

## Intakes: An activist's perspective on the fracking struggle at Balcombe



### AUFHEBEN'S INTRODUCTION

It is relatively uncontroversial now to state that the 'environment' and particular struggles around it are linked to capital and therefore can express the underlying class struggle. We argued in 1993 that the then-burgeoning UK anti-roads movement was an attack on capital – it was an attack on the mechanisms of expanding value.<sup>1</sup> The possible objections to this argument – that most of those involved did not understand their actions in anti-capitalist terms, that participants had a coherent identity of struggle only in the sphere of culture, that they were not directly connected with the means of production, and that in their composition they were thoroughly heterogeneous (comprising odd alliances of respectable middle class types and 'full time' eco-activists) – rested on a kind of workerism. The critique of this kind of workerism was developed through our engagement with another kind – that

<sup>1</sup> 'Auto-struggles: The developing war against the road monster', *Aufheben* #3, 1994

of the Italian *autonomia* movement - which suggested that 'the social factory' (meaning the relations of production) extended beyond the literal factory walls. If capital was 'everywhere' then antagonism was 'everywhere' too.

However, implicit in our appropriation of some ideas from *autonomia* (and much more explicit in later critiques)<sup>2</sup> was the argument that 'the social factory' was not sufficient as an analysis. The moment of truth in 'orthodox' accounts of the limits of the 'new movements' was that the conscious ideas of these groups were liberal and bourgeois – often dogmatically so; so the struggles in and of themselves were not necessarily anti-capitalist. But we argued that both the 'orthodox' and the autonomist needed to grasp these struggles in terms of their possible *trajectory over time* rather than simply (aspects of) their immediate appearance - as either 'struggle' (autonomists) or 'liberal' (orthodox). Through the very fact that these anti-roads groups were in

<sup>2</sup> <http://libcom.org/library/aufheben-autonomia>

collective confrontation with the forces of the state over a key aspect of the capital-accumulation infrastructure, they could *become* anti-capitalist forces.

Our analysis of this potential dynamic was partly borne out by subsequent developments, as the anti-roads movement morphed into the anti-car 'Reclaim the Streets' and the anti-capitalist movement of June 18<sup>th</sup> 1999.<sup>3</sup> Those involved in these struggles didn't simply change their language and identities to consciously anti-capitalist and communist subjectivities, but made practical connections with workers – tube workers, dockers – in 'traditional' working class locations and industries in order to escalate the struggle and build a movement.

Arguably, that high point of 'environmental' struggle has yet to be surpassed. Subsequent 'environmental' direct action campaigns have not developed into a movement of the scale of the anti-roads movement.



Yet climate change, which is now almost universally agreed to be linked to capitalist industry and consumption, is clearly a massive point of tension for contemporary capitalism. In the last issue of *Aufheben*, we analysed how climate change has led to the development of new industries and new locations of value expansion, including an emerging 'green capitalism'.<sup>4</sup> It therefore remains a potential basis for collective struggle, that might combine workplace actions with a class analysis of climate change. In the UK, an important example of this was the occupation of Vestas Blades, a wind turbine manufacturer, in 2009.<sup>5</sup> When their factory in Newport on the Isle of Wight was threatened with closure, the younger workers occupied. They also made nationalization for 'green jobs' one of their demands. However, while there was solidarity from a climate camp

and from other groups, the struggle did not spread, and the occupation ended without clear concessions.

In the last issue, we also pointed out that fossil energy prices will inevitably continue to rise and will become increasingly uneconomical. As we discussed, among the non-conventional fossil fuels that are now being exploited are shale oil and shale gas. These fossil fuels are extracted through fracking – hydraulic fracturing. While shale gas might give off fewer CO<sub>2</sub> emissions than burning coal, the fracking process releases methane gas, which is an even greater contributor to climate change. Thus while there are numerous local objections to fracking, the global problem of 'anthropogenic' climate change – the need for endless expansion of value through damaging industrial developments and patterns of consumption – means that the fundamental problem of this method takes us back to the nature of capitalism itself.

Currently, the most high-profile mass direct action campaign against fracking taking place in the UK is not far from *Aufheben* Towers, in the Sussex village of Balcombe. We have been following it with interest, particularly as it has developed into a focus for the national campaign. It is now at the forefront of both the UK's radical environmental direct action movement and the government's propaganda war.

