

Return of the Diggers

Anarchist Communist Federation

1996

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On Sunday 5th May, 1996 a campaign calling itself The Land Is Ours organised a land occupation on thirteen acres of derelict land. Around 300 people arrived in two coaches. The land is situated on York Road in Wandsworth, South London and is owned by Guinness.

When the people reached the site they began to transform it into a 'sustainable eco-village'. The name Pure Genius was decided on (it was previously called Gargoyle Wharf). They started off with building Octavia's Love Nest, a large wooden octagonal building in which to have meetings, workshops, entertainment, temporary sleeping, etc. People constructed their own temporary homes in the forms of tepees, tents, and benders. For the first week there were over 100 people permanently on site with a few thousand people visiting and participating during the week. Now roughly seventy people live on the site on a permanent basis and help to build more permanent, 'low-impact' housing both individually and collectively. On Wednesday 8th, Colin Ward came to the site and gave a talk in Octavia's Love Nest about the British squatters movement in the mid-40's. The talk was attended by most people on site and seemed to be accepted very well. As well as construction of the buildings, there was the task of making the flower and vegetable gardens, using an agricultural technique called "permaculture"; making the land (which was previously a brewery site and before that an oil refinery!) use-able despite the poor soil quality and polluted land. People also made a pond, rock gardens, walkways lined with painted stones, wire sculptures, banners and beautiful murals around the front entrance and also inside of the site.

Meal times are usually communal, with most people gathering around the main camp fire. Food supplies come from people donating and also cheap or free food 'tatted' at the end of the market day. Toilet facilities include two compost toilets and a shallow trench.

Entertainment at Pure Genius has included acoustic music (with much singing of The Diggers' Song), circus stunts, story-telling and an excellent performance of the anti-capitalist environmental play Dinosaurs and all that Rubbish. On the site are all sorts of people. There are many people from abroad: on the erection of a pyramidal sleeping structure, in which five people participated, one person was English, two American, one a New Zealander and the other a Canadian. There were also people present from the Green Party, Freedom (John Rety and Colin Ward), and many people from Newbury and other road protests. One ACF member stayed on site for all of the first week and on the evening of Saturday 11th, five other ACF members turned up, had a look around the site, visited someone in their tepee and left for the pub with two Class War members who happened to be visiting at the same time.

Anarchy in Action?

John Rety claimed that this is "anarchy in action" and that he has "now seen anarchy in practice and, so far, it works." (Freedom, 18th May) This is not anarchy. Anarchy means "freedom and justice for all". There are about seventy people living on Pure Genius and there are almost six billion people in the world. As long as most of the world lives in slavery, poverty and brutality, we will not see anarchy. If anarchy does not mean freedom and justice for all then we could say that a woman living isolated on an island is, of and by herself, Anarchy. (Not to mention that she would be a slave to her work, and that, as an individual, her potential could only be realised by its gratification in human society!) Also there is the fact that the people participating in the land occupation live neither under freedom nor justice. As long as the government has its army

of policemen and soldiers no one will really be free, and the small amount of freedom they allow is transitory and only guaranteed to the extent that the people can fight for it. As long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few have all the good things of life, there is not justice.

Property is Theft!

This land occupation was undoubtedly propaganda by the deed (as opposed to propaganda of the deed). The question is, what was the message of this propaganda? Anarchists would, of course, have liked it to be a message of “Property is theft” (as the proto-anarchist Proudhon said). It seems however that the main messages are things like “sensible land use” and The Land Is Ours (who can’t seem to stress enough that they are “a campaign, not an organisation”) also say that they “want to highlight urban dereliction”. Their participation in the legal process and their negotiations with Guinness are not anarchistic and it is silly to be saying “The land is ours!” while at the same time saying “Please, can’t we just use a little bit of the land which your not using right now?” Indeed, The Land Is Ours have said that they want to “make good use of derelict sites”, but what about the good property, with housing and infrastructure already there?

They claim it is not an ‘ideological squat’ but they obviously do have an ideology, it is just one which is un-ambitious and reformist. The people ‘behind’ the ‘campaign’ have expressed that many of them are for common ownership of all social property etc. and so have most of the people involved. But none of this made it into the media and they have admitted that they are deliberately trying to tone the politics down for the sake of the media. The media coverage was very positive, but at what expense? They have either tried to portray it as a bunch of hippies doing earth dances or as some sort of experiment led by a few Oxford intellectuals (which it may well be). There were three main positive aspects of the campaign.

1. The anarchistic organisation and structure of it. People live communally, eat communally and work collectively. No-one is ‘in charge’ and people organise their projects autonomously.
2. The Ideological and historical background for their actions is decidedly anarchist. On the whole they seem to have an affinity with the Diggers’ anarchist communist ethic. They are unquestionably anti-capitalist and anti-government and pro-self-organisation and autonomy. The presence of Anarchists on site, including John Rety, ACF and Colin Ward, and their participation in the decision making and work on the site definitely helped to strengthen the libertarian content of the campaign.
3. Involvement with local people. Leaflets were handed out to passers-by and all the local residences were leafleted telling them what’s going on and asking that they get involved. Several locals were highly involved in the decision making process, in leaflet production and distribution and work etc. All the local people who visited the site were positive and said that they supported what was being done. This helped to strengthen links between ordinary working class people and political activists and to expose them to ideas and attitudes which they otherwise might not have heard.

Is it all Worthwhile?

Maybe projects like these are a waste of time and end up being elitist and only benefiting a few people while not causing any real social change. Obviously we shouldn't expect that these things, by themselves, are going to radically alter the world ("Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it." – Mahatma Gandhi), but things like this could be worthwhile in addition to other struggles.

If we think that projects like this may be worthwhile, then we should ask ourselves whether we should get more involved in future projects and try to counter those who try to make it 'media friendly'.

You poor take courage,
You rich take care,
This Earth was made a Common Treasury
For everyone to share,
All things in common, all people one.

– The Diggers' Song

For surely this particular property of mine and thine hath brought in all misery upon people.

– Gerrard Winstanley

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Retrieved on 12th October 2021 from web.archive.org
Published in *Organise!* Issue 43 – Summer 1996.

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