

May Protests in Detroit

Stopping the Incinerator, Starting the Movement

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1988

After months of intense organizing, Detroit's Evergreen Alliance carried off a four-day "Mobilization to Save the Great Lakes," May 13–16, centered around opposition to the world's largest trash incinerator scheduled to open in May 1989.

Activities included 19 arrests for civil disobedience, a mass march and two educational forums, all of which brought public and participant attention to the ecological crisis facing the Great Lakes region as the quality of air, water and land continues to be in severe jeopardy.

The Detroit incinerator, if allowed to open, intends to burn 4000 tons of garbage a day, which will produce an enormous quantity of airborne pollutants, toxic ash, and the invidious message that this society can continue producing an immense mountain of junk without consequence.

As one could imagine, it was the direct action events of the Mobilization which stand out most vividly in memory. The Saturday, May 14 march kicked off from the now-closed Chene-Ferry market with about 400 persons in attendance and headed off toward the incinerator construction site two blocks away.

It was a colorful parade led by banners, two 16-foot high model birds with movable wings, and a Council of All Beings—masked and costumed people, representing those species unable to attend but still threatened by industrial and chemical pollution. All of the events had been in preparation for months and the effect on the marchers, some for whom this was their first demonstration, was the clear message that the state could be opposed, and the isolation of individuals as powerless fragments could be overcome.

One person active in the planning, described the march as a "religious experience," indicating how profoundly the mere act of collective protest had affected some of the participants. There was a joyous solidarity present punctuated by drum beats and chants that reverberated through the almost completed incinerator structure as we passed by. For a moment it seemed that our commitment to the planet had something of a chance to overcome the fire-breathing monster that loomed above us.

Cops and Trees

The march was accompanied by a police contingent so out of proportion to the issue at hand and the numbers in attendance that no one knew what to expect. We have long suspected that the official paranoia about the Evergreen Alliance emanating from the Mayor's office stems from the ecology group's close connection with Greenpeace and the Fifth Estate.

However, the only point of confrontation was quickly passed over when the police backed down from trying to stop marchers from planting a tree on the lawn of a privately rented community center. Hysterical city officials had gotten wind of the plans for the symbolic planting as a counterweight to the destructiveness of the incinerator and pressured the building owners to forbid the action. 11 cops surrounded the house to prevent us from even reaching

the lot, but bur resolve to do so won the day and the tree was quickly planted and the demonstration proceeded on to a rally at the local university.

The following Monday, May 16, we returned to the incinerator at 6:00 am for the planned civil disobedience. We had received a report that the construction workers were mobilizing to “kick our asses,” so a leaflet was hurriedly prepared explaining the dangers of the project they were working on and that the enemy was the City and the system of production and waste. The leaflets were accepted coolly by the sleepy workers arriving for the morning shift, but their alleged threats never materialized and instead the succeeding events became a way for them to break up their daily routine by standing around gawking as the scene unfolded.

About 125 demonstrators braved the early hours to support those who had chosen to blockade the plant and when the 19 ran across the street and sat down in the wet, muddy entrance, a resounding cheer came up from the picketers. The police executed a quick, fairly restrained arrest of the 19 amid sustained singing and calls of support from across the street. The picket line followed the cops and their captives downtown to the jail/courthouse, quickly reassembled and continued demonstrating until all those arrested were released several hours later with an impending court date this Fall.

Those involved in discussing the planning of the action had debated the act of non-violent civil disobedience with its implications of passively delivering oneself into the power of the state, and those questions remain open ones. Still, there was something about the power of the act that transcended all of those political and tactical questions. There was a palpable radiance to each of our friends as they were carted off to the waiting police bus that seemed more important than all of the theoretical considerations.

Their firm announcement with their bodies that they loved the planet and hated the system which was destroying it made a simple sit-in into a moving experience for all of us. Images of mobile street battles with the cops seem more exciting and militant, and may make sense in some circumstances, but what happened that day was just right.

From the Beginning

The first event of the four days of protest occurred on Friday, May 13 at Wayne State University, where 150 people turned out to hear talks by *Kick It Over* writer and eco-feminist, Jennifer Sells and Paul Connett, a nationally recognized expert on trash disposal and opponent of incineration.

One of the concerns about the weekend felt by those of us connected with the *Fifth Estate* was that it carry a perspective beyond just a single-issue reform. We attempted wherever possible to have events reflect the view that the incinerator is not a “mistake,” but rather that it is emblematic of the whole system of industrial capitalism. Imbedded in the waste crisis, and the attempt to buy out of it with another techno-fix, is capitalism’s work pyramid, its infernal machine of relentless production, its non-disposable, unrecyclable waste, and the hierarchical state apparatus which protects it all.

Sells’ talk illustrated parts of this perspective in her criticism of liberal and marxist feminists who, she said, “do not challenge the hierarchical structures which are inherent in the establishment of any state, nor do they challenge an economic development model which sees the natural world as mere raw material for satisfying human needs.”