The concern of local people with issues such as earthquakes and water supply in fracking locations has led some to characterize them as 'ignoring the science'. A number of fracking experts have been on the mass media to explain that people's fears are mistaken and that the practice, which is used around the world, is safe (or at least no less safe than other fuel extraction methods). However, what is of important in this conflict is perhaps less the extent to which protestors are right on every point of fact, but more their lack of trust in the government, who are actively promoting fracking as a positive development, for economic as well as energy-security reasons. It is not that people are necessarily ignorant or irrational in their opposition to new scientific developments but rather they are not ready to believe a government and industry they perceive has no compunction about lying if it is in its own political interests (Recent scandals in the food industry, in policing, and in the behaviour of the press have contributed to this decline of trust in 'the establishment'). Thus the 'local' struggle over fracking is not just a local dispute, but both reflects and connects with a wider set of social relations of mistrust, delegitimation and even antagonism.

For this *Intakes* article, we asked one of our friends who had been along to the Balcombe site

<sup>3</sup> <http://libcom.org/library/aufheben-inside-movements>

<sup>4</sup> 'The climate crisis... And the new green capitalism?', *Aufheben* #21, 2012

<sup>5</sup> 'The red shoots of resistance? Recession struggles in the UK', *Aufheben* #18, 2010.

to share with us his experience of the campaign and to give us his perspective on its prospects for escalation.

*Aufheben*

Brighton, September 2013

## AN ACTIVIST'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE FRACKING STRUGGLE AT BALCOMBE

I was asked by the good folk at *Aufheben* HQ to write about my experiences of visiting the recent fracking protests in Balcombe in August-September 2013 from the perspective of a retired eco-warrior. I was involved in the UK anti-roads struggles throughout the 1990s, and saw their development from the direct action protests against the M3 extension through Twyford Down (which had an almost exclusively environmental focus), to the No M11 campaign in London and its emphasis on housing issues, and later evolving into Reclaim the Streets' broader focus on social justice issues and a general critique of how we interact with social spaces <sup>6</sup>. This resulted in environmentalists making links made with explicitly class-based workers' struggles (such as the Liverpool Docks dispute in the mid 1990s<sup>7</sup>). Their development of a wider perspective closely follows my own and others' political development from idealistic (and sometimes quite naive) hippies to much more critical analysts of the class struggle. It is interesting to see how the struggle at Balcombe seems to currently have a similar potential for such growth and development. However, the struggle is also at a relatively early stage, with any analyses of capitalist production and/or class issues still in their infancy. This campaign may also need to confront similar problems that previous struggles have faced. What follows is my own observations of the struggle at Balcombe and an attempt at some form of analysis of what the campaign has so far achieved, how it has developed, and the issues it currently faces.

### Introduction: How the fracking struggle began and developed at Balcombe

There has been small-scale fossil fuel extraction in Sussex for over a century, with an interest in oil exploration at Balcombe since 1986.<sup>8</sup> In 2008, the drilling exploration company, Cuadrilla

bought a Petroleum Exploration and Development Licence (PEDL) for 270 square miles of West Sussex, including the area around Balcombe Estate. Local opposition began to grow as people became aware of Cuadrilla's proposals, and in January 2012, the then CEO was grilled by 300 locals at a public meeting<sup>9</sup>. Direct action protests began towards the end of July 2013, when around 250 people successfully prevented vehicles carrying drilling equipment from entering the site. This resulted in a massive police presence the following day and ever since to clear blockades in front of the gate, and force Cuadrilla's vehicles through the crowds that gathered in opposition, brutalising and/or arresting those who resist. This pattern continued throughout early to mid August, complemented by other innovative actions, such as: protestors super-gluing themselves to the gate, locking on to wheelchairs, and a group of 'frack-fighters' using an old fire engine to blockade the site entrance. The Balcombe Community Protection Camp (BCPC) was set up along the road-side by the site entrance and grew into an alternative village running along the verge towards Balcombe village. There was also briefly a splinter camp squatting the field next to the drilling site (which included tree-houses and protestors wandering round with climbing harnesses clunking away) before it was evicted by the police in mid-August.



