

# “Workin’ on the Railroad”

Give Chance a Piece

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1988

SAN FRANCISCO — On September 5, 1987, an event occurred which may signal a breakthrough for the North American anti-war movement. Forty yards of railroad track and ties serving the Concord Naval Weapons Station (CNWS) in Port Chicago, were torn up by hundreds of protesters during and after a rally at Clyde Park, adjacent to the CNWS.

The rally had been called in response to the callous maiming of ex-Air Force captain and anti-war pacifist Brian Willson, who was run over the previous Tuesday by a munitions train as he sat on the tracks to protest the shipment of munitions to war zones in Central America,

## Let’s Talk About Your Bombs

The CNWS is the only West Coast munitions trans-shipment point. Kathy Bodovitz, reporting in the S.F. *Chronicle*, writes that as of now in “peacetime,” roughly 100,000 tons of munitions arrive by train and truck and leave by ship each year. During the worst of the U.S. war against Viet Nam, 100,000 tons of munitions would leave the facility per month!

Missiles and bombs of all kinds pass through here (and are selectively tested) before being sent on for use in war situations. Today, about 80% of the munitions arrive by truck, the rest by train. There are about 100 miles of track within the boundaries of the CNWS, with a brief 200 yards of it passing over county-controlled property and the Port Chicago Highway. That short stretch of track was plenty, as it turned out.

## Another Liberal Rally?

I had come with a few friends, fully expecting to be bored to tears and depressed at the sights and sounds of crowds excited by the speechifying of the likes of Daniel Ellsberg, Jesse Jackson and Joan Baez. Nevertheless we decided we could go, meet with friends, express some sympathy for Willson and some more disgust with the military, and find out what’s what. There were rumors...

The fact was that a number of people—anarchists, workers, veterans, homeless people, commies, students and community activists (or any combination thereof)—had come prepared with tools and/or the willingness to attempt to dismantle the tracks on county property. At about 1:30 pm, a meeting was convened outside the rally site to discuss and co-ordinate the direct anti-war action.

The liberal-pacifist organizers of the rally, Nuremburg Actions, were informed of the preparations and immediately sent a few leaders over to insist that our “violent” action not take place. One of the rally organizers wishing to see the action blocked was Holly Rauen, who had just gone through the trauma of seeing her husband, Brian

Willson, run down and nearly killed. We would be “disrespecting” Willson and displaying callous disregard for his victimization and loss of his legs if we tore up tracks upon which he had been injured, she said. Fortunately, his suffering on the tracks did matter and was one intense reason why many people decided to tear up the tracks—whether he agreed or not.

For the ideologues of “non-violence,” the property of the war economy is apparently only to be destroyed by using it against the government’s targeted victims. The “non-violent revolutionaries” argued that the destruction of property was “violent” and therefore counter to pacifist principles proscribing all forms of violence. Responses addressed the fact that far from being violent, destruction of this property is a real defense of life—is actually anti-violence, in stopping violence against others.

The pacifists then announced that since they had called the rally, and did not want the action to take place, it should not take place. People replied that demos are not commodities owned by any group. We were also told that we would “provoke” Police attacks on “defenseless children,” even though the action was physically quite separate from the rally and people had been informed and could avoid involvement. It always seems strange that the pacifists make the argument that we somehow provoke the real violence-prone cops and bosses to commit violence against us. Why aren’t the pacifists ever arguing with the police against their own real use of violence?

## **Surprise, Surprise, Surprise!**

As Jesse Jackson was halfway through his preach, a group of ten people, shielded by a few dozen more, constructed a plywood death-train on a section of rails near where Willson had been hit. Soon, following Jackson’s speech—which people seem naturally to assume is the end of a rally—hundreds of people came to discover the goings-on and spontaneously joined in on this pragmatic anti-war action.

During the next three hours, over a thousand folks of all ages, shapes, colors and sizes cheered in support, brought food and drink, sang songs and played music (“I’ve been Workin’ On the Railroad,” for one) and/or uprooted rail spikes, unbolted tracks and plates, removed the rails, dug out and removed the wooden railroad ties. One friend noted that with every announcement by the rally organizers that they had nothing to do with the tearing-up of the tracks, more people came to check it out and participate. This included some calling themselves pacifists.

