Report of XR Peace at TBO in London from 21st to 24th April 2023

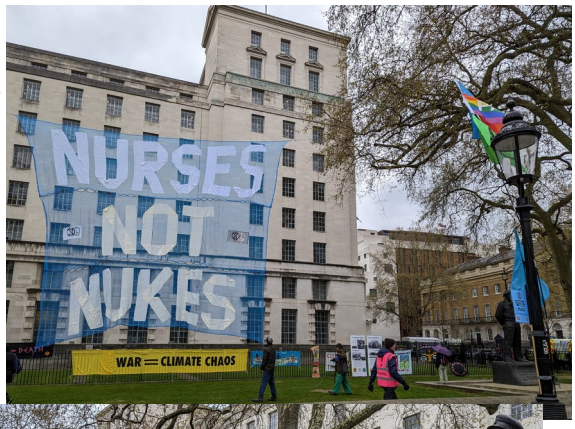
by Angie Zelter, 10th May 2023.

XR had done a wonderful job of inviting and including over 200 different social change organisations to *The Big One* - though it was a shame they kept to this temporary working title instead of the Unite to Survive headline that proved so popular. Most of the speakers on the main stage (that moved around Westminster on different days) reiterated the message that now was the time to put aside any differences and concentrate on the big picture and what unites us. I felt that this was the beginning of change by the people for the people. Probably around 100,000 people attended the 4 days with several marches that included over 60,000 people at this peaceful, non arrestable, family friendly event.

Around 400 different people supported XR Peace during XR's contribution to *The Big One* in London. They came from at least 13 of the 18 organisations which make up XR Peace. Everyone remarked on the lovely atmosphere and colourful banners and flags that brightened up the grim exterior of the Ministry of Defence where we were based. It was the first time these organisations had worked all together to prepare for the same event and showed the value of sharing resources and combining our strengths.



At 6am on **Friday** 21st April the picket started at both entrances into the MoD while a group from Coventry hung their giant banner between 2 trees that could eventually be seen right across Whitehall from Downing Street. It said 'Nurses not Nukes'.



Around 30 police had gathered to try to prevent the tree climber attaching the banner ropes to the trees. But after being asked politely why they were trying to stop someone climbing a tree, which was not illegal, and after taking lots of pictures of the waste of police time, they were embarrassed enough to finally leave.



The huge Nurses Not Nukes message was the centre piece of our anti-war picket. Soon loads of banners from all the different supporting peace and anti-militarist groups festooned the railings.



A gazebo, chairs, a podium and loud speakers were set up and despite some showers the workshops started on time at 10am.

We had chosen to picket the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall (out of the 14 Government Departments targetted) because militarism is a central pillar of the extractive systems that are causing climate change and destroying our planet.

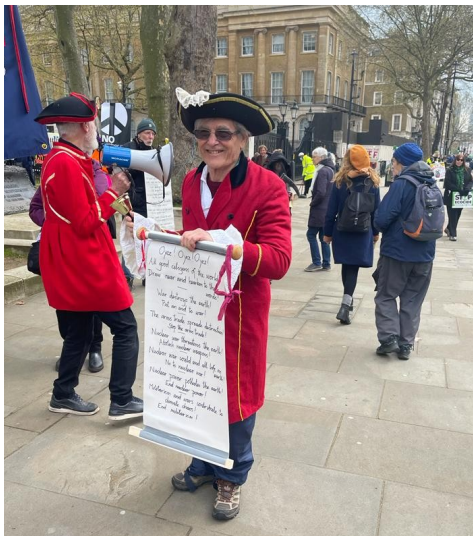
One of our supporters, who had generously decided to provide cooked food for our picket, said, *'I did enjoy the days in front of MOD, to me **never** Ministry of Defence, but Ministry of Death or Destruction'*. Although the MoD was rather a long way from all the other picketed Government Department offices that were mainly

south of Parliament Square, quite a few of us visited these other sites to make connections and offer workshops making the military connections. For example, a couple of us ran a workshop at the Home Office[1] exploring its increasingly militarised and inhumane border control system and the large numbers of arms companies involved in servicing the Hostile Environment. Others went to the Centre for Policy Studies in Tufton Street to present as letter[2].



