the mix.

These events have been characterised by widespread police violence and arbitrary arrest and prosecution. This mirrors lots of the experiences of activists at those global protest events of the early 2000s. The effect of this is two-fold: on the one hand, it is invariably radicalising because the whole experience acquaints people with the brutality and capriciousness of the system; on the other hand, it can be deeply alienating, because it is those things that, without support in place (and even when it is there at times), turn many people away, because it is hard and can result in trauma and injury.

So I think the answer to your question, ‘can the Weapons Expo protests be won?’, is both yes and no. If having three years of sustained campaigning against the weapons industry was all it took to destroy the military-industrial complex, I’m pretty sure someone would have done it a long time ago. But the protests have been effective for the reasons above. That said, they may not always be effective—and may even be counterproductive—so it’s essential that we continuously evaluate it.

**You talked a little about the *Profiting from War: New Zealand’s Weapons and Military-Related Industry* booklet that was produced by yourself and others and the booklet’s use as a resource for activists. Could you expand a bit on the role you see research and the production of texts such as this playing in activist communities and what could be done to promote their development?**

One of the great things about being active at this stage in history is the relative ease of producing high-quality research material: much of it can be

done from your own home with a good internet connection. Certainly, I'm a big believer in that model of 'educate, agitate, organise', and so it stands to reason that we need to be prepared to produce factual material that backs up our position and debunks our opponents' arguments as the first step in the work we are doing for social change. Moreover, we are awash in pseudo-journalism and fake news, so we need to do our own homework about the issues we care about. Giving people knowledge is giving them ammunition to fight for the things we want (or against the things we don't). It is powerful stuff. We can't win hearts and minds with research alone, but without research we are just talking in abstractions, and that has limits.

In terms of supporting research, like most things, it requires capacity building: skill sharing by those who have done it with those who want to learn. I have been really gratified that people around me have picked up on lots of the threads in the *Profiting from War* book and have started asking their own questions. We don't do that skill sharing in a particularly systematic way, but it would be helpful if we did. A couple of years ago, I went to a conference of the New Zealand Centre for Investigative Journalism and was struck by how much we could learn from journalism and apply that to our work. The best journalists see their work as holding power to account and exposing abuses of power. The corollary to that is the changes that can arise as a result of illuminating those abuses of power. Beyond that, there is also a shift within journalism around some of the foundational ideas, particularly regarding the idea of balance. Again, the best journalists understand that, when power is so unevenly held, balance requires something different than giving equal weight to both sides. It actually requires listening and accepting the validity of the claims of the voiceless/powerless. One of our key roles as organisers is educating people. So I see good journalism as a mechanism for more-informed and more-empowered people who can better participate in creating society by being able to hear those claims.

**One thing that stuck with me about our talk was the way that you emphasised the collective power of organisations. Now, I'm no greenhorn—this isn't**

**the first time I've heard someone speak about the power of collectives—but there was something about how you articulated the need for collectives over individuals that I'd like you to try to restate: what does collective mean to you?**

I suppose one thing that struck me deeply when I moved back to New Zealand in 1997 was that so many things were still understood to be a collective responsibility rather than an individual responsibility, and the resulting profoundly different societies that New Zealand and the United States were. Now, sadly, a great deal of that has changed in 20 years because of the relentless push of neoliberalism, but for me it was a real eye-opener about the kind of society we could build. I had grown up thoroughly indoctrinated into a kind of Ayn Rand vision of the hyper-individuated individual and, while I later grasped at an alternative I knew was there, I had never seen or felt it for real. Most of the political organising I had been doing in the US up to that point was very much around liberal environmentalism.

For me, then, it was really the experiences of living and organising here that brought home the centrality of collective actions as the basis for social change. At the same time, and it does sound trite, but we are a collective—humankind—and none of us is an island. In my view, our freedom is not some state that exists separately experienced from others but rather as a relationship with others based upon history and power. So we have to be mindful of that when we talk about freedom: whose freedom? Free to do what? We can only live, thrive, and survive collectively, so that should be the basis of our work for liberation.

**We talked a little about how to cross the very difficult terrain between discussing reform of the state and discussing the violence at the heart of the state, the monopoly on violence that the state holds, as well as the state's protection of the economic elite. One of the ways that this terrain has been crossed most often is in discussions around Aotearoa New Zealand as a settler-colonial state. When I asked for other examples, you brought up the work of Auckland Action Against Poverty (AAAP) as a glimmer from 'communities**

**that are under pressure from the state'. With a little more time to reflect, are there any other examples or any other moments in recent history?**

It's the perennial question, right? Reform or revolution? One of the issues that has been closest to me is the issue of prison abolition, and the prison-industrial complex gets to the issue of state violence rather quickly. It's very easy to want to jump up and say 'abolish prisons'—and indeed that is what I want. But I am also sadly aware that we don't get to start history over again. We don't get to wipe the slate clean of people who have been damaged and deformed by this capitalist-colonialist-patriarchal-racist green-eyed monster and ended up in prison, and only start with people who haven't been affected by those forces. So how do we traverse that terrain between reforming the prison and abolishing it? Well, people like Angela Davis suggest that the terrain between the two is a pathway that travels together at times and, when it does, advocating for one particular measure advances both possibilities. It is when we lose sight of the radical transformation we want and settle for the reform (or even embrace reform that ultimately entrenches the prison) that the problems arise. It speaks to the idea that revolution is not a destination, but a never-ending struggle against the accumulation of coercive power.

