

Militant Eco-action

Flat Oak Society

1996

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The following is an article sent to us by Andy, an ecological activist involved with the Flat Oak Society, a direct-action orientated environmentalist group based in Kent. We are publishing it as we feel it opens up some interesting debates on the nature of the present activist green movement, particularly those around opposition to road building. We welcome comment from our readers.

The direct action environmental movement in the UK has got its act together. Growing from being small isolated groups protesting against road schemes and mining operations, with their only goal being to cost the companies responsible as much as possible, now there is talk of real opportunities for damaging schemes to be stopped.

Earth First!'s recent Whatley Quarry action was well organised, planned and executed. £250,000 of criminal damage was reported to have been done and twenty metres of railway track 'disappeared'; the control panel for video monitoring of the plant fell apart and a 2 story crane pulled itself to bits; 3 control rooms dismantled themselves and several diggers and conveyor belts 'broke down'¹. Newbury has been an inspiration with direct action stopping security getting to work. Thames Valley Police have estimated the policing costs of the whole protest may be £12,000,000! Protests at the Thanet Way have cost the council about £8,000,000; 1.3 million on fencing; 3 million on security and approximately 4 million on delayed work. The last eighteen months have seen the three largest post-World War Two evictions, at Claremont Road, Stanworth Valley and Brigghenlys. The arguments being put forward by the anti-roads movement (in particular) are very encouraging. Gone are the arguments that you shouldn't put this road here simply because it will destroy beautiful countryside. Along with this attitude was a deep-rooted 'cosmic' consciousness; Mother Earth would avenge herself on the earth-rapists, even going so far as to striking down chainsaw operators at Twyford Down! Nice idea though... Now roads have been put in a social context. Claremont Road was a reclaimed, car-free zone, room to show what a radically changed world might be like. Reclaim The Streets have continued this message, with their enormously successful Street Parties. Selar and Brynhellys' success was because of strong local support. They only had this level of support because the open-cast mines were criticised in the context of deep-mine closures as well as environmental destruction.

To a certain extent this shift in attitude is a response to the state's attacks on the movement. With increasing arrests and prison sentences since the Criminal Justice Act was passed, eco-activists have been forced to question the whole system. There is a growing awareness that it is Capitalism's nature to pollute and destroy the environment. For a long time the police were seen to be really 'impartial keepers of the peace'. This is being replaced with open hostility and defiance of the law. When people were arrested at Whatley Quarry and in Glastonbury at the Survival of the Tribes² activists attempted to block the police vans and sabotaged their vehicles.

¹ EF! Action Update. NO 23, December 1995. Available from Action Update PO Box 7, Cardiff, CF2 4XX, send a SAE.

² Survival of the Tribes was a gathering and meeting of environmental protesters in September 1995. The local cops were spoiling for a fight, as were the local beer boys. Hassle started on the high street between protesters, cops and the local heavies. Seven people were arrested, so everyone sat down in front of the cop van and the cops started getting heavy. More people sat down, including shoppers and their kids. The Bristol riot cops were then called in.

Single Issue

Environmental concern is no longer seen as a single issue. To many activists in the eco-action movement 'the environment' now means man's (sic) environment as well as saving the natural world. Earth First! UK have adopted a more social analysis, organising around the Job Seekers Allowance and prisoner support, particularly MOVE prisoners in the USA. The Earth Liberation Front's annual Earth Nights in October calls for economic sabotage to all environmentally damaging projects, fascists and oppressive employers and institutions. The Earth Liberation Prisoners Support Group is "an International network for prisoners of conscience, be they fighting for Earth, Human or Animal Liberation, those basically are attempting to save the planet from self-destruction". The ELP editorial sets out a very good analysis, "we at ELP believe that we all have a common enemy, i.e. multinationals, big business, state control,; fascism, call it what you will, each wants power, and pursues this selfish interest to the detriment of others"³.

But with the rise of support and success of the movement came the predictable political leeches. For once it was not Militant or the SWP who tried to hijack the protests, but liberal green groups like FOE, Greenpeace and the Green Party. When Twyford Down was being defended Friends of the Earth (FOE) said they could not support breaking the law and condemned the protesters. Now they are throwing money and support at Newbury. While many of their members are genuinely supportive and involved in the campaigns, it is hard not to be cynical about their change of attitude. Was the growing support for EF! draining FOE's membership and therefore income?

Greenpeace have always been about a team of hand-picked (and paid!) activists doing daring actions. Individual members are expected to pay their dues, turn up to a few media friendly stunts and organise fund-raising. They are not allowed to campaign on any issues except for official Greenpeace ones, such as their blatantly xenophobic 'NON!' campaign against French nuclear testing.

Recently a meeting was held between FOE, Greenpeace and leading members of Road Alert!, EF! and Reclaim The Streets. It was agreed that Greenpeace and FOE would help and support the other groups more in the future. While this may be seen as those groups going 'soft', none of the people involved in the meetings are 'leaders' of any groups. The loose network nature of EF! etc. means that it contains a whole range of opinions, from reformist to revolutionary. So these meetings only indicate the opinions of the individuals involved. Most of the activists neither sanctioned or agreed with any part of it.

Prejudice

Unfortunately there are too few people prepared to get involved in environmental actions and offer a class based revolutionary analysis of society to counter FOE etc. There is a lot of prejudice on the anarchist 'side' against environmental activists. They sneer at what they see as 'fluffy' actions and tactics, when if they talked to those involved, they would find a surprising level of militancy⁴. Not all anti-roads protesters are drum-banging, stoned hippies, this is 'just' one of

³ Earth Liberation Prisoners, Spring 1995. Contact ELP c/o Box 23, % High Street, Glastonbury, Somerset.

⁴ There has been loads of controversy in the anarchist press about 'Keep it Fluffy' leaflet distributed at an anti-CJA demonstration. The leaflet was the work of one individual and distributed by the Freedom Network, only due to them being (in part) a distribution group. Anyone could have easily put out a 'Keep it Spiky' leaflet through them! Too much time and energy has been wasted arguing about this and other pathetic issues. It would be far more

the media images of them (mainly the liberal media i.e. Guardian, Independent), and anarchists fall for this bullshit! It is nearly always the working-class who suffer most from environmental destruction, so why aren't we organising around these issues? A lot of radical 'eco-activists' show interest when offered a coherent analysis of capitalism and the class system. But we are in danger of losing ground to the ideas of FOE and Greenpeace. Get out there, get involved, get talking to people and spreading anarchist ideas. A huge breach has appeared in capitalism's armour due to EF! and others, we must exploit this weakness and use it to attack capitalism further.

productive and much less damaging to just treat this leaflet with contempt and put energy into something more useful.

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Retrieved on May 13, 2013 from web.archive.org
Published by the Anarchist Communist Federation in *Organise!* Issue 42 – Spring 1996.

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