UC Berkeley targets protesters for trees

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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In this age of global warming caused not just by cows, cars and smokestacks, but by deforestation, it is in general a morally criminal act to cut down old trees that sequester carbon. This is especially applicable to a grove of live oaks and redwoods enjoyed by thousands of young people every day who are supposed to be learning about their world. One would expect the famous, prestigious school known simply as Berkeley to be rather progressive and be a hotbed of radical ideas taking form. Think again.

The University of California at Berkeley is the same institution, headed by the Regents of the University of California, that has insisted on paving and despoiling common parkland and gardens in the past: People's Park, of 1969 fame. Those events of 37 years ago, punctuated by a military response by the campus (with Ronald Reagan pulling the strings), activated people on to great heights, particularly the back-to-the-land movement. Yet, the battle for preserving People's Park flared up again and again over the decades.
On Sunday, Dec. 10, I visited the grove in question, at the east end of the UCB campus where the hills start to climb. Unsurprisingly, when I found the tree-sit, I knew people there because it's usually the same old activists doing more than their part for society. I was made welcome by those committed to stay, especially because I had a guitar which they imagined would raise their spirits. Less than a dozen people were on hand to defend the grove, where three trees had high platforms and other rigging occupied by protesters. Because of the low numbers of people and the surrounding community being so nonchalant and uncaring, I knew the grove and its human friends would soon be removed by force, unless there would be greater public support.

Having lived near this grove last year, I felt protective of the trees, yet I felt overshadowed by the huge football stadium immediately up the hill. Thousands of people flock there to see their cherished "Bears" take on Stanford University and other foes. Attending these games, and owning cars and other questionable products, seems to be the lifestyle of the population that periodically takes over the area. Naturally, the targeted grove is for "development" of more athletic facilities involving high-tech underground levels far below any of the roots of the old trees.

Many of the grove's defenders are beyond student age, and some of the young people are not students. This gives an idea of how sadly disconnected the student population is from the number-one issue facing them: catastrophic climate change. Instead of going to college to learn about and remake their world, as their Berkeley predecessors did in the 1960s with the Free Speech Movement, the typical student just wants to get good grades to ultimately get a high paying job. Politics for the students may extend to getting into student government so that their resumes can look better. What you see among the students coming and going on the streets and paths in and around the campus is rarely the artistic, idealistic youth, but instead consumers heavy on the cell-phoning and iPod isolation. Plastic trash is almost everywhere, including on and in the students' bodies.

The very latest information available to these so-called students is that the Arctic will be ice free before the middle of the century, and that the Iraq War may have already cost a trillion dollars. So, we must in effect write them off for the moment -- even as we continue to try to organize and inform people all over this sleep-walking nation -- and wonder if the average U.S. university has relevance today. Should people stick to their routine of work and schooling at all costs? If we are going down, what are we going to do about it, right now?

It was fitting music heard Sunday evening in the grove; the songs played by two former member of the Depavers band were "Have a Global Warming Day," "Schoolmaster," and "The Government Song." We were not plugged in literally, but were figuratively plugged into the trees and the spirit of resistance, as we played near the Food Not Bombs table under a tarp for the rain. A police car pulled up nearby, and the officer came and asked if everything was alright. He was told "Everything's cool" and he left. Unfortunately, as a soldier for the state, he was probably among those blindly following orders three days later. Read on for the next development, but it will not be the final chapter. - JL

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For Immediate Release

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Police Detain Oak Grove Tree-Sitter on UCB campus

Breaking News: POLICE CONVERGING ON GROVE WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Berkeley, Calif.-In the early morning hours on Wednesday, UC Berkeley campus police detained Native American activist Zachary Running Wolf as he was temporarily down from his perch high in a redwood tree in an imperiled grove of trees slated for cutting by UC Berkeley. The campus police then surrounded the redwood tree, ostensibly to prevent Running Wolf from returning to his platform, where he has been maintaining a presence since December 2. They ordered him to stay off UCB property for 7 days. Police had arrived this morning and roused support people who were staffing an information table under tarps through the rain. Two other oaks and a cedar tree in the threatened grove have platforms in their branches where activists, one per tree, have been holding 24-hour a day vigils to protect them.

UC is planning destroy this majestic grove in order to build a sports gym covered by a concrete patio. This unique eco-system, the last grove of coast live oak (Quercus agrifolia) in the Berkeley lowlands, is protected by municipal code. However, UC, the largest landowner in Berkeley, says they are not obliged to obey city laws and codes.

This tree-sit action was taken after the university ignored the concerns of residents, students, scientists, the Berkeley City Council and many others. A lawsuit has been filed by the Panoramic Hills Neighborhood Association to get the university to consider alternatives, and a lawsuit has been approved by the City of Berkeley. Community members have, for years, been frustrated by the University's apparent disdain for citizen input and local opinion.

Attorney for Save the Oaks Stephan C. Volker expressed concern for the tree-sitters and other activists maintaining a protective presence in the grove. He said of the activists, "They seek only to exercise their Constitutionally-protected right to engage in free speech, to peacefully assemble, and to seek judicial redress for they what they view as an unlawful and ill-conceived and [ill]-designed project."

The planned cutting of the oaks has brought hundreds of alarmed local residents and university students to speak out against this destruction and degradation of this . After exhausting many other avenues, Running Wolf and other activists decided to take direct action because UC is stonewalling community, student and even City of Berkeley efforts to find workable solutions

The tree occupation is ongoing, located between Piedmont Avenue and Memorial Stadium on the UC campus just north of the International House and Bancroft Way. [Using the BART subway get off at the Downtown Berkeley Station and walk or bike east toward the hills, through or along the campus.]
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