<sup>6</sup> See the following *Aufheben* article for a history of the Twyford Down and no M11 campaigns and how the UK anti-roads movement developed in the early 1990s; <http://libcom.org/library/auto-struggles-aufheben-3>

<sup>7</sup> See 'Docks and dreadlocks come together', *Schnews*, 1996 <http://www.schnews.org.uk/archive/news93.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <http://frack-off.org.uk/fracking-in-balcombe-a-community-says-no/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://frack-off.org.uk/caudrilla-boss-mauled-at-west-sussex-public-meeting/>

The 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> week of August saw a significant escalation of the campaign (and resulting police response), as the national campaign group no Dash For Gas<sup>10</sup> decided to re-locate its planned Reclaim the Power (RTP) camp to Balcombe in solidarity with the campaign. This was held from August 16-21<sup>st</sup> and attracted experienced



*Sussex public order unit doing photo-shoot for their latest bondage look*

activists from across the UK and beyond, culminating in a series of nationwide actions on 19/8/13. This period also coincided with a huge increase in police reinforcements from across England, with more force used against protestors, and a dramatic increase in arrests. Since the RTP camp finished, there have still been up to 100 cops deployed per day to escort the trucks. From September 1<sup>st</sup> a rolling blockade of the site began, with some protestors managing to disrupt operations temporarily by locking on to vehicles as they approach<sup>11</sup> and most recently blocking the road with a tripod<sup>12</sup>. However, apart from these set-piece spectacles, the protests have sometimes developed a more symbolic nature, as protestors are often so heavily outnumbered, there is little more they can do than walk with the cops as they escort the trucks onto the site. The struggle at Balcombe has inspired other campaigns across the British Isles, such as in Somerset<sup>13</sup>, Wales<sup>14</sup>, and Ireland<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, these localised protests have the potential to develop into a coordinated nationwide movement against fracking that could scare off the relatively small exploration companies currently seeking permission to expand the drilling and/or fracking projects to a scale that will make them economically viable for bigger companies to exploit.

### Response of the state

As with previous direct action campaigns, the state's response has been massive, and at times

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nodashforgas.org.uk/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://frack-off.org.uk/latest-news-from-the-great-gas-gala-day-40/>

<sup>12</sup> [https://twitter.com/28\\_DaysLater/status/375530069294583808/photo/1](https://twitter.com/28_DaysLater/status/375530069294583808/photo/1)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.frackfreesomerset.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://frack-off.org.uk/local-group/frack-off-gower/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://frackingfreeireland.org/>

quite disproportionate to the numbers of protestors at Balcombe. The amount of police resources used and their subsequent costs (a reported £2.3m already spent by 23/8/13 and up to £3.7m predicted by the end of September 2013<sup>16</sup>) reflects this sense of overkill, and shows how seriously the state takes the potential significance of these

protests. This has led to comparisons with the 1995 Shoreham Harbour live export protests,<sup>17</sup> where the costs of policing almost bankrupted Sussex police (the force had to apply for central Home Office funding after spending its annual public order budget in the first couple of weeks of 1995). Reinforcements have been drafted from at least 11 police forces nationally (including the Met), leading to bizarre scenes of cops from as far away as Cornwall wrestling with protestors in previously sleepy Sussex lanes. There has also been the opportunity for the cops to try out a whole assortment of new kit, with cops in riot gear patrolling inside the drilling site, and escorting the trucks onto the site in body armour for a brief period after the RTP protests. Cuadrilla have also hired G4S (famed for the 2012 Olympics security debacle) to employ retired Gurkhas to guard the site inside the perimeter fence, who are reportedly being paid just £2.60 p/hr for this dubious honour (has anyone told Joanna Lumley?!).

In keeping with the recent national trend towards attempting to create more dialogue between cops and protestors on demos, Police Liaison Officers (PLOs) seem now to be fully embedded in Sussex's response, and smiling coppers in blue tabards have become a ubiquitous presence at Balcombe. However, protestors remain wary of them, and they tend to only engage with them on a very superficial level as they are seen by even the most ideological pacifists on the camp as little more than friendly intelligence gatherers. It is also debatable how much influence these PLOs have on the ground anyway.<sup>18</sup> Their relatively junior level<sup>19</sup> means

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-23796432>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no5/shoreham.htm>

<sup>18</sup> During the RTP camp, there was a stand-off with the cops over vehicular access to the site. Discussions with the PLOs

that more senior officers can and do over-ride the PLOs if there is a clash of views in policing strategy. Furthermore, as the protests have continued, they now seem to do little more than hang out on the periphery of police lines, and every now and then they attempt to explain or justify some of their colleagues' more forceful *for their latest bondage look* actions to protestors (with little apparent success).