By 5:30 pm, perhaps two dozen sections of track, 40 or so railroad ties and dozens and dozens of bolts and plates had been stacked or scattered around the demolition site. A 40-yard section of the railroad which carries munitions was dismantled and made impassable.

The whole scene seemed almost impossible, but many factors were involved, not the least of which was the determined and catalysing presence of the small number of people who had prepared for this action beforehand. This fact is, of course, the basis for the claim by Nuremburg Actions, cops and most of the media that the rail-action was “the work of a radical fringe.” Clearly, it was not.

What was the work of that “radical fringe” was the willingness to act and to do so in ways and with means and for goals which are empowering, practical and anti-authoritarian.

Nobody really had to ask, and certainly not cajole, others to participate. People would ask, “What are you doing?,” and hear an answer like, “The tracks are used by trains that carry munitions to be used by servants under the command of dictators against exploited people; the trains have not been stopped by prayer, silent vigils, symbolic opposition or even physical self-sacrifice.” Then they might exclaim, “Oh yeah! Let’s remove the tracks!”

## **Stop That Train**

Throughout the afternoon there was the nagging fear of attack by the surrounding “peace officers.” Their occasional troop movements sent many of us scattering, only to regroup. Perhaps the most ridiculous part of the day was efforts by several pacifists to play morality cops by sitting on top of rails being removed, so as to “stop the violence.”

Otherwise, the afternoon sailed by as a sometimes uproarious celebration. The free cooperation, the sharing of expertise, elbow-grease and extra effort was infused with a positively libertine and libertarian good spirit. In a pleasant, if very brief way, we made anarchy in action, the very opposite of chaos: no promulgation of compulsions, no pay, no bosses, no slaves, because it was really something we wanted to do and that needed to be done.

Some people probably never felt so good and excited about getting sweaty and dirty for free.

On the other hand, we were lucky. The decision of the cops and marines not to move in and disperse the action appears to have had two main reasons.

First was their undoubted surprise at the action itself and the quick, willing and happy participation by hundreds of people. They could have broken it up, regardless, but they did not seem to have the people available to interfere successfully without a high degree of brute force, both because of our numbers and because they were aware we would resist.

They would have moved into a large crowd holding crowbars, tire-irons, hammers and lots of metal bolts, only having first struggled through the encircling supporters. In fact, at one point protesters—most of them in wheelchairs—blockaded and forced back a line of California Highway Patrol cruisers whose drivers were trying to come down and interrupt the “work site.”

Second, the unhappy victimization of Willson, which was largely responsible for drawing 5,000–6,000 people to the rally, along with the significant national media presence, seems to have further counterbalanced the urge of Contra Costa County and the Navy to “defend property.”

## **Tomorrow Never Knows**

It is not likely that there will be many opportunities to derail the U.S. war machine in so public and festive circumstances again. In the days following September 5<sup>th</sup>, the loss of the rail-line brought increased hauling by trucks, which were protested by Nuremburg Actions from behind walls of Marines on either side of the roadway. One report told how the protesters appreciated the courtesy of the Marines who were out there “for the protection of the protesters.”

On September 10, five days after our work, wage slaves had reconstructed the torn-up section of railroad at a cost of something like \$10,000.

If sabotage of the military’s infrastructure is to continue, it will for now necessarily continue as more or less clandestine action. Anti-war sabotage of military property is on-going in Europe, especially West Germany, for many years now. In this they have reclaimed an element of past radical working class and anarchist struggle. (An example of this largely unknown history can be seen in the article “John Olday, Artist and Fighter for Social Revolution,” in the *Angry Workers Bulletin* no. 2, c/o 2140 Shattuck Ave., PO Box 2200 Berkeley CA 94704.)

In the U.S., this perspective on sabotage is shared already by some activists. On the day after Willson was hit, for example, some men at a protest rally broke into and messed up the ROTC’s Callaghan Hall on the UC Berkeley campus. Similarly, a week earlier, a group of women stormed into and trashed the armed forces recruiting office near downtown Oakland, leaving before the cops got there. Without a doubt, the idea of anti-war direct action in the States has been provided impetus by the laudable use of anti-property sabotage tactics by people connected with animal rights and eco-defense groups.

