HOLIDAY IN NARRUNGAR

A cool Thursday night in Melbourne. Hundreds of people are milling around the steps of Parliament House. A host car car watches from the top lended images of resolution.

Suddenly some buses appear and the crowds surge forward. A few organizers try and organize things while everybody tries to find seats next to their friends. When everyone is on board the buses move off, and we leave Albion to write through it’s Thursday night without us.

Soon we were over the West Gate bridge and the city lights are disappoiting into the blackness. The bus ride was long (eighteen hours) and boring. I don’t know why organizers think that we should watch political documentaries with subtitles while on the way to a big demo.

Most people I know would have preferred some mindless American entertainment to more politics.

The bus ride can be summed up in the drivers final words: “I hope you achieve what you came here for kids and watch out for snobs, especially one eyed cousin so you ladies I thought that such moles could die out with the dinosaurs but no, you are alive and well and breeding at Chris’s bus company.”

It was with some relief that we arrived at Narrungar. We were driven down to the front gate where some dusty protestors gave us a rousing cheer on command. We then drove back to the camp and posted ourselves on delicious food provided cheaply by RASAF (Renegete Action Activist Force). It was then time to set out tents up, a hot and dusty job amongst the rocks which constituted most of Narrungar’s landscape. After getting up people either relaxed or ran around tracking down friends from previous demos.

That night we had the first of many meetings to organise and communicate actions planned for the next day. Barry, a representative of the Kakuta people, spoke at this meeting. The Kakuta people are the traditional owners of Narrungar, and since the 1950s have been unable to gain access to their land. Their land also encompasses Marungu, where the British used misused weapons, intimidating their own soldiers. Hundreds of Australian soldiers many of the Kakuta people, and thousands of square kilometers of Aboriginal land in the process.

The Kakuta people are still awaiting compensation from both the British and Australian governments, neither of whom

Barry was standing out passports to their land. We were supposed to get the stamps, which meant that we would abide by the conditions of entry. It appeared though that the conditions of entry were written by some white politically correct type, because Barry was just refusing to insist on some of the conditions. He didn’t like the line: ‘respect all Aboriginal peoples’ (after all I would find it hard to respect an Aboriginal policeman who was bashing me) nor did he like the line, ‘respect all property’. He just said, ‘Do you have to do that?’

After Barry revised the conditions for us we all went back to our camps. During the meeting a handful of individuals had spent hours putting a rock barricade across the road. This passed the police right off, so much so that they set up a barricade to keep out the buses (the barricade was a major concern of contention with the cops all weekend). The people who made the barricade then took off to get some supplies. While they were gone a bunch of self righteous NVA’s (Non Violent Action) removed the barricade without consulting anyone, thus undermining a powerful political action.

This infuriated those who made the barricade and some of them turned up to the main camp where they confronted the organizers (who had nothing to do with the removal of the barricade). A politically violent confrontation was diffused and a long meeting ensued where the right for affinity groups to do their own autonomous actions without interference from others was again spelled out. It seems the rightious NVA types can’t stand not being allowed to interfere with other people’s actions.

On the whole I found Narrungar great in this respect. The NVA versus the non NVA brat that assually erupts at large demos, especially at Ades, didn’t really occur. CAYU (Campaign Against Military Intervention) organised things in such a way that there was organisation plus autonomy, if you didn’t agree with an action you didn’t go in it but you didn’t undermine it.

The whole issue of Narrungar was brought to a head by the fact that America had shot down some Iraqi planes and

is a point in Australian satellite tracking stations which was used extensively in the Gulf war. The American government tells the Australian government very little of what goes on in there, and the Australian government, in its area liking role in world politics, asks no questions and ships out money and people in an attempt to be liked by the American government.

Most people marched down to the gates, led by a contingent of women, followed by members of the CSMEU (Construction Forestry and Mining Employees Union). Once at the gates some speakers spoke, the gates were torn down and everybody charged in, led by the CSMEU.

The cops on horses and on motorbikes, in helicopters and four wheel drives and on foot set about herding everybody up. They were hopelessly outnumbered and people could be seen moving towards the base with no cops chasing them. Some people got to within five hundred yards of the base before being nabbed. Apparently the closer you got the more of a hard time the cops gave you.

There were over two hundred arrests in this action. Again a lot of people were just sent back by the cops. After about an hour they started turning the arrested people out. There was some debate about blocking the buses but it was decided that it would be hot and uncomfortable in the non air conditioned vehicles so we let the buses out. It took hours for everybody to be processed.

One thing I found stupid was everyone outside the police station looking for their arrested friends and then yelling out their real names for all to hear. People often use fake names whenever possible and to have some friend yell out your real name and expose you shows a distinct lack of intelligence.

After everybody was released some of us went to the pub where we met the locals and had some interesting raves. We raised an interesting point. That is, if the base was so important why did they buy them? They will be unemployed. I think this is worth thinking about. If we could answer that question I feel we would get a lot more support from the local community who appear to be on side ethically but not politically. That might more bands played a little easier.

The next day there was a plan to storm the American rocket forge. While this was being thrashed out, a tractor shovel appeared, heading straight for the barricade. The meeting dissaved as most people ran to the barricade. The cops
In previous burning issues there has been news on the ongoing fight to get the toxic waste treatment plant, run by Harpers Waste in Newlands Rd, North Coburg, either relocated or closed down.

During 1992, local people were opposing the extension of the plant, which involved Harpers being allowed to burn off toxic waste from inside drums. We celebrated our successful agitation when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) refused to issue permits to Harpers for these plans.

Then, in December, we were shocked when the EPA gave Harpers permission to build another incinerator to burn waste wood. Burning wood sounds innocuous enough, but the wood is likely to contain lead-based paints and arsenic. Harpers licence prohibits the burning of these substances, but as they have a long history of polluting the area with smells ranging from ammonia to phenol, locals have no expectation that Harpers will be restricted in their licence.

To put a brake on Harpers plans, we have appealed against the issue of a permit for the wood waste incinerator to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. We may be successful, but if we aren't the next stage is to oppose the granting of planning permission by Coburg Council. We have been getting support from the Environmental Defenders Office, a group of volunteer lawyers and law students.

Meanwhile, research has been going on into Harpers smelly and toxic history. Workers at a nearby foundry, Davis and Baird, many of whom suffer from asthma and other breathing complaints, walked off the job nauseated and retching after poisons from Harpers reached their workplace in 1985. No-one knows the effects of the incineration of toxic chemicals which can combine in the burning process to form other substances. Many asthma sufferers link the smells from Harpers directly to the onset of an attack.

So watch this space for the next instalment of news from our fight to just one polluter to keep their toxic residues out of our lungs. If you want more info or can help, especially from a scientific angle, contact:

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