

Yikes! We Shut It Down!

Detroit Burner Closes Temporarily

Mary Wildwood

1990

Sometimes we have arguments about whether it is appropriate for anarchist-types to be participating in officially sanctioned political events with double-speak names like “public hearing” held before bogus, paid-off boards with Ministry of Truth names like “Michigan Air Pollution Control Commission.” Like the one held April 17th to validate a backroom deal between the City of Detroit and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) called a “consent order,” made to allow the Detroit trash incinerator to keep burning even though they couldn’t come up with a test result that didn’t grossly violate emissions standards—standards which consider 79 deaths per million residents an acceptable risk.

But let’s not get into that now, Okay?

Some of us like to think of these public hearings as among other things forums in which to communicate our lesser heard perspectives to counter and, dig it, deconstruct the official line. Some of us were getting real proficient at voicing our opinions at the mike, even eloquent, inspiring. Some tending toward the deeply philosophical, others honing skills in political expose, brandishing pointed fingers at the money-power hungry earth-killers with specific charges of lying and corruption; some attacking sociologically, with accusations of environmental racism, some offering poetic visions of a renewed world, that even the Commission folks could be a part of, if they’d only quit their jobs. I mean the miraculous diversity of the creative human voice! Is this beautiful or what?! You should’a been there when I told them about my rash.

Anyway, there we were. It was 6:30 p.m., April 17th. We weren’t sure the Commission was listening anymore or ever had been, busy, as they were, munching chips and passing the coke can. We were hungry, tired, cranky, often waiting through testimony of people we didn’t know, didn’t really want to know and didn’t agree with, for the Commission to do what was expected and vote to accept the DNR order.

Now, maybe it was the impressive testimony of our sympathetic experts, so fluent in the language of science, or maybe our deafening chants of “Shut it down,” and persistent heckling throughout the vote had an effect.

Possibly it happened because the Earth Day hype was reaching crescendo pitch, or maybe some of the commissioners just hadn’t heard the motion right; but imagine our surprise when, on the grounds that the mercury emissions wouldn’t be effectively lowered by the phony measures listed in the shamboodie consent order, the commission voted 6–5 to shut the incinerator down.

I’m not exaggerating when I say we were taken aback. What had we done? Validated the system by using it to effect social change?! Yikes! But after four years of constantly marginalized struggle, how could we suppress our euphoria? WE SHUT IT DOWN! We were changing the world! Here, in the butthole of Western Civilization, we were spearheading a revolution of rising expectations! As soon as people had to manage their own trash, they’d realize what toxic waste this capitalist-consumerist society was force-feeding them, and all would be made clear. Suddenly the entire techno-industrial complex would come crumbling and tumbling down. We were in the news papers! We were on T.V.!

But we're not stupid. We knew it would be a matter of days, hours, before another backroom deal would be made between the City and the DNR to keep the most expensive investment project in Detroit history burning. (After all, the mayor was having a fit. He said he thought he and the commission folks had a deal, an "agreement." He said, "Somebody double-crossed somebody and I want to know who it was." In the newspapers, on T.V., he really did.)

In the meantime we held our big Earth Day demo, which turned into a New Orleans jazz band-style-mock-funeral-parade-celebration escorting a long line of homemade coffins representing the winners of the Incinerator Death Lotto.

So two weeks later, when another bogus public hearing before the Commission was held to validate the new emergency backroom deal, we were ready. This new proposed "consent order" used double-plus-good-duckspeak to authorize, basically, the incinerator's resumption of contaminating earth air and water on the condition that the incinerator authority, over a span of 7 (count 'em. seven) years, make a series of token, futile attempts to lower emissions (which, of course, even if successful, would only increase levels of toxic ash to be landfilled and leached into ground water, but that's beside the point), after which time, if the incinerator still failed its tests, another backroom deal would be negotiated.

We rounded up the experts again, readied our own personal presentations, smuggled in what signs, banners and coffins we could, and put on the definitive, comprehensive, multidimensional, anti-incinerator-cum-anti-production-consumption-based techno-industrial society performance.

Throughout 14 grueling hours, one-by-one, we demanded, admonished, accused, reasoned, explained, exposed, shouted and sang. Finally, at 12:30 a.m., after a young friend was pushed down the aisle to the mike, impersonating a 75-year-old ex-Air Pollution Control Commissioner suffering from asthma and bleeding bowels, testifying his remorse at a bad decision he'd made 25 years earlier to grant an operating permit to the infamous Detroit incinerator, we awaited the Commission's vote, exhausted, starving, bored, anxious, but still ever hopeful an unlikely seed of life might open in the wasteland of their bureaucratic hearts. Hopeful even though only two of the commissioners represented the "general public" and the other nine represented industry and local government. Hopeful, even though Earth Day was over.

Now, one positive aspect of the whole affair is that according to an informal poll conducted soon after the Commission's 9-2 vote to reopen the incinerator, only one, maybe two witnesses surveyed thought that, when we stormed the stage, chanting, "Shame! Shame!" pelting the commissioners with the closest objects available (mostly on the soft side, though it's true that one of us hurled Channel 4's mike at a particularly insidious commissioner), we were being unnecessarily rude. Most witnesses, whether they call themselves anarchists or not, thought we were being necessarily rude and inclined themselves to join in. So, maybe the world is changing around us, whether we're changing it or not.

Guilty, as some of us are, of unreasonable optimism, like I said before, we're not stupid. We were prepared for the inevitable. And to prove it, a contingent had left the hearing early and awaited the rest of us with signs, banners, tents and sleeping bags set up, and provisions for an immediate protest and all-night vigil along the brick and barbed wire wall of the incinerator, its loudspeakers echoing instructions to entering workers, and heavy trucks rumbling all night long.

In the early morning we met a shift of workers with a mobile blockade of bodies and banners at the various gates. Scuffles with police included one in which a large, armed cop holding an unarmed woman protester in a double-fisted grip, shaking, accused her of trying to intimidate him. She isn't even a witch, as far as she knows. Another cop asked where he could recycle.

Soon after, we huddled for a consensus to go home unarrested, think on these strange occurrences, sleep, and muster strength, hope and a sense of humor for the ongoing struggle.

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