Berkeley tree-sitters extracted from destroyed UC oak grove

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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The University of California at Berkeley, despite court appeals in the works to save the Memorial Oak Grove from the administration's athletics development scheme, has attacked the trees and forcibly removed the tree-sitters. Today the last tree-sitters came down voluntarily, although their safety would have been a factor in feeling there was no choice.

It was just reported to Culture Change that a negotiation was successfully reached: UCB has promised to find new ways to make land use decisions that respect the community. Whether this can be believed is not the point: vigilance and fundamental social change are called for beyond what we're seeing this decade.

This column will be updated shortly as more is learned directly from protesters now on the ground. Their current wishes or demands, and suggestions for activists and UCB alumni across the nation, are barely known as people are in shock. We will provide an update as soon as possible and release an action alert to our list.

The cutting of all the oaks, save a beauty strip along Piedmont Avenue below the stadium, happened last Friday when there was just one tree-sit platform and activist crew left high in a lone redwood. The sitters and crowds in the street below had to witness the old oaks munched up by machines over the weekend.

Today the last tree-sit was taken, as usual with great risk to the activists and the "arborists" ordered to extract the sitters. The university tries to justify their whole scheme and police-state actions by claiming human waste was thrown on arborists and police. Such a claim is an old tactic, very much like pro-clearcutting timber-corporation supporters in Fortuna, California, who said the problem with protesters holding a rally was that they needed soap. As patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, cleanliness is a favorite refuge of those justifying ecological destruction for profit.

The following is an emotional report from a nearby resident whom I'd taken to the oak grove perhaps a year ago, before the many fences went up in the University's attempt to starve out the protesters in the trees:

Jan,

I tried to call you this afternoon. Being so close to the campus, I could not avoid hearing the helicopters circling 'round the trees, or what was left of them. I heard the copters circling a few days ago and knew the worst had happened. But today, in spite of the worst damage already being over, my thoughts were on the young'uns in the trees and the spectacle of it all for the EYE WITNESS NEWS whores. It's hard not to cry as I write. I know that these were but a few trees compared to the amazing damage that gets done each and every day. But these trees were special. Many people connected with them; lived in them; slept in them; prayed for them; and were injured for them. Now they've most likely been removed from the last few trees standing and the trees cut to the ground, like so much chip wood. The copter blades are silent now. And I don't hear any more sirens. What we'll get in exchange is PROGRESS -- progress towards the end of life as we know it. I think everyone is in a hurry to meet the end. We'll have a shiny new sports arena that people can exercise in. There'll be lots of great plastic tread mills and probably wide screen TVs playing EYE WITNESS NEWS. Wall-to-wall carpeting of plastic, walls and ceilings covered with plastic. The people in it will wear plastic and paint their bodies with plastic. Probably some will have plastic body parts and fillers, so to speak. Of course they'll all have plastic Ipods with plastic ear plugs, that they paid for with a plastic credit card. But we won't have those trees any more. And I could do without all the plastic crap if we could have the trees back. (Well, I could do without all the plastic crap no matter what).

I am personally devastated by this news. One tree-sitter told me of the local animals of the grove that had become friends with the protesters. I used to live a few blocks from the grove, and enjoyed its green quiet as a refuge from the concrete and asphalt that dominate the tamed grounds of the notoriously corporate campus.

I had the pleasure to meet at the grove Country Joe McDonald, the famous psychedelic musician of the 1960s and active to this day. He and I and many musicians, mostly protesters, shared a makeshift stage under the trees. Acorn pancakes and other dishes were supplied by Food Not Bombs, to show how we can all share for a common cause and to raise public consciousness about the utility of the rare oaks (made rare by Bay Area development).

U.S. police state crackdown?

Why would a University insist on doing this? Why the police-state tactics of high fences, weaponry, depriving the tree-sitters of food and water, threatening their lives? A court decision in June seemed to save the grove. However, the state carries out its plans despite niceties, as we have seen with periodic federal government actions for as long as we should

care to remember. What is at work is intimidation and brute force, as the contest between peace and ecological protection continues to go up against private interests who have control of government. This happens in other countries as well, some more overt and some not at all.

As demonstrated by the Republican National Convention police tactics against protesters and journalism in the Twin Cities before the convention even started, there is a clear intent to crack down on direct-action dissent. This is a trend shown clearly by U.S. aggression against Iraq and Afghanistan (those countries did not attack us), which is designed to look so normal and permanent that even Obama feels he has to buy into the Afghanistan war. With the domestic crackdown on civil rights and protest, a message from the outgoing regime may be being handed off to the new one, if it is Obama and not McCain, that the police state intensification is part of business-as-usual and must continue.

Heavy handed perfidy against citizens exercising their rights of free speech and assembly is nothing new in the U.S., if one studies the history and looks beyond the official stories and corporate news media reports. But as the economy becomes more unstable, and population growth continues with the attendant risk of riots for food (due to petrocollapse or other meltdown), the attempt to keep the mass of people "in line" and full of fear is increased.

After campaigns are lost, with sadness and anger abounding, the hope is that we have gained another learning experience or that the mass of people will wake up to the need to protect their own interests. The smiling faces of the officials in front of the cameras are easier for the unsuspecting public to like, trust and forget. But who is it acting against the public interest and our embattled Mother Earth and her tenuous climate? As Utah Phillips, the late folk musician, used to say, "The Earth is not dying; it is being killed, and those killing it have names and addresses."

The man who gave the order to cut the grove, after ordering the siege of the tree-sitters who took to the trees in December 2006, is Nathan Brostrom, Vice Chancellor of U.C. Berkeley. He has six children -- but play in that oak grove and enjoy its former oxygen gift they will never do.

Protest against the state is not new in Berkeley, as we recall from People's Park from 1969 onward. It is pitiful how the modern student body is so brainwashed to go to school only for "a better job" to compete in the corporate marketplace. So the students would walk by the grove and ignore the sidewalk protesters trying to support the tree-sitters. The modern idea of campus politics is to run for some student-government office as a popularity contest for adding to one's resume.

The grove will be developed out of existence, but we shall remember the beauty of the trees and what spirited and valiant resistance was deployed. We hope a possible future student body will resurrect the spirit of this campaign and turn the university upside down for some real progress in education.

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For video footage and more, visit

saveoaks.com

Previous coverage of the oak grove campaign:

culturechange.org

Coverage and photo journalism from IndayBayMedia:

indybay.org