

WAKE UP!! IT'S YER RIDING THE SITE-GEIST....



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CONVOY POLLOI

24 YEARS ON, SchNEWS REVISITS THE BATTLE OF THE BEANFIELD...

“What I have seen in the last thirty minutes here in this field has been some of the most brutal police treatment of people that I’ve witnessed in my entire career as a journalist. The number of people who have been hit by policemen, who have been clubbed whilst holding babies in their arms in coaches around this field, is yet to be counted. There must surely be an enquiry after what has happened today.”

- Ken Sabido ITN journalist.

Twenty four years have passed since the defining moment of the Thatcher government’s assault on the traveller movement - the **Battle of the Beanfield**. On June 1st 1985 a convoy of vehicles set off from Savernake Forest in Wiltshire towards Stonehenge, with several hundred travellers on their way to setting up the 14th Stonehenge Free Festival. But this year English Heritage, who laughably were legally considered the owners of the Stonehenge Sarsen circle (built several thousand years before by god knows who), had secured an injunction against trespass naming 83 people. This was considered legal justification enough for a brutal assault on the entire convoy. What followed was a police riot and the largest mass arrest in British history.

As the Convoy made its way to the Stones the road was blocked with tonnes of gravel and it was diverted down a narrow country lane, which was also blocked. Suddenly a group of police officers came forward and started to break vehicle windows with their truncheons. Trapped, the convoy swung into a field, crashing through a hedge.

For the next four hours there was an ugly stalemate. The Convoy started trying to negotiate, offering to abandon the festival and return to Savernake Forest or leave Wiltshire altogether. The police refused to negotiate and told them they could all surrender or face the consequences.

At ten past seven the ‘battle’ began. In the next half hour, the police operation “became a chaotic whirl of violence.” Convoy member Phil Shakesby later gave his account of the day:

“The police came in [to the grass field] and they were battering people where they stood, smashing homes up where they were, just going wild. Maybe about two-thirds of the vehicles actually started moving and took off, and they chased us into a field of beans.

By this time there were police everywhere,



Pic: Tash

charging along the side of us, and wherever you went there was a strong police presence. Well, they came in with all kinds of things: fire extinguishers and one thing and another. When they’d done throwing the fire extinguishers at us, they were stoning us with these lumps of flint.”

By the end of the day over four hundred were under arrest and dispersed across police stations around the whole of the south of England. Their homes had been destroyed, impounded and in some cases torched.

THE VAN GUARD?

In today’s surveillance society Britain it seems inconceivable that festivals like the Stonehenge Free Festival ever happened. At their height these gatherings attracted 30,000 people for the solstice celebration - 30,000 people celebrating and getting on with it without any need for the state or its institutions. The festivals themselves were just the highpoint of a year-round lifestyle of living in vehicles. As one traveller said at the time, “The number of people who were living on buses had been doubling every year for four years. It was anarchy in action, and it was seen to be working by so many people that they wanted to be a part of it too.”

Having seen off the miners strike – the first casualties in the plan to re-order Britain according to neo-liberal economics (or as it was known locally - Thatcherism), the state turned its force on a more subtle threat. This time not people fighting for jobs and a secure place in the system but people who rejected that system outright. Although prejudice against travellers was nothing new, the traditional ‘ethnic’ travelling minority represented no significant threat to the status quo that couldn’t be dealt with by local authorities. But to many of the millions left unemployed by the Thatcher revolution, life on the road looked increasingly appealing. This was inconvenient for a state determined that conditions for the unemployed be miserable enough to spur them into any form of low-paid work.

WHEELS ON FIRE

The propaganda directed against the so-called ‘peace convoys’ by all sections of the media created an atmosphere which allowed draconian action. The Beanfield was not an isolated incident. The Nostell Priory busts of the previous year were a vicious foreboding of what was to come. Months before the Beanfield a convoy-peace camp site at Molesworth was evicted by police acting with 1500 troops and bulldozers headed by a flak-jacketed Michael Heseltine, then Defence Secretary. In 1986 Stoney Cross in the New Forest saw another mass eviction. At the time Thatcher said she was “only too delighted to do what we can to make things difficult for such



things as hippy convoys”. This attempt to create a separate yet peaceful existence from mainstream society was to be ruthlessly suppressed.

Over the next ten years – notably with the Public Order Act 1986 and the Criminal Justice Act 1994 the whole lifestyle was virtually outlawed. As John Major said at the Tory Party conference in 1992 to thunderous applause: “New age travellers – not in this age – not in any age”. The CJA removed the duty of councils to provide stop-over sites for travellers and regular evictions began to punctuate traveller life. But it wasn’t all one way, thousands stayed on the road and the free festival circuit was infused with fresh blood from the rave scene. Even after the massive crackdown that followed the Castlemorton free festival the convoys in many cases moved onto road protest sites.

