

Everyone was pushing hard; school children and their parents, eco-activists, elderly local residents. First it creaked, then cracked and then crash – the huge wooden fence fell. Erected by the Department of Transport (DOT) on Wanstead Common in east London in the winter of 1993, the fence surrounded an old chestnut tree, condemned to sawdust because it was growing in the way of a new road. It took no time for people to push it down, to reclaim their commons. But weeks later the DOT came back. Despite the resistance, they cut down the 250-year-old tree, but it took them ten hours.

Demolishing that fence was a spontaneous act of popular rebellion and it became a defining moment for the British direct action movement in the early 1990s. It catalyzed a campaign of direct action against the M11 link road, which helped inspire road protest camps to multiply across the country. Tactics imported from environmental activists in the United States and Australia (such as building tree houses and using bodies to block bulldozers) were highly effective and proved very expensive for the road builders. Public opinion was behind the movement and the government's road programme was soon in tatters. Budgets were cut and over 500 road plans scrapped. In response the government introduced a draconian piece of legislation, the 1994 Criminal Justice Bill, which included criminalizing direct action, removing the right to silence, and banning rave parties.

Instead of stopping the movement, the Bill did quite the opposite. A broad, and uniquely diverse coalition emerged to fight it as all the disparate factions whose interests were threatened banded together: hunt saboteurs, peace protesters, football supporters, squatters, radical lawyers, gypsies, ravers, disabled-rights activists. The idea of single-issue politics dissolved as new relationships formed, and new networks were born.

Over the Wall: so *this* is direct action!

by Noam Leven

We were late, as always. Lost in a part of London neither of us had ever been to before. A place far across the river and way to the east, with a postcode, E11, that indicates a zone on the endless periphery of our sprawling city. Eventually we found where we were meant to be, a nondescript semi-detached house, pebble-dashed in grey, steeped in normalcy and surrounded by a sea of suburbia.

Someone opened the door and quickly whisked us inside. A strong smell hit us – the smell of wet clothes and bonfire smoke, and a group of about 30 people sat on the floor of the living room. Young dreadlocked hippies, elderly women sipping mugs of tea, a few people looking like bike messengers, all listening attentively to a woman in her late twenties who was enthusiastically explaining the ins and outs of Operation Road Block. For a suburban house, it was uncannily bare, empty of trinkets and the amassed stuff that so often suffocates suburban interiors. We were in one of the many squatted houses on the route of the M11 link road which was being built through this area, destroying 350 homes and several patches of ancient woodland in its wake. Operation Road Block was a month of daily direct action intended to delay the construction of the much-contested road scheme and cost the developers large amounts of money.

Half an hour later we were walking in a single file through one of the threatened pieces of woodland, crouched one behind the other, a bunch of clumsy urbanites desperately trying to make as little noise as possible while creeping through the undergrowth. I wasn't really sure where we were going, or exactly what we were meant to do. I knew why I was there – to disrupt the road builders; to place my body in the way of the machinery which was destroying this neighbourhood and to try and prevent another triumph of crazy car culture. The training told us our legal rights and some basic tactical tips, but what exactly I was going to do once I got there, I had no idea. And frankly I was scared – terrified. I'd never taken direct action, never jumped on a bulldozer, never even been arrested, and in seven months time I would be a father. Was this a responsible thing to be doing?

A high wall topped with sharp shards of broken glass embedded in concrete marked the edge of the woodland. We stopped beside it. I looked up and wondered – were we really going to go over that? Someone threw a roll of carpet over the protruding bits of glass. "Quick – over the wall," they whispered breathlessly. I froze, hit by one of those

"All I was trying to do was defend our local bit of land. I've never thought of myself as political before but this has shown me that all life is politics – if you step out of line."

– East London resident and protester against the M11 link road, 1994

moments where the normal flow of life is suddenly interrupted. A tiny fraction of time expanded, encompassing everything, filling itself with many thoughts, questions, dilemmas. Am I really going to go over that wall? It's too tall, I'm not going to make it. I'll hurt myself. What's on the other side of it, anyway? Aren't we just going to fall into the waiting arms of the police?

