Tree-sit protest saves oak grove at U.C. Berkeley

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
19 June 2008

Culture Change Letter #188, June 19, 2008

The activist dilemma

After a year and a half of direct action and coordinated support, the Memorial Oak Grove at University of California, Berkeley, has been spared the chainsaws and bulldozers. UCB wants to build a new high-tech athletic facility on and under where the trees stand, even though there's an earthquake fault. Suggestions to build the facility elsewhere on campus fell on deaf ears -- until now, thanks to a court decision on Wednesday.

The tree-sits and ground-support have over the past 18 months been favored by citizen interest and good media coverage -- although both could have been better. Creative events such as concerts, acrobatics and acorn pancakes helped keep the protesters going. The sacrifice of the tree-sitters and ground volunteers -- braving foul weather, police oppression, and other stress -- made for a successful action.

Media-support has been through the Bay Area Coalition for Headwaters forest (BACH). The group released this today:

"As tree-sit supporters and oaks supporters waited for the judge's decision, UCB police brought in cherry-picker trucks, a crew of contract arborist tree-climbers, and a giant construction crane estimated to be 140 feet tall, suspending a 4-person basket from a long cable.
Armed with this machinery, as dozens of UC police lined the grove standing guard at the double chain-link fence topped with barbed wire put in place to prevent food and water deliveries to the tree-sitters, the contract climbers attempted numerous times throughout Tuesday and Wednesday to approach tree-sitters high in the branches. On Tuesday, nearly all the food, water, platforms and gear were cut by UCB contractors and dropped to the ground. Oak supporters implored the arborists through bullhorns to not engage in the reckless and patently life-threatening removal of the tree-sitters. They succeeded in only bringing one female tree-sitter down to waiting handcuffs on Tuesday. Several others in the crowd were arrested on Wednesday.

"Crews also revved up chainsaws at least five times on Wednesday, sending large branches crashing to the ground, “absolutely in violation of the court's injunction,” say attorneys. The tree-sitters remain in the trees as all sides analyze the court's ruling."

A voice inside me came up and said, "This is what fascism looks like." - a twist on the favorite chant at demonstrations, "This is what democracy looks like." The huge fences, generator-lights, strong police presence -- overkill for the purpose of intimidating activists.

I wasn't the only one, as a newspaper reporter/photographer found out. Richard Brenneman was shoved in the back by one officer after he had been ordered away from the stadium rim, the only place offering a clear view of the activities below. He was pushed down stairs by the police -- and fortunately caught by an activist. Brenneman was warned by an officer that arrest might mean losing his camera equipment in jail.

Most tree-sitters are still aloft. I heard them speaking over the din of the diesel generators the police use for needless illumination. I saw one platform at the top of the only redwood in the grove, where a woman stands and dances like Julia Butterfly did nine years ago, hundreds of miles to the north when she lived aloft for two years.

According to Karen Pickett of BACH,

"At issue in the lawsuit—three separate lawsuits ultimately joined—is whether the proposed project, a sports training facility, is an adjunct structure to the existing football stadium, which remains far out of compliance with earthquake safety standards while straddling the Hayward fault, and whether the planning documents written for the proposed construction complies with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The lawsuits challenging the University’s planned construction were filed in December, 2006. A preliminary injunction granted by Judge Miller in February, 2007, constraining UCB from making any physical alterations on the project site (the oak grove)including cutting of trees, remains in place. Petitioners include the City of Berkeley, Panoramic Hills Association, the California Oaks Foundation, Save the Oaks, and a number of individuals. This ruling sends the University back to the drawing board on their project, or into appeals, but unable to proceed forward immediately, which is clearly what they intended to do.

"The Alquist-Priolo Act of 1972 forbids alterations on an existing project if the value of those alterations exceeds 50% of the existing project (the UCB stadium) The sports training facility was found to constitute an alteration of the existing stadium project .

The activist dilemma

One the whole, the grassroots movement to protect nature and boost people-power has all but lost. When community support is so minimal -- just enough to defeat the stubborn monolith UC Berkeley -- and masses of people do not take up the fight, the movement is not winning.

It isn't dying either, as there is always an attraction for a good cause, however poorly understood by masses of people who rarely support any campaign.

Some activists live with almost no money, and rely on friends and supporters for sustenance and other benefits of solidarity. The appearance of some activists is sometimes thought, by more affluent folk in sympathy with the cause, to be thoughtlessly counterproductive. But on the front lines, anyone's help is gratefully received.

Are the street people (some of whom are activists) really "below" the level of workers doing the nine-to-five routine? Workers are supposedly more respectable, with their assumed responsibility. But another way of looking at workers and their capitalist bosses is to see them as unimaginative. Street people refuse, in most cases, to adhere to the regimentation and mind-numbing, dispiriting repetition of work. They are more like wild animals than their domesticated brethren who have opted for the security of the job. Some people can say they love their jobs. But for decades? What about freedom to go anywhere any time? Not possible. What has been given up, only homelessness?

Activists and anarchists are, like street people, more like the wild animals. They are not in the game just to win, as a capitalist is in it just to make money. An activist is more likely to be a free person, having opted to go for more than the carrot of security offered by employment's servitude. On the other hand, some employed people are more effective activists in their part time than many full time activists, and there are jobs that aren't too oppressive and uncreative.

Very few people today are free, and this includes most of those who think they are, such as U.S. citizens. The power of propaganda that conditions us is enough to put out of mind basic questions such as "why should anyone have to tell me what to do?" Or, "why should I have to slave away to enrich others so that I can buy what nature freely gives in the way of food, shelter, clothing, medicine, and heat?"

Activists eventually learn to ask such questions, striving for good answers. Although activists make entire sense -- most of the time, anyway -- perhaps 99% of the people do not participate in activism until their personal interests are clearly threatened. The dilemma for the activist is to be forgiving and patient in the face of apparent failure. Some victories are mere stoppages of outrageous development schemes. Moving ahead with rebuilding society is the elusive goal.

After the UC Berkeley tree-sit vigil last night, I saw a devoted activist who is a good friend and fine musician, catching a snooze on the hard street a few yards from the police barricades. He may have been having a good dream of the oaks' long lives -- his thanks for much work and sacrifice of his own choosing. But how could the average UC student walking by him, seeing his lack of comfort, be attracted to activism, even when there was a victory? Fortunately, new kids come along and replace the fading veterans, while the general population further outnumbers the activists with each global-warming birth.

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"Judge Halts UC Memorial Stadium Gym Project" by Richard Brenneman, Berkeley Daily Planet, June 18, 2008:

berkeleydailyplanet.com
Save the Oaks:

saveoaks.com
Hear Depaver Jan's tune, "Protesting UCB":

culturechange.org