Ultimately however travellers were forced to adapt - abandoning the garish war paint of the hippy convoys for more anonymous vans, moving and taking sites in smaller groups. Many went abroad or were driven back into the cities. However, despite the worst excesses of the cultural clampdown, travellers remain all over the country. Many are now in smaller groups, inconspicuous and unregistered. It’s become more common for vehicle dwellers to take dis-used industrial sites blurring then lines between travelling and squatting.

The fact that Stonehenge is now open again on the solstice might - on the face of it - look like a victory. But the event is a top-down affair complete with massive police presence, burger vans and floodlights – a far cry from the anarchistic experiments of the 70s and 80s. A smaller gathering had been permitted just down the road at the Avebury stone circle over recent years with the National Trust taking a far more lenient stance on live-in vehicles than English Heritage. But even there, since 2007, there’s now a ban on overnight stays on the solstice.

Much of the festival circuit these days is in the hands of profit-motivated commercial promoters apart from the growing shoots of a range of smaller festivals, who continue in the spirit of people-led celebrations of community co-operation. But festivals today are also mostly buried under an avalanche of red tape and security, health and safety requirements - The Big Green gathering saw its security costs treble in one year (2007) as they were told to ‘terrorist harden’ the event.

When popular history recalls the pivotal moments in the mid-80s for Thatcher’s Britain, the Battle Of The Beanfield rarely adequately takes its place alongside the Miners Strike and Wapping. For UK Plc, travellers became - and remain - another ‘enemy within’, to be dealt with by organised state violence, like all others who have found an escape route from a society subordinated to profit, where freedom had been reduced to a series of consumer choices

* See also SchNEWS 25

* For the definitive account see Andy Worthington’s book ‘The Battle Of The Beanfield’ - www.andyworthington.co.uk

THE RICH GET RICHTER

On July 7th-10th the G8 Summit circus dares to return to Italy, eight years after the debacle of Genoa 2001 which saw the death of protester Carlo Giuliani (See SchNEWS 314/315). This year the venue has been changed at the last minute from the Sardinian island of La Maddalena to the rubble-strewn epicentre of this April's earthquake, the town of L'Aquila, 120km north-east of Rome, in the region of Abruzzo. Rome will also host parts of the summit. The actual venue of the meeting in L'Aquila is Coppito, the largest police academy in the country. But oh the irony of putting the summit and it's entourage of 5,000 in the midst of a disaster area where tens of thousands are still in refugee-style camps. And it's still getting the occasional tremor - so it could go off again (here's hoping). Apparently the change of location is to halve the security bill.

Another reason to move the summit came after Berlusconi claimed that "I don't believe that anti-globalists will have the courage to organize violent demonstrations in this earthquake-stricken region". Which is ridiculous because left and activist groups have been in this area since the earthquake in L'Aquila killed 300 and made 30,000 homeless on April 6th 2009, providing food kitchens, infrastructure and aid. With Berlusconi's wobbling government looking more vulnerable than ever in the wake of his dalliances with teenage glamour girls, what better time to protest?

* See also <http://globalisenot.blogspot.com> and www.gipfelsoli.org/Multilanguage

TARA FOR NOW

Fourteen protesters against the motorway development at the Hill Of Tara, Ireland (See SchNEWS 585), have had their cases dismissed in Trim District Court. Most cases arose from the 'Battle Of Soldiers Hill', on July 18th last year (See SchNEWS 597), where seven were arrested after being on the end of violence from security during some digger diving to prevent the road-building.

The protesters' defence in court was that they had a lawful excuse to stop the road building which was illegal under EU directives. The judge questioned the Gardai as to whether they'd asked the protesters if they believed they had a lawful reason, and Gardai admitted they had failed to. After the Gardai and Siac/Ferrovial security gave contradictory evidence, it seems the judge decided to drop the cases, and avoid any unnecessary scrutiny into the illegality of the road.

There is still a protest camp - the Vigil Camp - and direct action at the site, despite the fact that a lot of the destruction has happened, and the road could be finished some time next year. A decade-long campaign has been waged to stop this road and the desecration of land near the ancient monument, with protest camps and direct action since the summer of 2007. The Vigil Camp are still inviting all to come to the site and take part.

* For Vigil Camp see www.tarapixie.net

* For more info about the protests see www.savetara.com

* On August 30th there will be a Heritage Week event at the Hill Of Tara

DEPORTATION ALERT

Cardiff resident Maryam - who is six months pregnant - and her son Mousa, from Iran, are to be deported 8.15pm TODAY (5th) by BMI airlines from Heathrow on flight BD931. Complain to BMI airlines on 0133285400 or 01332854854

HOLY UNJUSTIFIED

We've seen the movies - they just don't like folks being a bit 'different' down in Texas. Last week a Dallas court gave the founders of a charity sending humanitarian aid to Palestine a legal lynching as they sent 'em down, with scant evidence, for seriously draconian sentences. Two of the defendants got 65 year sentences, one 20, and two others 15 - one for merely being a voluntary fundraiser for the group.