Unsurprisingly, given the high police presence, there have also been many arrests<sup>20</sup>, either from the large-scale detention of protestors during blockades, or done retrospectively by snatch squads after the alleged incidents. As with previous campaigns, the cops have exploited their ability to set draconian bail conditions on those they arrest. However, this strategy has backfired somewhat, as they tried to ban arrestees from such a large area around the site (including the main London to Brighton railway line), that their lawyer successfully argued in court that this was a politically motivated attempt to stifle the

protests. Therefore, all conditions were dropped and unconditional bail granted - a pattern that has been repeated at other court hearings since.<sup>21</sup> More recently, there were co-ordinated efforts between the police and local authorities to clamp down on the protests. For instance, in early September, West Sussex County Council (WSSC), who own the land where the BCPC is based, began the first stage of eviction proceedings by serving a notice to quit on the camp. The following day, the police also imposed S14 restrictions of the Public order Act (POA), meaning that protests were only supposed to happen in an enclosed pen away from the site entrance. These attempts to stifle the protests were largely ignored, and the struggle continues undiminished at the time of writing this article. In a final ironic twist, the campaign had a minor victory in the High Court on 16/9/13 when the judge rejected WSSC's eviction claim as 'flawed' on the grounds that they had not considered the right to protest, and adjourned the case till 8/10/13, which is after the imposed deadline on drilling operations, and



*A local's response to Vivienne Westwood when she asked him to change her grandchild's nappy*

were getting nowhere, so people went over their head to a more senior officer to negotiate access, and had more success.

<sup>19</sup> The PLOs that Sussex use seem to be either be PCs or sergeants (the lowest ranks in the police hierarchy). This may reflect the low importance attached to their role.

<sup>20</sup> By the middle of September 2013, there had been over 100 arrests in total

<sup>21</sup>

<http://investigatingbalcombeandcuadrilla.wordpress.com/2013/08/14/original-map-of-bail-conditions-imposed-on-arrested-cuadrilla-campaigners/>

when the protests at Balcombe are expected to finish<sup>22</sup>.

The political establishment has also thrown its weight behind fracking with senior levels of the UK government openly offering their support, and links between top politicians in the coalition and the fracking industry have been exposed<sup>23</sup>, including allegations of lobbying of government officials by Cuadrilla's chairman.<sup>24</sup> In early August 2013, Lord Howell (Chancellor George Osborne's father in law) made a spectacular gaffe in a House of Lords speech about how fracking should be done in the 'desolate North-East', which resulted in PM David Cameron feeling the need to write an article in the *Daily Telegraph*<sup>25</sup> saying how fracking would bring down domestic gas prices (a claim later rubbished by Lord Stern, author of the influential Stern report on Climate change<sup>26</sup>), and that it should be done in the South of England as well as the North. Given that most of these intended fracking sites in the South are Tory seats, I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of Tory MPs are now nervously observing the Balcombe protests and worrying whether fracking is coming to their back yard!

This open support of politicians for fracking along with apparent abuses of the local planning procedures has created a perception of the illegitimacy of the whole drilling/fracking process. This was highlighted in a recent Private Eye article<sup>27</sup> pointing out the lack of transparency in the planning process regarding Cuadrilla's application to drill at Balcombe, and that locals were largely kept in the dark. Therefore, whether or not protestors are entirely factually correct in all their arguments is not vital in their perception of the legitimacy of their struggle (although there are numerous objections to fracking in peer-reviewed academic reports<sup>28</sup> that are cited by the more articulate protestors on the front-line). The imposition of fracking on the local community in the perceived absence of any meaningful consultation and the perception that their concerns about local environmental damage are being ignored, means that there is a general distrust of Cuadrilla and the government that is

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-24112750>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/revealed-fracking-industry-bosses-at-heart-of-coalition-8707589.html>

<sup>24</sup> <http://frack-off.org.uk/browne-lobbying/>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10236354/You-must-accept-fracking-for-the-good-of-the-country-David-Cameron-tells-southerners.html>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/baseless-economics-lord-stern-on-david-camersons-claims-that-a-uk-fracking-boom-can-bring-down-price-of-gas-8796758.html>

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.private-eye.co.uk/sections.php?section\\_link=news&issue=1346](http://www.private-eye.co.uk/sections.php?section_link=news&issue=1346)

<sup>28</sup> <http://frack-off.org.uk/campaign-materials/science-and-data/>

seen to be behind it (as well as the cops who are seen as working to ensure Cuadrilla can continue operations unhindered).