**The terror attacks in Christchurch in March have brought to light for many the threat of white-nationalist ideologies and violence and their growing presence both in Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad. In your experience, how can direct-action and activist groups effectively challenge these people and the spread of these ideas?**

I think there are two strands here really. The first is that we Pākehā must learn to listen to Māori and Tau Iwi People of Colour when they talk about racism and about *their* concerns about racism. Last year, when we did the organising against two Canadian fascists, many of those people said it was less the obvious white-supremacist Right that they were worried about than the day-to-day racism that was so damaging, including that of all major



political parties. That said, I think we can all agree that the unchecked growth of explicitly neo-Nazi, white-supremacist groups in Aotearoa also has the effect of shifting the entire narrative further to the Right. Moreover, they play a disproportionate role on social media, giving the impression that their support base is larger than it is.

So what can we do beyond listening? I think it is imperative that anti-racist activists—Pākehā in particular—appreciate that we are not all at the same place in our journey to greater sensitivity to oppression. We want to bring people with us on that journey and sometimes that means challenging them, sometimes it means doing education. It doesn't mean excusing racism, but it does mean recognising that part of our role is to work with Pākehā to dismantle white supremacy, and there are a range of techniques and practices to undermine those beliefs that are going to be effective with different people at different times. It also means recognising that we don't all hold power equally in society, and while those who enjoy white privilege all benefit from white supremacy, we don't all benefit equally. This is a situation that arises directly from the nature of capitalist exploitation, and really speaks to the structural nature of white supremacy as part and parcel of a nexus that includes colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. There are complexities and, perhaps, in that, solidarities that can arise.

Returning to your question about how we can challenge that effectively, it feels to me at the moment that we have an opportunity to challenge the structural nature of white supremacy manifest in the intelligence services, to disrupt the deeply held and ultimately racist notions of 'national security'. It is hard to know if those things will be successful, but there is a space that has not existed heretofore. On the ground, it seems clear that more proactive educational work in and across communities is urgently necessary, accompanied by a network of uncompromising anti-fascist activists who are prepared to 'make racists afraid again'.

**I was fascinated with how you described growing up with a father who was a 'hardcore libertarian' with a TV show called *The Libertarian Review*, and how he gave you a 'profound distrust of the police'. Then you**

**mentioned how the war on drugs had been hugely radicalising for people in your communities in the United States. There was a sense in both of these stories about how distrust of the state can emerge from a wide range of interactions, and how the state's control is not as deep as it might appear. Do you feel that kind of contingency in your own organising, today, in Aotearoa New Zealand? Can you describe it?**

Certainly, there are large sections of New Zealand society that have a distrust of the state but, to be honest, the manifestations of that distrust arise less from being exposed to state violence and abuse (as is the case with the War on Drugs) than from things like organised far-right conspiracy theories that are based in anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-environmentalism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-Māori racism. Clear exceptions to that are, of course, Māori themselves, who are frequently collectively and individually distrustful of the state as a result of specific colonial histories and personal experiences of institutionalised state racism.

One of the things I have been thinking about regarding this view of the state is around the TPPA protests that happened in 2014–2016. The people and groups that came together to oppose the TPPA did so for vastly different reasons, based on really different ideals and values. Many of them came with a deep distrust of the motives of the state vis-a-vis the TPPA because it undermined some view they had about sovereignty, but not the kind of view of sovereignty that I might have—for example, a liberatory autonomy that is more akin to tino rangatiratanga in Māori communities—but with these really racist, nationalist ideals about what the state should be doing (for example around immigration). So, tactically, I have to wonder to what extent did we (the grand ‘we’ of the left tendency opposing the TPPA) actually facilitate the growth of ideas and movements abhorrent to us by marching down the street with these people, by not more vocally, physically, and unequivocally rejecting their ideas.

**We talked a bit about the issue of state surveillance, particularly in the wake of the 2007 terror raids. In particular, you mentioned the ‘chilling’**

**effect that surveillance can have on activists and the difficulty in generating widespread action against the creep of state surveillance. How do you think these two issues could be approached in the future by activist communities in Aotearoa New Zealand?**

We have a very long history of state and corporate surveillance of activists. Just in the past 15 years alone, I have had personal experience with the exposure of two paid informants for private industry and one paid police informant; these instances are aside from Operation 8, which was one of the largest surveillance undertakings in the New Zealand State's history and one targeting left-wing activists almost exclusively.