This was obviously the 'right' result as far as the government was concerned, with this being the culmination of the most costly US 'terror financing' investigation ever.

The Holy Land Foundation, once the biggest Muslim charity in America, was shut down shortly after 2001 in the wave of patriotic Homeland Security paranoia as (Texas boy) George Bush looked for scapegoatable terror targets close to home. Despite being nothing to do with Saudi nationals flying planes into buildings (like Saddam Hussein), the charity was accused of being a front for sending cash to support 'terrorist' Hamas in its battle against the Israeli occupiers.

A ten year investigation turned up nothing more than proof that the charity did exactly what it claimed to, i.e. sent money to officially recognised Palestinian charities which was provably distributed to provide humanitarian aid - charities which the US government itself also gave help to through USAID for some years after Holy Land was pounced on. Even using 'secret' (ie undisclosed) Israeli intelligence and disputed documents from FBI tapping operations, the founders could only be charged with indirectly supporting terror by dealing with organisations which may have been in touch with or under the control of Hamas - something they, nor anyone else, could really know or avoid even if they wanted to.

A previous trial of the defendants had ended in acquittal on some charges and a split jury on others, leading to a mistrial - so the government just decided to do it all again only this time a with more carefully selected jury.

At his sentencing hearing, ex charity chairman Ghassan Elashi, himself Palestinian born, said, "Nothing was more rewarding than... turning the charitable contributions of American Muslims into life assistance for the Palestinians. We gave the essentials of life: oil, rice, flour. The occupation was providing them with death and destruction." For his heinous crime, he was sentenced to 65 years in prison. What a great victory for the Land of the Free.

* For more see: www.democracynow.org/2009/5/29/holy_land

* Meanwhile, just how cosy that US / Israeli alliance has been revealed this week as the Israeli government looked for a way to derail Obama's demands for a freeze on all settlement activity in the occupied West Bank. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu justified continued settlement construction by citing secret agreements between prior Israeli governments and the Bush administration. The Israeli government says it agreed to the 2003 US-backed Road Map that called for a settlement freeze only on condition that it be allowed to violate the plan's ban on expanding existing settlements. No problem! said George... Diplomacy in action.

PARTY & PROTEST

* For listings updated weekly see www.schnews.org.uk/pap

PHOTO FINISH

Police may be forced to review the way they store images taken of people on protests following a recent legal victory by peace campaigner Andrew Wood. The appeal court ruled (on May 22nd) that pictures of Wood - media spokesperson for the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) - taken on a surveillance operation by Met police must be destroyed because the images were 'a disproportionate infringement of his human rights'.

Lord Justice Dyson said: "The retention by the police of photographs taken of persons who have not committed an offence, and who are not even suspected of having committed an offence, is always a serious matter."

What this decision will mean for FIT teams busy filming anyone going anywhere near a protest is not yet known. The cops, never keen to see any roll-back of the police state, are now deciding whether to appeal the ruling.

* Watching them watching you watching them at www.fitwatch.blogspot.com

REBELS WITHOUT A CAUSEWAY

The Rosspoint Solidarity Camp Summer Gathering took place last weekend at Glengad on the west coast of Ireland to protest against Shell building an offshore pipeline and gas refinery (See SchNEWS 595). As expected this gathering was a busman's holiday for the 200-odd activists attending, with actions taking place from Friday night until Monday evening. On Sunday, following another day of direct action, over 200 people from the camp and the local community attempted to breach the compound fence in two places and were met by over 60 Gardai. Five people who managed to scale the fence were held by security guards and later arrested.

On Monday evening protesters removed part of the Shell causeway that extends into the sea. Half an hour after around 40 protesters had waded out into the sea and removed a large amount of stone, a 70 strong Shell security crew arrived and the protesters dispersed.

The Rosspoint Solidarity Camp is back for another up-fer-it summer of actions against Shell's gas development.

* See www.rossportsolidaritycamp.110mb.com www.corribos.com

BRIAN OF BRITAIN

This Wednesday (2nd) was the eighth anniversary of one-man-walking-protest Brian Haw's camp in Parliament Square, London. He set up in June 2001 - before 9-11 - in protest at the bombing and economic sanctions on Iraq before broadening to include the US and Britain's 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In his time Brian has been raided by police (see SchNEWS 545), taken Metropolitan Police Commissioner Ian Blair to court (see SchNEWS 609), had a classic New Labour authoritarian law drafted just for him (See SchNEWS 543) and won Channel 4's 'Most Inspiring Political Figure' award (see SchNEWS 576).

Fair play to Brian for keeping on keeping on, but with the newly branded 'Overseas Contingency Operations' still in full swing in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it looks like he could be out there a while yet.

* See www.parliament-square.org.uk

Disclaimer

SchNEWS reminds all readers about our joint benefit gig with Radio 4A on June 11th at The Volks, Brighton, 10pm-3am, fiver, with live music and DJs. Honest!

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