On Friday 21st April and Monday 24th April both entrances into the huge Ministry of Defence building (where over 3,000 people work) were picketed. Different XR Peace folk gave out leaflets and the especially popular 'All the Arms you Need' badges showing 2 people hugging each other. There were usually at least 5 or 6 people at both entrances. The vast majority of our supporters were on the grass outside the MoD building on the Whitehall side talking to the general public passing by and engaging in the workshops and listening to speeches. Although most of the workers scurried into their offices ignoring us completely, some did take leaflets and it got better as the days went by. On the Monday one person entering the building told the picketers that our presence had resulted in big discussions going on inside the building!

Several times XR Peace supporters progressed around the MoD building and along Whitehall with a fully outfitted Town Crier with bell who called out the warmongers with an effective chant and response:



Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!
All good citizens of the world
Draw near and hearken to these words!
War destroys the earth!
Put an end to war!
The arms trade spreads destruction!
Stop the arms trade!
Nuclear war threatens the earth!
Abolish nuclear weapons!
Nuclear war could end all life on earth!
No to nuclear war!
Nuclear power pollutes the earth!
End nuclear power!
Militarism and wars contribute to climate chaos!
End militarism!

The passing public enjoyed the spectacle and some then went to listen to the speeches.



1 https://xrpeace.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Workshop-agenda-for-The-Home-Office-given-by-Angie-Rolly-on-21stApril23.docx

2 https://xrpeace.org/2023/04/17/letter-to-centre-for-policy-studies-london/

Another group took various black umbrellas each with a single letter painted on them and stood in various patterns spelling out the words NO TO NATO, NO TO WAR and DEMILITARISE 4 SECURITY. They also chanted the words which could probably be heard inside the building.[3]



6 people dressed up as yellow radioactive waste bins with masks on their faces and this also attracted interested attention. They kept appearing throughout the 4 days of activity reminding everyone of the deadly waste produced by nuclear weapons and nuclear energy. No one has found a solution for the safe disposal for the hundreds of thousands of years needed for the waste to be safe.



CND as one of the largest of the XR Peace organisations had taken responsibility for organising the speeches and workshops and these included:-

- How we achieve a world without nuclear weapons.
- Wages not Weapons: addressing the cost of living crisis
- 90 seconds to midnight: no nuclear war
- War is bad for the planet too!
- War costs us the Earth
- Lakenheath, 1st strike and climate

We were also treated to performances from XR Rhythms and the Raised Voices choir.



Many of the 200 plus organisations supporting the event marched around Whitehall, Parliament Square, Victoria St, Trafalgar Square etc passing the many pickets of government departments, gathering people as they went along. The Samba bands leading the way. XR Peace joined in as they passed us.

3 Videos of this action can be found on the website at https://xrpeace.org/media/

Saturday we were all free to join in the amazing, massive, colourful, biodiversity rally and march. It was huge and some of the costumes and art work were outstanding.



Some joined in as an XR Peace bloc and others joined in with their family and friends or with their specialist social change organisation or their regional XR groups. Many took the opportunity of dressing up as an extinct or rare species and had downloaded the bird calls on their mobile phones which were played during the die in.





Choirs, drummers, red rebels, and dancers kept people entertained and it was a time to celebrate our strength together with thousands of other people all determined to save what was left of the incredible diversity of life left on our fragile planet.



There were so many people in and around Parliament Square that many people were not able to move far on the long march before the die in started. But when the signal came we all took part, lying in the roads and on the pavements wherever we were, however far from Parliament Square.