Although a thousand thoughts flowed through my mind in that moment, it was actually my body that took over and made my decision for me. My muscles, by now bathed in adrenaline, knew exactly what to do. My knees bent, my arms reached up, and I jumped. Someone held out their



The Restless Margins moments of resistance and rebellion: 1994 - 2003

1994

>> **January 1** >> The EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) declares war against Mexico, bringing its inspirational struggle for life and humanity

to the forefront of political imaginations across the planet. Within 24 hours the Mexican army responds, bombing communities and killing at least 145 indigenous people. An outraged Mexican civil society retaliates with massive demonstrations calling for an end to military repression. The date of the uprising marks the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which condemns millions of

hand and pulled me over the top of the wall. As if weightless, my body complied and seemed to fly over what had seconds ago seemed like an unassailable obstacle. I landed on my feet, leaves crunching on impact, and began to run. At first I did not know where to go; I couldn't see any machinery to jump on. We seemed to be on some cleared land, bounded on one side by the wall and on the others by newly erected steel fencing. The only thing that made sense was to head towards one of the two large oak trees that I could see a few yards away. I propelled my body towards the base of one of the trunks as a flash of fluorescent clothing lurched at me. Security guards, everywhere.

A group of us huddled around the base of the tree trunk. Half an hour ago I had never met any of these people; now we were intimately entangled, arms locked together, limbs thrashing, a mass of squirming bodies resisting the guards' attempts to remove us. I remembered the trainer's words: "Keep your thumbs tucked in so they can't prise open your hands." That strange suburban house now felt several worlds away.

I'm not sure what happened next. The clarity of the peak moment – jumping over the wall – turned into a blur populated by frantic security guards and police. But after much pulling on limbs, something extraordinary happened. They gave up and just walked off the site. "We've done it!" someone shouted from one of the piles of bodies. "We've squatted the land, taken it back!" A cheer went up, whoops of joy. Our pragmatic embraces turned into warm hugs of victory. We stood up and immediately began dismantling

the steel fences enclosing this piece of land, which was destined to become a four lane motorway one day.

So this was it, this was direct action. Not asking someone else to do something for us, but doing it ourselves. We had crossed walls, broken down fences, and claimed this land as ours. Our bodies had trespassed. Our feet had walked across the line that separates the private from the public. Our minds had evicted the fear that tells us not to disobey and had ignited the hope that anything is possible.

That day was the first step of a journey which would transform my entire life – a journey to places, struggles, and rebellions I never imagined on that spring morning as I crouched beside the wall, wondering if I should jump or not.

Noam Leven is a pseudonym

Resources:

» **Extensive site with links and information on radical ecological direct action movements: www.eco-action.org**

» ***Not for rent: conversations with creative activists in the UK*, Evil Twin Publications, Amsterdam/Seattle, 1995**

» ***DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, Ed. George McKay, Verso, London/New York, 1998.**



Creative tactics protect Claremont Road, an occupied street on the route of the M11. London, UK

indigenous people, peasants, farmers, and workers across North America to poverty, and accelerates environmental destruction and corporate ascendance.

>> **January 27** >> New labour laws provoke a 24 hour general strike across Spain. Major cities are occupied by police, and rioting erupts sporadically as hundreds of thousands take to the streets. Shops, airports, and railway stations close, and tourists must fend for

themselves in hotels.

>> **February 3** >> Thousands of Indian villagers gather on the banks of the Narmada River to celebrate victory in their year-long campaign to halt the Maheshwar hydropower dam – the first to be built in India using private finance.

>> **March** >> Campaign against the M11 link road begins in earnest in London, UK, as anti-road activists

team up with local people to try and defend their public space.

>> **April** >> Peasants form 850 self-defence committees across Bolivia to block roads and resist militarization, the result of the US demand that the Bolivian government eradicate 1,750 hectares of coca production, under threat of an international economic embargo from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)