“In trying to change women’s position vis-a-vis men,” she continued, “there has been a tendency to focus on entrenched male privilege or the need for institutional change, important though these are, while ignoring underlying hierarchical and anti-nature attitudes.” (The full text of Sells’ remarks are in the current *Kick It Over*).

Following Sells’ remarks, Connett spoke eloquently, if only specifically, about the waste disposal crisis facing this society as he also did the next day at the demonstration rally. It was with his remarks that some of the problems began to arise, but more on this later.

The Sunday conference was the only real disappointment of the long weekend, with scant attendance for a series of presentations from a *Fifth Estate* staff member, a native american from Walpole Island, and representatives from Greenpeace and the Audubon Society.

A Community of Resistance

Overall, the actions in May had a positive effect on the movement to inform people about the dangers of the incinerator and the perilous point at which the Great Lakes' ecology hovers. It also helped foster a radical, anti-industrial perspective among a growing community of resistance centered in Detroit's Cass Corridor district.

Still, in my estimation, the actions were not without problems, and ones which should be discussed thoroughly. Those of us who produce the *Fifth Estate* and other radicals in our community diverted a great amount of time and energy to the Evergreen Alliance, and a self-critique is necessary, both for our own evaluation and for other anti-authoritarians who may undertake similar projects.

Throughout all of the activities under discussion, it seemed that those of us who constituted the radical core of the group were acutely aware of the political differences which existed between us and the many newer people whose sole concern was the incinerator and who had fairly conventional ideas of how to stop it, i.e., media, lobbying, electoral activities, etc.

We were extremely anxious not to function or even to be conceived of as traditional leftists trying to manipulate a reform effort around a hidden, radical agenda. On the other hand, we made no attempt to hide our radical ideas from the group and sought to insert them where we thought appropriate, but always working in such a manner so as not to dominate the setting or make others uncomfortable with our views.

However, this meant that the overall politics of the group reflected those of the more numerous, less radical people involved and the organization took on the political character of a single-issue reform group, but with the radicals being central to much of the planning and staffing of the organizing efforts. In order to work successfully with others, a fuller critique of industrialism and capitalism fell by the wayside and we often wound up in the unenviable position of carrying out tasks, being in roles, and advocating positions we had previously polemicized against. (A small, but to me, not insignificant example is how, during the march, the old chant of "5,6,7,8; organize and smash the state," had its rhyming couplet changed to say, "recycle, don't incinerate.")

Also, the form of the Mobilization was problematic in itself. A large, amorphous coalition such as the Evergreen Alliance which involved people of differing levels of political understanding, commitment and skills creates almost the necessity for hierarchical administration, and one quickly consolidated around those from the radical core, and existed right through to the end of the events.

This leadership structure was recognized as such by all of those who attended the weekly planning and work sessions, with the only disapproval of it coming from those who had an anti-authoritarian critique to begin with. The others saw such a hierarchy as a necessity and the normal way in which such affairs are handled. Leaders were seen as necessary to negotiate with the police, contact the media, do fund raising and to make quick and final decisions while coordinating a massive undertaking. When this style of leadership was combined with an incredible schedule of work and meetings in preparation for the events, it all began to take on a character we had previously identified with the leftist milieu.

Part of the problem was structural: an equality of relationships such as those striven for on small projects such as this newspaper become impossible within the context of a large, political body. Within the Fifth Estate collective we've been trying to work on the process of decision making, struggling to overcome the hierarchies of sex, age and experience, and although flawed and never seemingly satisfactorily completed, it remains as one of our goals. This process is never at issue in groups like the Evergreen Alliance since it has only an external political goal and probably is too large and mediated a structure to even come to grips with the problem.

As the weeks proceeded it became clear that our organizing efforts were hitting a responsive chord in the community immediately adjacent to the incinerator site and within the larger ecology milieu. This widespread acceptance of our message almost assured that our radical views would be severely reduced in favor of ones of liberal reform. We had effectively arrived at a position critiqued in these pages in June of 1982 following an anti-nuke conference we had organized.

Bob Brubaker, in an article entitled "Anti-Anti-Nuke," talked about the necessity of raising "questions of fundamental importance regarding the miserable lives we are forced to lead in capitalist commodity society." He continued, "To me, a movement that criticizes daily life without ever mentioning nuclear weapons is far more profound than a movement which criticizes nuclear weapons without ever mentioning daily life."

Our anti-nuke efforts were perhaps better than Bob makes out as were our efforts in our organizing around ecology issues, but his reproach had an accurate ring to it as we continued. As we went around to churches, universities, and community groups, often dressed in suits and ties, seeking endorsements and donations, no mention was ever made of an overall anti-industrial, anti-capitalist perspective which normally animates our conversations.

