

Redwood Summer

Anatomy of an Action

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1990

The Concept

Redwood Summer was modeled after the “Mississippi Summer” of the civil rights movement. The conditions were similar to those of Mississippi in 1964. African-American victims of the system needed outside intervention to advocate for them in hostile territory. In Northern California in 1990, it was Redwood ecosystems that needed help.

While the main thrust of the campaign was to be protection of biodiversity, there was an important sideline being developed by Earth First! organizer, Judi Bari; protection of local workers and their livelihoods. Overcutting the forests was laying waste to jobs along with the trees. Earth First!ers and others were beginning to recognize that long term protection of forests had to directly address the role of corporations and involve the workers in booting them out.

The Bombing

Those involved in planning Redwood Summer (RS) knew from the outset that the possibility of violence was very real. But we never could have been prepared for the total disruption caused by the May 24, 1990 bombing of Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney. These two Redwood Summer organizers were on their way to perform at a concert in Santa Cruz, Calif., when a bomb exploded in their car as they drove through Oakland. The legal and medical aftermath of this disaster absorbed more energy than we knew we had. It was amazing that, stunned as we were, organizers were able to establish a basecamp and pull off the first major action against the Louisiana-Pacific Lumber Company at their Somoa plant in Eureka, Calif., on June 21st.

Three different arraignment dates were set to charge Bari and Cherney with the bombing. Twice the state postponed the date to “gather more evidence.” Each date was preceded by copious news releases from the Oakland Police and FBI detailing the “evidence”—duct tape and nails found in Bari’s car they claim could have been used to construct the bomb. As we were learning, this type of “media trial” is a classic FBI COINTELPRO disruption.

On the third date, July 18th, the DA again did not file charges due to lack of evidence, but also did not set a new arraignment date. It is still possible that charges could be filed in the future, should the FBI somehow be able to manufacture convincing evidence.

Many feel that the backdown on the part of the DA was directly attributed to a press conference on July 16th at which a coalition of over 50 labor, environmental and social justice groups called for a congressional investigation of the bombing and the FBI’s handling of the case. Ominously, FBI’s chief dick in the bombing inquisition is Richard Held, a former COINTELPRO specialist. The May 24th bombing may be a test case for the FBI’s strategy for the

nineties. They have always used such tactics in their suppression of people of color. Will they also be able to terrorize white environmentalists with impunity?

Putting Judi Bari out of action for the summer was an immeasurable loss. Not only were her talents sorely missed, but a monumental effort to provide for her care was immediately required. For the 7 weeks she was hospitalized, a 24-hour vigil of trusted people was needed in her room, both because of the sad understaffing of publicly funded hospitals and to guard against another assassination attempt.

Judi's healing has been phenomenal. She is an immensely strong woman and she has lots of love and support. Her injuries are real and permanent, however. She may never walk again unassisted.

The Actions

As planned at a meeting the night before the bombing, Redwood Summer was to have four major mass actions directed against each of the big three timber corporations (Louisiana-Pacific, Georgia-Pacific, and Pacific Lumber/MAXXAM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). The major actions were to be punctuated by many smaller actions. As it turned out, RS was one long continuous action. Establishing base camps in logging areas meant battling public agencies like Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Forest Service, and State Lands Commission. Being at base camps meant, putting up with harassments both scary and amusing: gunshots fired into camp, and rednecks driving by and stealing our "earth flag."

There was some kind of demonstration almost every day. Actions ranged from "peaceful, legal vigils" to barricading logging roads. Those of us working at the communication offices often didn't hear of actions until afterwards (as it should be). As an action, RS was incredibly far flung in geography and time. Throughout Northern California, from Fresno to Arcata from May until September, actions were conceived by local community groups organized on a watershed basis, some hatched by affinity groups in the Bay area and elsewhere, and some born at basecamp.

Statistics about Redwood Summer are hard to put together since we had no central office and no paid staff. One estimate is that about 5,000 people came up to the North Coast to participate, most for just a weekend or two, but many for longer periods. About 1,200 different people stayed at basecamp, about half of those from out of state. Approximately 250 people were arrested, mainly in woods actions.

After several false starts, basecamp was finally established just in time to support the first major action. Forty-four people were arrested on June 21 at the L-P mill on the Samoa peninsula for dancing in the streets and on top of blockaded logging trucks. Ten defendants, the Lorax affinity group, brought the Humboldt County Justice system to its knees by demanding a jury trial. Jury selection took 30 days, exhausting several jury pools and stressing the county coffers. Defendants convinced the judge to let them use a version of the necessity defense and then shocked the jury with the revelation that Louisiana-Pacific was daily violating the law with toxic discharges. They won a hung jury and the case was dismissed. Most of the subsequent RS cases have been reduced to infractions.

There were no arrests at a huge anti-Georgia-Pacific rally in Ft. Bragg on July 21. However, there was a simultaneous counter-demonstration by the "yellow ribbon coalition," a corporate-funded hate campaign masquerading as a worker solidarity movement. Bellicose, beer-drinking loggers were separated from the RS event by two lines of cops. In an attempt to defuse an ugly situation, speakers from our sound stage invited the loggers to send representatives to speak from our stage.



Cops separate angry timber workers from a Redwood Summer protest at Ft. Bragg, CA, July 21, 1990

The first few were predictably hostile, but one man got up and blew us all away with his story. He was now on welfare, he said, because after many years of working at the mill, he could no longer be party to G-P's "liquidation logging," the total destruction of the land he grew up in.