There are concerns about the specific local effects of the drilling, and a recent report<sup>29</sup> highlights Cuadrilla's inadequate preparations at Balcombe, and the risk of contamination of local water supplies because the drilling is too close to the surface. There is also evidence from the US that it is not possible to 100% guarantee that groundwater supplies will not be polluted by fracking.<sup>30</sup> The risk of water contamination is also concerning for the wider Sussex population, as the site is very close to Ardingly reservoir which is a major source of fresh drinking water for the entire region. The campaign also makes the point that there is much more at stake than the immediate vicinity around Balcombe<sup>31</sup>. Because Cuadrilla is an exploration company, it is too small to undertake major extraction projects itself. So, it tends to undertake small-scale drilling operations in specific locations to show that they are viable, and then sell the findings on to bigger oil extraction companies (such as Shell) who have the resources to engage in much larger projects. Therefore, the risk is that if Cuadrilla concludes that fracking is viable in the region, it could be the first of many drilling wells across West Sussex and beyond.

### Role of media

The Balcombe protests have all the ingredients for a media-friendly mix of full-time environmental protestors, outraged middle-class locals from the Tory voting shires, and assorted extras that such protests attract (hippies, travellers, druids, conspiracy theorists<sup>32</sup>, academics, etc.) mingling together in a sometimes festival-type atmosphere interspersed with set-piece confrontations as the trucks appear with a heavy police escort, and are then forced through the crowd into the site. This media spectacle has been further enhanced when celebrities like Vivienne Westwood have attended the site, and were pursued by a media scrum wherever they went. However, a planned visit by the narcissistic Russell Brand thankfully never materialised, and we only had to endure a message of support from him!

<sup>29</sup> <http://frack-off.org.uk/geophysics-emeritus-professor-cuadrilla-knowledge-inadequate-for-purpose-required/>

<sup>30</sup> <http://frack-off.org.uk/fracking-pollutes-groundwater-controversial-new-data/>

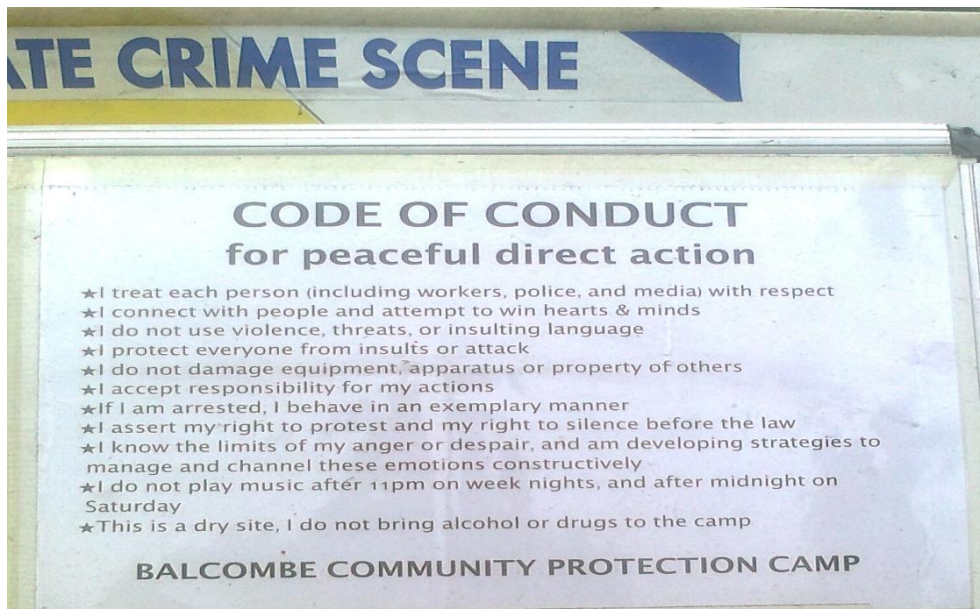
<sup>31</sup> <http://frack-off.org.uk/the-real-significance-of-the-battle-of-balcombe/>

<sup>32</sup> A frequent presence on direct-action campaigns in the UK, claiming that the issue in question (or 9/11, 7/7 etc) is all the result of the insidious influence of the Masons, Illuminati, aliens, etc. in their attempts at global domination, and they often try to impart their wisdom onto anyone unwise enough to stop and listen to them!