To our audience, we were probably just good-hearted ecologists doing the yeoman's work of stopping pollution so daily life could continue unabated and unchallenged. It's doubtful that if they had viewed us as implacable opponents of this entire system—its political machine, its economy, and its culture—we would have seen such support forthcoming from them as we did.

As it turned out, the formal, liberal endorsements we obtained didn't amount to much. We had estimated, from the level of pre-march support, that we would have between 1,000 and 2,000 people at our Saturday demonstration. It was a shock to several of us to see only one-fifth of the high number attending when we had received endorsements from as far away as Ohio and Wisconsin and had launched an extensive publicity and media campaign. Why did so many stay at home? In part, it seems as though we experienced the "Greenpeace phenomenon"—people feel deeply about the ecological crisis, even angry, but wind up paying a core of militant activists to do the actual "job" of defending the planet.

After seeing the results of the weekend, it seems to me that we could have had much more overtly radical actions with less compromise to our beliefs and still had almost the same number of people in attendance.

On the other hand, this is not to say that a totally liberal and reform approach prevailed at all times and nary a word of radicalism even uttered. Most participants in the Evergreen Alliance knew that radicals were at the center of things and we often had an important impact on the political direction of the group or functioned to head off some of the worst suggestions for tactics, i.e., inviting politicians to speak, initiating referendums, etc.

The Mobilization Call to Action was written by us as were the radical critiques in the anti-incinerator tabloid which was produced (still available by the way). Also, George Bradford from the Fifth Estate staff, spoke forcefully for an anti-industrial, anti-civilization point of view on several occasions before and during the weekend, and was seen by many as the main spokesperson for the Alliance.

Undoubtedly, people were affected by our statements, articles and speeches and much of our radical critique was taken as eloquent and even accurate, but it probably seemed unrealistic when it came to achieving the immediate goal of stopping the incinerator. Also, what we did, in terms of acting out the dominant mode of politics, reinforced the notion of practical, that is, reformist solutions.

For instance, one man, who seemed particularly moved by a talk of Bradford's linking the degradation of the environment of the Great Lakes with the destruction of the Central American rainforests by the same world system of capital, was the first to leap from his seat at a subsequent meeting to suggest we should all contact "our" legislators. This illustrated a sense that our remarks appeared as beautiful, but unattainable and that was reinforced by the fact that we were administering an effort which included numerous other speakers who proposed nuts and bolts solutions.

Almost all of the other speakers besides Sells, Bradford and the native american accepted the contours of this society as they exist. Connett, the waste disposal expert, assured us at every turn that if we would only employ proper waste disposal procedures, the current levels of production and consumption could easily be maintained and that recycling would even create jobs. He was roundly cheered as were the other advocates of recycling throughout the weekend. Whoopee! We bust our butts for five months and spend hundreds of dollars to fly in a guy who advocates work and everything else we've been denouncing for the last 13 years.

Confrontation With The State

So, was it a worthless undertaking and is it all bleakness? Happily, and perhaps surprisingly, I'd say, not at all. There is a radicalization afoot in the land, and here in Detroit, it took form through the Great Lakes Mobilization. Maybe it didn't have as militant a character as the building of street barricades by anti-authoritarians in Minneapolis, but it was part of the same spirit.

To many of the participants, particularly the younger ones, the effort against the incinerator is a radical issue of confrontation with the state and part of their passionate desire to defend the planet. And, they're right; that's exactly what is at issue, and we should let the spirit which prevailed at the march and the sit-in be what guides further actions. At the same time though, a clear understanding of what social and political forces control this single abuse of a decaying system needs to be kept in the foreground of our consciousness.

All reforms have as their function the affirmation and extension of the dominant culture and it has had the capacity in the past of buying off even the best of militant confrontational movements. It seems to me that an anti-incinerator movement is pitifully inadequate to battle the totality of what we face. Fighting for one reform after the next, we will find it impossible to keep up with the abuses. If there is hope, it lies in forming revolutionary communities, based on anti-authoritarian precepts, which fight to defend themselves against assaults like the incinerator.

In spite of getting sucked into a bit of liberal bullshit, I don't think the radicals have much to apologize for. I think we made some mistakes, but this was our first foray into mass activity like the Evergreen Alliance and we've all learned a lot from the experience. Our radical community emerged stronger and larger than before the weekend, so we must have done some things right.

As an indication, many of those who attended the Toronto Anarchist Gathering from Detroit, whose contingent numbered about 60, also played strong roles in the anti-incinerator effort. Of the 19 arrested in the Detroit sit-in, almost all of them went to the Gathering.

The May events and the Gathering, both left us all hungering for more, so I hope people will take my remarks in the positive manner in which they were made and if they make any sense, just push on further.

Related

- Stopping the Incinerator, Starting the Movement, A Response, FE #330, Winter, 1988–89
- Evergreen 19 Beat Rap As Incinerator Fires Up, FE #330, Winter, 1988–89
- Detroit trash incinerator closing—eco-apocalypse continues, FE #404, Summer, 2019



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