For us, anti-property sabotage is, nonetheless, essentially defensive, a delaying tactic, no matter how disruptive to the uses of the particular physical structures. Its relationship to constructive anti-capitalist social alternatives to this system of violence and exploitation is implied, but only implied.

That does not make sabotage any less legitimate. Sabotage is a rational response to the facts and relationships of the present oppressive situation. What is demanded, however, are real resolutions of the underlying interrelated dilemmas of oppressive, unequal social relationships and neurotic, repressive psychic patterns. The vitality of anti-war direct action is only dissipated if we subjugate ourselves to conventional reformist and single-issue politics.

War against aboriginal, non-capitalist and working class peoples; statist militarization and war between competing powers are unavoidable and fundamental to the successful continuity of authoritarian, particularly crisis-ridden capitalist civilizations. Sensible and constructive fulfillment of the intent of anti-war sabotage subsists in

the creation of, and advocacy for non-authoritarian forms of social self-organization, the purpose being consequential mutual aid and direct social action against domination in every facet of our lives. We initiate the passage to libertarian, communistic and ecological society together for each of us. That is the single issue, whatever our special and decisive personal interests may move us to emphasize.

—anonymous euonymous, Berkeley CA

## **TO STOP A TRAIN**

1. Track removal is only one element in the total strategy to interfere with the flow of weapons and obstruct U.S. military intervention in Central America (and elsewhere).

2. The more tracks removed the better.

3. The more people who participate the merrier:

4. We should respond to those who disagree with this tactic in a friendly and open manner, while our comrades continue to dismantle the track.

5. This demo belongs to no one group: our movement is strengthened by diversity of actions, and by our respect for those differences.

6. We are here to continue the work in which we have all been involved, and to which Brian Willson gave part of his body, and the people of Central America their lives.

## **Technical Aspects of Track Removal**

1. The spikes on the side of the tracks need to be pulled up. Try any and all implements, use whatever works. (Sometimes by hitting the top of the spike it can be loosened.)

2. The bolts joining one track to another need to be unscrewed. They are often rusted, and may need to be lubricated, a little oil or liquid wrench may help. Large pipe wrenches (with pipe extenders) probably work best. It may take some real muscle.

3. Remove the track. It takes about 30 people to pick them up. Question: where should we put them? Can they be permanently ruined? Perhaps sledge hammers, and then placed on the barbed wire or fences.

4. Remove wooden railway ties—crowbars, etc. and very important

5. Transform railroad beds so that they can't just put tracks back—shovels, hands, etc.

What next??? 1) keep removing track behind fence going along road. 2) remove barbed wire and march on base???

Stay calm and collective, be cool, respect diversity...Tear up the tracks —stop the war!!!

—from a flyer distributed at the action

## **TRAIN CREW SUES VICTIM**

In a legal move perhaps unprecedented for its callousness, the civilian train crew who ran over Vietnam vet Brian Willson on Sept. 1 have sued their victim for damages due to the mental anguish they incurred. Besides his legs being severed below the knee, Willson also incurred a fractured skull and extensive abrasions when he failed to escape the train exiting the Concord Naval Weapons Station at an excessive rate of speed.

Willson, in turn, has filed a civil rights suit against the Navy and the train crew after receiving evidence from a county sheriff's office which stated the base commander knew that the demonstrators would be on the tracks and ordered the train crew not to stop for them.

The Navy claims the train was moving at the legal speed of five miles per hour, but Willson and other observers state that it actually sped up to triple that as it approached those on the tracks. Also, the train crew could clearly see where the demonstrators were situated since they had a large banner stretched across the tracks and were visible for at least 500 feet.

Willson's suit charges that the train was purposely driven at the demonstrators to discourage protests at the base which is a major disembarkment point for weapons bound for U.S. client states in Central America.

# fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/328-spring-1988/workin-on-the-railroad>  
Fifth Estate #328, Spring, 1988

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