### Response of the left

The left has so far been rather muted in their response to the Balcombe protests - perhaps unsure of what angle they should take on a campaign outside their traditional comfort zone (e.g. trade union dominated workerist struggles, pointless marches from A to B, trying to persuade people why they should vote Labour etc.), and

Down days (including some old faces). For instance, both saw a disaffected local population in the heart of the Tory shires allying themselves with people they would probably have previously crossed the road to avoid! There was also a cheerful (and almost naive) optimism amongst protestors old and young alike and a strong belief in the legitimacy of their struggle. Unfortunately,



*Did anyone ask the cops if they had signed up to this code of conduct?*

apart from lone individuals with union flags at some of the protests, I have not seen much significant involvement. The Trotskyist left have made some attempts to cash in on the protests, but compared to their previous attempts to set up front groups in an effort to take over the campaign in question (Coalition against the CJB, Globalise Resistance etc), their efforts have been pretty feeble so far. For instance, the local SWP organised an anti-fracking meeting in Brighton after the protests started, and deposited a single anti-fracking poster with an SWP logo on a tree near the site (the same poster was removed and later reappeared on top of a protestor's tent with the 'SWP' logo replaced by 'rape apologists'!<sup>33</sup>)

### Have we been here before?

The struggle at Balcombe has clear resonance with previous anti-roads struggles seen in the UK in the early 1990s. There are certainly similar factors that reminded me of my early Twyford

there is also the danger that this belief can be accompanied by self-righteous evangelism. This has been manifested at Balcombe through the sometimes malign influence of ideological pacifists who 'know' that such protests have to be non-violent under all circumstances and I saw some trying to impose this view on others. A code of conduct 'for peaceful direct action' is posted inside the main info tent (see photo below), and was read out at early meetings to remind people of the need to be non-violent and 'accept responsibility for their actions'. I also heard comments like 'violence is old hat, and it just doesn't work'. I found all this a depressing re-run of endless debates that we used to have in the direct action movement between those espousing ideological non-violence versus those who realised that in some situations more militant tactics were justified or even necessary. I'm sure *Aufheben* readers are well versed with the deep problems with ideological pacifism and aware of the many critiques of such a position (see previous *Aufhebens* if not), so I will limit my observations to the following points.

<sup>33</sup> In March 2013 the SWP was rocked by revelations that the central committee covered up accusations of rape by a senior party member <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/mar/09/socialist-workers-party-rape-kangaroo-court>

There seems to be a fundamental gap in the understanding of the ideological pacifists when they believe that their actions alone will determine whether or not cops will behave violently towards them. While the police's behaviour at Balcombe has been less obviously brutal than it could be (so far they haven't really used truncheons, shields, dogs or horses), they will still use violence as and when it suits their objectives, because quite simply, it works. Their use of more subtle (but still violent) methods in clearing protestors (such as pressure points, forceful arrests, pushing protestors to the ground etc.) seems to have been quite successful so far in achieving their aims (to allow vehicles to enter the site, and facilitate Cuadrilla's drilling operations without too much disruption). Protestors don't seem to have persuaded the cops to sign up to their code of conduct either, so any professed non-violence will always be a one-sided (and unequal) gesture. Furthermore, asking people new to protests to accept the violence directed towards them without allowing them the possibility to resist or defend themselves (or even try to escape!), does not seem to be an effective way of building a mass movement, as most people do not want to become punch-bags for the police or private security.

### Change/transformation of protests

It is interesting to see how involvement in such struggles can result in fundamental and long-lasting change. Recent blogs<sup>34</sup> on the campaign at Balcombe have suggested that charges of 'NIMBYism' (Not in My Back Yard) are often misplaced, as while it may be the specific local issue that is the initial trigger for some people to get involved, they often become politicised by their involvement (especially when they see the lengths the state will go to stop them), and can develop a much wider critique of capitalist relations and state oppression. Previous campaigns such as the M11 even saw some middle-class Wanstead residents leaving previously comfortable lives to become full-time activists after the campaign was over. Such campaigns also attract full-time environmental activists, sometimes jokingly called BANANAs (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anybody), who spend their time travelling to protests across the country and further afield, and consider the whole world as their 'back yard'.

Also at a more direct level, the highly publicised arrests of Green MP Caroline Lucas and others at the sit-down blockades (and the police's use of pain compliant techniques on pressure points to achieve this), illustrate quite nicely the shock and moral outrage that liberal

protestors can experience when confronted by the violence that cops will go to in order to achieve their aims. It's very easy to slip into the cynical response of 'yeah they're cops - that's what they do', and these were certainly my initial thoughts when first seeing this. However, for people who have spent their lives believing the police are there to protect them and uphold the law, the realisation that the police will never be on their side if they are involved in direct action struggles can be a powerful radicalising process. Therefore, I think seasoned class warriors should not discount the possibility of such a process of transformation occurring in people new to direct action, as righteous anger can produce rapid and even long-lasting change in people who may have previously had some pretty reactionary views (as was seen at Shoreham Harbour and the M11 protests).

