

Police Break London Anti-Road Blockade

Alec Smart

LONDON (Special to the *Fifth Estate*)—The last remaining group of 25 houses in the path of a contested road construction in London were cleared and bulldozed late last year.

The “No M11 Link Campaign” created Operation Roadblock to stop work on Claremont road in Leytonstone, an East London working class district situated on the southern end of a seven kilometer construction project linking the M 11 motorway from Wanstead to the Blackwall Tunnel.

The action was carried out by environmentalists occupying and fortifying vacated houses and by residents who had been ordered to move squatting in their own homes. Road building was entirely shut down for a month in March 1994. The protests have cost the hated 300 million pound project millions more in down time and security measures.

The final effort to forcibly remove the determined occupants of Claremont Road involved a five-day assault by an estimated force of 1,000 police, bailiffs, and security guards and cost the British taxpayers over two million pounds (the most expensive civil eviction in U.K. history) .

In mid-November 1994, 91-year-old Dolly, Claremont Road’s last “legitimate” resident (whose house was force-purchased by the Department of Transport) became ill and was moved to a care home. Bailiffs quickly implemented eviction proceedings to remove over 400 squatters and environmental protesters.

On Monday, November 28 the police operation began in earnest. Several “false alarms” had taken place earlier in the month, leaving the 400 resisting the eviction somewhat skeptical as to whether this was “the real thing.” Without the skepticism, numbers would have been higher.

The cops diverted transport and sealed off the Leytonstone neighborhood. Local residents turned out to offer support to the demonstrators who took to the treetops, towers, tunnel and roofs in the early hours of Monday morning. The police didn’t begin the evictions until 2 p.m., even though the first wave of snatch-squads swept and removed 200 roadblock supporters from the adjacent area.

Inside The Ratrun

A giant spider web of rope netting had been strung over the northern end of Claremont Road, linking tree houses and rooftops to a wooden tower 16-meters high. A woman scrambling across the netting became dislodged and grabbed the extended bucket arm of a construction worker’s portable digger to prevent falling. The driver reversed the digger suddenly, hurling the woman seven meters to the road below where she lay unconscious. Police officers, indifferent to the possibility of injuries, hauled her up roughly and carried her away.

Protesters inside the “Ratrun” (a basement tunnel linking two terraced houses) sealed themselves beneath several tons of rubble. They had collected and piled up the rubble earlier and used a trip-pole to release it to entomb themselves below ground. However, police removed them relatively quickly on the second day of the operation by digging by hand through the boulders, bricks and concrete blocks to arrest the Ratrun occupiers.

Many of the rooftop and tree house occupiers came down during the second day. As the sun set, they faced the daunting prospect of another long winter night exposed to the elements. Mary had sat on an angled tiled rooftop for 24 hours with no blankets or food. She declared, "I was so cold. Basically we had no sleep as we were constantly expecting the bailiffs to come up and pull us off. I couldn't wait to come down!"

Late Tuesday afternoon, sleep deprivation provoked Kate to abandon her treetop position, along with six others. Sitting on a corrugated iron roof with one blanket between them, she explained, "Had we come down, we would have been escorted off site. We had water, but no one dared drink it in case you'd need to piss!"

Noisy generators and floodlights were kept on continuously by the construction security personnel. Mike, on the pretext that he intended to use a police ladder to help some tree dwellers climb down, borrowed it from officers who were scaling the wall of a house. Instead, he used it to climb into a tree after which he hauled the ladder up into the branches, keeping it from the cops for several hours.

Among those evicted from Claremont was an autistic boy and his family as well as six old-age pensioners. Demonstrators locked arms within concrete-filled washing machines, or U-locked their necks onto rings plugged into the bitumen road.

By the third morning, one hundred people were still on the rooftops.

A giant 30 meter high tower, constructed with scaffolding poles (and smothered with grass and barbed wire) became the last staging-post for the Claremont Road resistance. Bailiffs used a cherry picking machine to remove the eight demonstrators from its upper reaches. Mick, a resident-turned-squatter (on whose roof the tower was erected) climbed down voluntarily on the third day of the police operation (30th December).

The last person to be evicted from Claremont Road was a man who descended from the scaffold tower on Saturday morning, after holding out for five days.

The police sweep and evictions ended the possibility that the opposition could directly block the path of the Motorway link construction (as no further occupied premises lay in the path of the developers), but protests are continuing.

At present, an average of two "invasions" a week of the site by protesters occur with activists spontaneously storming into construction zones and clambering on machinery to halt work. Cases are scheduled to go before courts of all those arrested in connection with the M11 protests.

Legal Fund contributions (labeled as such) or information: No M11 Campaign, P.O. Box 965, Leytonstone Delivery Office, 6 Joseph Ray Road, London E11 1AA U.K.

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Fifth Estate #346, Summer, 1995

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