One supporter wrote in to say, *"I think one great thing about this event is the possibility that it acted in the way an ecosystem builds – creating thousands of tiny little links between people and organisations as species build links with other species until they collectively become a whole ecosystem, where thousands of species live their different lives in interdependence with each other, collectively helping to create something bigger than any of them – a forest, a society. It's what we need – ecosystems of action where people play different yet complementary roles and ideally start to govern themselves without all this political parties nonsense. It's empowering. Given the right circumstances a group of ordinary folk will come up with much better policies than any government…"*

Later on Saturday afternoon there was a large march of maybe 40,000 people to the Home Office to express our outrage at their inhumane and illegal systems denying the rights of asylum seekers and not providing them safe and legal routes to join their families in the UK nor to a fair processing system for them to gain refugee status.





Letters to our MPs on pink A4 pages were folded into origami boats and floated in a moat outside the Home Office while people from diverse backgrounds spoke about the horrifying conditions the UK were imposing on people fleeing terror and war.



Sunday was a day when we joined the London Marathon spectators to show our support for the many charities they were raising funds for and to show our banners and hand out leaflets explaining why we were in London for the 4 days.

Many of the supporting organisations kept their information stalls open around the Houses of Parliament so there was plenty to occupy ourselves with and another opportunity to make connections with each other.



Monday, we continued the picketing of the MoD in the morning.

We then moved to the corner of Parliament Square and Westminster Bridge Rd putting up our banners and engaging with the public.





We joined yet another march around Westminster united with other groups.

This was our day to engage with MPs and the Houses of Parliament. Some went to meet their MPs. They had written letters to their MPs[4] asking for a meeting and some actually got a positive response! Most did not – our politicians do not want to engage with climate change and the changes they should be making. Others planned to meet their MPs at their constituency offices back home.

At 3pm a group of people also delivered letters to 10 Downing Street and the Westminster Parliament. Addressed to the Prime Minister and the Speakers of both Houses of Parliament, these XR Peace Council letters expressed our shared concerns and called on the government and MPs to implement practical steps to support urgent climate action, disarmament and peace-building.[5] At around 4pm one person from XR Peace made a short speech from the main stage about why war causes climate change.[6]

Heavy rain around 5pm stopped the plans for a large holding of hands surrounding Parliament and drove us all home, exhausted but satisfied that we had done our best over the 4 days. We are now all pondering what we can do next to not only keep the pressure on our elected Parliamentarians but to create the changes we need in our own home areas.

Things we learnt from members feedback included:-

An initial meeting with as many supporters as possible the first morning would have been useful so we knew what each group had planned and could join in where appropriate. This could have included a quick session on how to maximise the effect of our picket. For instance, one person suggested that "*we need to be encouraged to make eye contact, even if there's little response!"* Also, "*having one or two strap lines which, whilst not being aggressive, command attention. Instead of "Would you like to take a leaflet?", to which the answer was often "No thank you", it might be effective to think of more open-ended things to say instead."* This person held out a leaflet whilst saying *"For our survival"* which she found more successful.

The accommodation support for people needing it was very good and the venues are happy to host us again.

Our internal communications need more work and perhaps a dedicated person to make sure everybody has the latest information. But there was a problem with too many messages for some of the main organisers to keep on top of!

There was very little press coverage, which most people felt was due to our being so obviously peaceful and non-arrestable. If there had been any violence there would have been coverage, but of the wrong kind. Nevertheless we made the most of alternative and social media and some people engaged with their local press. It was important to get thousands out including families and is the start of more joint events and was very worth while.

Around 300 people who could not join us from Scotland held their own event when they got home.

We want to meet and plan more regularly for joint actions. The next actions highlighted for support include:- 20th May - Lakenheath demo and the September DSEI actions.

---

4 https://xrpeace.org/2023/04/17/draft-letter-to-your-mp-for-the-big-one/

5 https://xrpeace.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/XRPeace-letter-to-PM-Govt-April2023.pdf https://xrpeace.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/XRPeace-letter-to-Speaker-HoCommons-April2023.pdf https://xrpeace.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/XRPeace-letter-to-Speaker-HoL-April2023.pdf

6 https://xrpeace.org/2023/05/09/why-war-causes-climate-change-and-climate-change-causes-war/