Although there were affinity groups that had planned civil disobedience at Ft. Bragg, it was discouraged by some organizers of the event. Those organizers were very taken with the "communication" they thought was developing with the workers, and didn't want to see anything divert attention from that. Some affinity groups were upset by this, although no one but police would have stopped them from their actions. Most of the rally organizers live in Ft. Bragg and felt they had an interest in keeping attention focused on communication with workers rather than confrontation with G-P.

The third major action was in the Sequoia National Forest in Southern California where, incredibly, the U.S. Forest Service allows logging of the vanishing giant sequoia species. Not surprising to Earth First!ers, the Sierra Club had just negotiated a sellout agreement on the next forest plan that will allow logging to continue. Heartbroken local activists were glad to see 500 of us arrive for a "California Rendezvous and Action" on July 29th to August 1st.

After a weekend of workshops, beer drinking and infighting, more than 200 people risked arrest and hiked three miles into an active logging site. Rather than deal with the publicity of massive arrests the USFS had advised the loggers not to show up at any logging sites that day. So, we shut 'em down all over the forest and showed a lot of people, directly and through the media, what a clear-cut looks like.

The final target of the summer was the Pacific Lumber Co. Since P-L was taken over by Charlie ("He who has the gold rules") Hurwitz and his MAXXAM corp., the cutting of ancient redwoods has tripled to pay off junk-bond debt and to cover Hurwitz's eight-million-dollar annual salary (one of the largest CEO salaries in the nation).

In the month of August, actions were concentrated on P-L land, mostly in one area, Murrelet Grove. Nesting Murrelets (an endangered sea bird) were sighted there at the beginning of the summer, yet no legal protections for them could be won. By the end of the summer, their habitat was mostly gone, but not without resistance.

About 150 people were arrested in the grove, hugging trees or chaining themselves to gates. Many also got away and came back to barricade another day! Sneaking in to build road blockades was the favored activity.

What is a woods action like? Imagine 12 of you, an affinity group, walking down a logging road on a moonless night. Suddenly you see headlights flash and you hear the engine of a Company security truck. You all ditch off the side of the road. You find yourself up to your neck in ferns. You all try to move quietly away from the road in the thick brush, but you sound like a herd of crashing elephants.

As the headlights pass, you gaze up at the forest canopy, hundreds of feet above you. Across the road there are no trees. You all continue walking down the road. Soon you see a pile of huge logs to the side. The 12 of you jump on top grunting and sweating, finally managing to roll one right in the middle of the road. You know that tomorrow they'll have to bring the loader down from the yarder landing to move it. That will tie up several men for half the day and keep a few of the old trees standing that much longer.

Redwood Summer: Successes & Failures

At one point during the summer, several of us thought about calling a press conference and declaring RS a failure. We hadn't physically saved any trees other than one tiny grove. Every day we could see the trucks loaded with huge old redwoods headed down Highway 101. Yet we also had to acknowledge our successes. We were an effective training ground for new activists. Thousands of people were trained in nonviolence, and many hundreds of new activists took part in their first demo or action.

People learned to live with consensus decision-making process, and basecamp became a functioning community. We were the focus of unrelenting media coverage all summer, putting the plight of forests on front pages and in feature articles across the country. Discussion on the issues of biodiversity, sustainable forestry and community autonomy exploded in the media of California's North Coast.

Besides this dose of self-doubt, there was also plenty of criticism from those who were only marginally or not at all involved. In other words, we got flak from everyone. To some, we weren't organized enough. With no paid staff or money to rent an office, it was hard for people to get information about the action.

To others, we were too organized and rigid; the non-violence code, including a rule about no alcohol at base-camp and no property destruction, was too oppressive. There were a lot of complaints about too many "hippie rainbow types" at base-camp and at actions. Yet, whatever problems one may have with the "New Age" lifestyle, it's to their credit that people associated with that tendency were willing to put their bodies on the line to save ancient forest.

Anyway, what's wrong with hippies? They live more lightly on the earth than most. Without jobs or yuppie obligations, hippies kept basecamp together and created a community there.

Leadership in Redwood Summer

Most EF!ers have no desire to be leaders and in mass movements it is usually very hard to avoid the creation of leaders and the attendant problems. On the other hand, if we are ever to make real social change and protect biodiversity once and for all, we need mass action! In my opinion, RS was the most anarchically organized mass action I have ever heard of. Leadership roles were temporary and rotated among different people. Leadership more often took the form of inspiration rather than manipulation.

Corporate Fall

The summer months have faded, but in California, EF!ers are already working on the next campaign to save the old growth forests—Corporate Fall. Or October 15, six EF!ers were arrested basking in Harry Merlo's hot tub. Merlo is president of Louisiana-Pacific Lumber and is infamous for his "log to infinity" quote regarding his company's policy of liquidation logging. About 50 EF!ers went to Merlo's posh Sonoma County house and upon discovering he was not at home, decided to enjoy his pool and hot tub.

Disappointed that Harry couldn't come out and play, the EF!ers vowed to return another day when he was at home to continue spotlighting the corporate role in the destruction of the Northern California ecosystems. With public attention focused on the forests, the time has never been more appropriate for actions to save the remainder of the earth's heritage.

Fifth Estate Note: Those interested in reaching the EF! groups involved in the ongoing efforts to save the old growth forests may contact the Ukiah EF!, c/o Judi Bari, 106 W. Standley, Ukiah CA 95470.

Correction for Web archive: The print edition this article was incorrectly attributed to Estelle Fennel, who took the photos accompanying the piece (see note in "Detroit Seen," FE #336).

Related

See "Bombing won't stop Redwood Summer," FE #334, Summer, 1990.

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