

UK EF! Gathering

Annie Oakley

21 December 1998

This summer I came to my rope's end over "the hamster wheel," or "the cult of nonviolence" as it was referred to this year in the *Journal*. Rather than succumbing to the familiar (and strangely comfortable) bitter cynicism that tends to hang around our folks, I had the good sense to attend the EF! gathering in England. I ventured across the big pond groping for inspiration, clues to my own dissatisfaction and new ideas. I carried with me sentiments shared by many others in our network whose lives have, in recent years, virtually revolved around a clumsy application of a very narrowly defined political strategy that pretty much consists of replicating the same tactics, each time expecting different results.

In the past year, activists from within and without the EF! network have attempted to deconstruct and shed light on the potential errors of our ways, citing the rampant disempowerment, cynicism and fragmentation among formerly enthusiastic activists and the general ineffectiveness of our strategies (or lack thereof). It was these internal critiques that motivated me to try and figure out what is so damn special about "them."

The primary thing that makes the difference in morale and, to some degree, effectiveness in England is the normalcy and encouragement of militant action and monkeywrenching among EF!ers. It was somewhat shocking to me coming from such a culture of paranoia. Their attitude astounded and delighted me: "So what if they think we did it, there's no hard evidence." And this comes from a country with no First Amendment, from a country where the editors of *Green Anarchist* are being tried on conspiracy charges for reporting on sabotage. It's enough to make one wonder if we Americans are waiting till they repeal the First Amendment before we start reviving a climate that encourages nonviolent monkeywrenching.

I've never heard or seen the assertion that monkeywrenching should never be a tool in the radical environmental movement's tactical toolbox, even from the most strict practitioners of nonviolent civil disobedience and the hard-core media stuntists among us. Yet, the general lack of eco-sabotage is noticeable, especially compared with the fervent climate of Animal Liberation Front actions in the past year. The effect on morale that militant actions have is obvious in Britain. It inspires people and feeds their desires. They don't get hung up on the moralism of it because they see it as economic sabotage against the ruling class, which can be nothing but noble. Peaceniks and flaky hippies are the exception rather than the norm.

Strategic monkeywrenching is a major topic of discussion in England, as opposed to our favorite topic—to monkeywrench or not—and they don't shroud these discussions in vagueness. It reminded me of what I've heard about "the old days" of tree spiking workshops at the rendezvous. I explained the history of infiltration in the US (which most were already very informed about) and the decision of some groups to build mass movements around the name EF!, which forced these matters underground and made discussing monkeywrenching hush-hush. The common response was, "But I thought it's a network of autonomous groups." To many UK EF!ers this is not an issue because they rarely use the name EF! publicly (and are seriously considering dropping it) and never as a banner for mass movement building.

Their aggressive tactics, from warding off tree evictions with buckets of human sludge to daylight office trashings, are never overtly claimed as EF!, which prevents the kind of pigeonholing we get over here. Also, they often get away before arrest. Their attitude is that property damage is about economic sabotage not public outreach so it doesn't matter who did it or even why. In this manner, they have succeeded in becoming a financial threat that the corporations and government have to figure into all future plans, directly affecting the decision to cancel the rest of the roads program.

British EF!ers are radical ecologists, but they are also anticapitalist, self-organized social revolutionaries. A lot of us call ourselves anarchists because we're pissed and disobedient, and we believe in our desires. The same is true for them, but because they are quite well read in revolutionary theory and history (as well as ecological politics), they take anarchy seriously enough to apply it to their strategies rather than just their tactics.

Their political analysis involves a basic critique of capitalism and global economics, for which individual campaigns like Reclaim the Streets and genetically engineered test crop trashings act as "terrains of struggle" rather than ends in themselves. This is not to deny that their actions have goals. One of my favorite sentiments, expressed in the context of questioning symbolic nonviolent civil disobedience, was, "Even sabotage is symbolic, and if it's all symbolic, it might as well be a radical symbol rather than a reformist one." Actions such as throwing computers out of Monsanto's office building, pulling up genetically engineered test crops in the night and organizing with the striking Liverpool Dockers spring from this philosophy.

British activists take interest in discussing and analyzing what does and doesn't work, and questioning contradictions and liberalism. They're actually questioning a lot of the same things we are, especially in the realms of internal dynamics and fostering sustainability in activist communities, and they do it out of a seemingly sincere interest in social evolution. I witnessed a thought-provoking debate about accountable versus covert test site "decontaminations" in the anti-genetix Snowball campaign that resulted in the "accountable" folks asking some of the critics to come voice their concerns to the rest of the campaign. Much of this discussion takes place in the pages of their quarterly (sort of) journal, *Do or Die*. Since activists live so close to each other (Britain is the size of New England), informal strategizing is common, and local groups often consist of multiple close-knit collectives that live together.

The discussion structure at the gathering was dynamic, mixing small and large group discussions. Topics like "Review and Discussion of the Last Year" and "Tactics and Effectiveness" fostered healthy self-criticism. Questions about "What now for EF!?" and long-term strategy opened up the floor to visionary proposals. Many of these discussions were led and structured by different local groups. Some groups and individuals wrote and disseminated discussion papers on timely and controversial issues, which got people thinking critically before the larger meetings. International and UK campaign update workshops, as well as practical skills workshops, were packed into what little time was left. A healthy dose of closed caucusing among the "long-term" core of the

network (jokingly referred to as "the clique") resulted in a decision to hold a winter activist conference for strategic discussions among affinity groups and to let the summer gathering be more accessible, leisurely and diverse.

The most striking difference in our styles of self-organization is that British EF!ers have spent a lot of time developing regional affinity groups and collectives. The result is a kind of rapid mobilization of tight-knit groups I haven't seen here. It enables them to pull off militant, covert mass actions. It also enables activists to work closely in land and housing co-ops and practice mutual aid. Public outreach in the form of action camps and wide-open action planning isn't as common there, but direct action campaigns like Reclaim the Streets, Genetix Snowball and The Land is Ours are very accessible and can be stepping stones to more revolutionary activity.

My visit inspired me but ultimately left me with more questions than I went with. I find myself rethinking assumptions about the benefit of mass media coverage of direct action campaigns and mass organizing in the US. The effects of a potential backlash should we see an escalation in tactics here is unpredictable. Britain gave no easy answers. After all, there is no Wise Use movement or religious right there, and so much of the working class despises the industrial elite. Mostly, I am left questioning how we can organize and strategize in an ecologically revolutionary way, within Earth First! in the US. It's becoming clear to me that a parallel network is necessary to foster the seeds of an integrated awareness, where ecological direct action and social revolution are not opposing struggles and where sabotage is not a dirty word.

The Ted K Archive

Annie Oakley
UK EF! Gathering
21 December 1998

Earth First! Journal 19, no. 2

www.thetedkarchive.com