This kind of invasion has, of course, a chilling effect on people who are wanting to get involved in activism in a quite explicit way. But in some ways, I think that the chilling effect is actually more widely and profoundly felt by large sections of the population who are fearful of any display of democratic dissent. The past ten years of the National government were particularly damaging to democratic engagement—they scared the hell out of people that if they spoke up, they would be targeted, they would lose their job, or their benefit, or their house. There were really serious implications for people. We saw this play out a number of times, and the message is understood very well by those who are already at the margins, who are vulnerable and reliant on the state for their day-to-day survival.

As activists, we need to take our work seriously. That doesn't mean being serious all the time, but to take seriously the possibility of creating social change, and to reckon on the blowback from those who have power in the form of surveillance and violence. We should not be surprised to learn that we are under surveillance—that doesn't mean we shouldn't be outraged—but we should be prepared and be taking pre-emptive measures against it. This is part of the struggle and, in effect, always has been. So we should learn from those who have walked these paths before us, and we should aim to include security culture as part of our organising, to normalise it. Security culture refers here to building in protection of the parts of our work that need to be kept private, anonymous, and/or confidential;

it means using tools like encryption, but it also means recognising that we have to have regular practices in our organising that acknowledge the risks we are taking. These are practices to help keep us safe. There are a growing number of New Zealand journalists and academics who will be in a similar space—look at the cases of Anne-Marie Brady and Nicky Hager, for example. It may be that the widening out of those whose work must be ‘chilled’ may also provide us with a broader base upon which to build an explicit campaign against state and corporate surveillance. One thing that I have found a bit hopeful in the darkness of the struggle against surveillance is a growing willingness by younger activists to use technology to evade surveillance; and the corollary to that is that they recognise that they are potential targets of surveillance.

**I described this as a kind of tangential, off-to-one-side question when we first spoke, but I have a feeling that people don't speak about or reflect much on how we negotiate the massive content of information in this time of digital media. You mentioned checking in on *Democracy Now*, *Al Jazeera English*, and *The Intercept*, as well as receiving some more local tips from your Mum and via a well-curated Twitter stream. You also mentioned how inspired you are by younger activists engaging with politics for the first time. Can you tell me anything more about the way you find out about the world on a day-to-day basis and, beyond that, what kind of work needs to be done in reflecting on how we curate and consume digital media?**

The one example I have thought about a great deal in respect of the media is that of covering the war in Syria. Now, the old adage that ‘truth is the first casualty of war’ can hardly be overstated when it comes to Syria. Wow. It was and remains really hard to figure out what is actually going on and whom to believe in any particular instance. This is why history and context are so incredibly important. News that delivers package factoids, absent history and context, cannot possibly do justice to the events unfolding because life isn't absent of history and context. So when I heard people defending Assad as the democratically elected leader of Syria, or when I heard people

demanding US ground troops invade and effect regime change alongside the Free Syrian Army, I had to reference that history and that context, and find media sources that would help me with that. From there it was easier to figure out what my own position on the situation was, even if I could not ascertain the validity of a particular fact or event. In a sense, the general paradigm in which I approach such issues is trying to figure out where the power is, and who the powerless are. If you have that information, it goes a very long way to critically engaging with the media. All that said, it is hard not to feel overwhelmed by a relentless exposure to daily news media—particularly world events—and, for that, sitting down with a novel, a book of short stories, or a well-written long-form essay is a great antidote!

**And finally, can you give us a brief rundown of your main priorities in activist organisation in the immediate future and over the next couple of years?**

As I write, it is the two-week anniversary of the white-supremacist terrorist attack in Christchurch, so my thoughts very much linger in that space. The connections we need to build across groups and communities for greater understanding, particularly greater understanding by Pākehā of the rampant racism that constructs our whole society, are urgent work. There has been a very slow but inexorable march towards greater understanding of the violence that has been perpetuated against Māori, and now maybe there is a tiny space that has been created for Tau Iwi People of Colour to also have their stories and histories of racist brutality heard. The question is for me as a Pākehā: how do I work to ensure those voices are really heard and understood, and how do we collectively work to dismantle the systems of white supremacy? So the main priorities right now are cementing the connections we have made with the people whose voices we want to be listening to so that we can figure out how we can act as meaningful accomplices alongside them and what work they want us to do. Longer term, the organising work we are doing against war and militarism must continue, focusing in particular on illuminating the relationship between white supremacy here and the role New Zealand plays as a part of the

global order of empire, but also on how we might construct a different social order based on peace, justice, and self-determination.