### Critical analysis of the Balcombe campaign

As with previous struggles in the 1990s, 'rainbow' alliances of hippies and outraged middle-Englanders can be a powerful and eclectic mix in environmental direct action campaigns, but they also illustrate the practical and ideological



*Caroline Lucas introduces her son to the violence inherent in the state*

contradictions that exist and can lead to divisions over tactics and strategic focus. For instance, on a practical level, there seems to be a definite division of labour in levels of commitment and activism. So, while most locals seem supportive of the protests (recent polls have shown that at least 8/10 of locals oppose fracking, with less than 1/10 in favour<sup>35</sup>), they tend not to stay at the camp, and instead visit to offer moral and/or logistical support. There have been some impressive displays of collective support for the campaign by locals and other liberal campaigners, such as a rally held on 4/8/13 by 150-200 locals from Balcombe village (about 10% of the

<sup>34</sup>

<http://dontpaniccorrectingmythsaboutthecrowd.blogspot.co.uk/2013/08/fracking-protests-in-balcombe-and.html>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Q3D49aERS0>



population), and a national march on 18/8/13 that attracted over 2000 people from across the UK (although less than half that number were involved in the nationwide direct action protests the following day). This division is not that surprising (living full-time on such camps tends to rule out involvement from those with work or family commitments and most direct action happens when the trucks enter the site during working hours), and is something I've seen on similar protests in the past. There are of course exceptions to such differences in involvement (see below for some examples), but it did remind me of the slight unease I used to have when living on such camps. For instance, sometimes I worried that I was merely cannon fodder for other people's environmental consciences, and rather than having people continually congratulating me for what I was doing, I would have preferred that they had got stuck in as well!

There are also possible wider ideological differences between the locals and camp protestors. On the way from Balcombe station to the protest site, there was a sign hanging from the trees stating; '82% of local residents oppose fracking and 100% oppose illegal activity' - presumably reflecting a misplaced liberal concern that if they start doing anything 'illegal' then they will lose support for their cause. However, this concept of 'legality' has proved to be a somewhat fluid concept even for the most respectable Balcombe residents opposed to fracking, with none of them seeing to mind when Caroline Lucas and others got involved in the technically 'illegal' act of obstructing the highway. Since the rolling blockade began in September, some locals have also participated in openly illegal acts such as locking on to tankers<sup>36</sup>, and the gate to the site<sup>37</sup>, often eloquently explaining their reasons for why they became disillusioned with 'lawful' protest and decided to engage in direct action.

One clear difference between the Balcombe campaign the road protests of the early- mid 1990s is that so far there hasn't seemed to be any appetite for site occupations and/or pixieing<sup>38</sup>, actions that were common at Twyford Down and the M11 campaigns, and so presumably the drilling proceeds unhindered once equipment and workers are on site. This could be a tactical move, as the site is relatively small and patrolled 24/7 by security, so it is debatable what protestors could realistically do if they managed to get past the police and razor wire fences. However I didn't hear of any realistic consideration of this tactic

<sup>36</sup> <http://vimeo.com/73631038>

<sup>37</sup> <http://vimeo.com/73675207>

<sup>38</sup> A euphemism for criminal damage that originates from the 'Earth Liberation Fairies'- an anonymous banner that was used to claim responsibility for more militant Earth First! Actions conducted in the mid to late 1990s

either, and worry that it could be for ideological as well as tactical reasons, in that there is a fear of alienating the more liberal elements of the campaign if their actions become too 'militant'. Putting to one side whether effective class struggle needs to limit itself with such concerns, such a premise may even be incorrect, as militant action at previous protests did not necessarily deter public support<sup>39</sup>. I also heard anecdotally that some Balcombe locals were in favour of more radical action, but that such suggestions were quickly discounted by the ideological pacifism of the full-time protestors at the camp. This does raise the question of who actually owns such struggles - the locals who will suffer the long term effects of fracking in their area, or self-righteous pacifists who are not local and may very well disappear off to the next protest when the campaign comes to a natural end? It also concerns me that the energy that comes from the sense of righteous indignation that liberals get when realising that the police are not on their side could be dissipated or channelled down ideologically pacifist avenues that are often tactically flawed<sup>40</sup> and fundamentally disempowering if such tactics are implemented unquestioningly because those new to the scene believe this is how one is supposed to do direct action.

### Divisions between different camps

I noticed an interesting dynamic emerged during the week of the RTP camp 16-21<sup>st</sup> August that was a couple of miles away from the BCPC. While the numbers attending were slightly over-hyped beforehand (the cops said they were expecting over 1000 but roughly three quarters of that figure showed up at its height), there was still a good turn-out, including veterans of the No M11 and Reclaim the Streets campaigns as well as activists involved in No Dash for Gas. The RTP camp was well-organised, with field kitchens, media liaison teams and on-site legal advice from Green and Black Cross. They also had a reasonable level of political awareness in that it was generally accepted that the police were not welcome on site, and security measures were in place to protect the space (tripods at each gate, people with walkie-talkies guarding entrances at

<sup>39</sup> In January 1997, protestors against the Newbury bypass invaded a construction site after a symbolic 'vigil' organised by Friends of the Earth (to commemorate a year of the campaign) and destroyed all equipment, causing upwards of £250,000 of damage. While FoE condemned this action to the media, it did not adversely affect local support towards the campaign & many locals on the day openly supported this 'Reunion rampage' as it was later called!

<sup>40</sup> Pacifist advice given in previous struggles (such as trying to get people to sit down in the face of police horse charges during the anti CJB campaigns in 1994-5) risked dangerous and/or fatal injuries if they had been used.

all times etc.). The cops seemed to respect this, and did not make any serious attempts to enter the site, being content to post a continual presence at the entrances and greet people as they entered. The atmosphere on the RTP camp was more like the Earth First! gatherings I attended in the 1990s, where people would turn up, secure a space, have practical skill-sharing workshops and discussions about overall strategy, plan their action, go and do it, and then leave afterwards before the energy and enthusiasm dissipated.

This was in marked contrast to the BCPC, which has more of a free festival atmosphere (albeit interspersed with bouts of increasingly symbolic attempts to stop traffic entering the site). The physical limits of the camp (it follows the narrow verge of the road outside the main gate) also means that it cannot be realistically defended against incursions, and the police can enter tents to arrest people at will. While both camps were running, they tended to attract different styles of protestors: those from a more social justice/ class struggle tended to go to the RTP camp, and the more lifestyle/ hippy protestors would go to the one outside the site. I even heard anecdotally that there was a bit of rivalry between the two, as some from the BCPC resented the presence of the RTP camp for taking the focus away from them!

### **Conclusion - Success at Balcombe and beyond?**

On 3/9/13 Cuadrilla announced that it would not seek extension of its permission to drill, meaning that its operations are due to finish on 28/9/13.<sup>41</sup> However, this was not that surprising for the campaign,<sup>42</sup> and so while the decision is good news, it is not yet been treated as an outright victory. Where success will probably be measured is in the campaign's ability to inspire a national protest movement that makes fracking so politically toxic and expensive (because of the increased policing and security costs for the anticipated protests), that companies are deterred from bidding for future schemes because of the possible reputational and financial damage.<sup>43</sup> Such a situation is possible, as for fracking to be economically viable, drilling companies will need to sink possibly hundreds of wells into the countryside, and if they are all met with similar protests to those seen at Balcombe, the policing costs will quickly become prohibitive. No doubt this would lead to hysterical outbursts that the forces of law and order are caving in to 'mob rule', as the *Daily Mail* headline of 17/8/13 shrieked

when Sussex Police advised Cuadrilla to scale back operations for the RTP week.<sup>44</sup> However, such definitions are in the eye of the beholder, as those who don't agree with direct action protests in the UK, often use the term 'mob', but if they begin to attract wide-spread sympathy, they could quickly be viewed as legitimate expressions of 'people power' against an intransigent political system and/or planning process. I don't expect the political and media establishment to suddenly come out in favour of the ostensibly 'illegal' direct action seen at Balcombe. However, if we see similar protests up and down the country (and especially in the Tory heartlands), it could make the whole fracking process economically and politically unviable, meaning that like the attempted introduction of GM foods into the food chain in the 1990s and 2000s, the whole project may end up being quietly shelved for less politically contentious ways of 'keeping the lights on'.



<sup>41</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-23944344>

<sup>42</sup> <http://frack-off.org.uk/the-real-significance-of-the-battle-of-balcombe/>

<sup>43</sup> <http://dontpaniccorrectingmythsaboutthecrowd.blogspot.co.uk/2013/08/fracking-protests-measures-of-success.html>

<sup>44</sup> <http://twicsy.com/i/pN6D7d>