

# It All Began On Mayday...

The First Year of Tyneside Action for People and Planet



*Decontamination of the Edge House Farm GMO oilseed rape field in Summer 1998*

In Newcastle 1998 didn't look like being a very good year for revolutionary eco-warriors. The Tyneside Anarchist Group (TAG) had stopped meeting, the radical Alleycat Books Co-op had closed down and the animal rights group had fallen apart due to paranoia and in-fighting.

But there were still a few dodgy individuals around who wanted to do some 'Reclaim Mayday' activities as TAG had done in previous years. So a small group of leftovers from the Cradlewell Bypass road-protest, Alleycat, the animal rights group, the Green Party and the University Green and Peace Action Societies met to discuss what they fancied doing. A solidarity action for the Darlington Magnet Strikers was planned, and we made a huge banner reading 'Sacked Magnet Workers - Sold Down the River', which we draped over the Tyne Bridge.

As we were planning this Mayday action it was announced that a European Agriculture summit was to take place in Durham and Newcastle during May. The genetics issue had been quietly beginning to raise its ugly mutated head, and a Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) test site had recently been announced on Edge House Farm near Ponteland. People in the Reclaim Mayday group figured that if we were meeting to plan one action, we may as well plan several, and so a week of action against the genetics threat was declared.

First we held a public meeting below our favourite pub. This attracted a damn good crowd through word-of-mouth and posters. Some local Greenpeace folk explained the ins-and-outs of genetic engineering and the May actions were announced and support

gathered for them. We decided on a name for ourselves; Gene-No! (taken from an old Dexy's Midnight Runners song), and before taking action we raised awareness with information stalls in town.

At the summit in Durham, the agriculture ministers were seated round a lawn beneath the Cathedral expecting to see a nice military band play. Instead they got a gaggle of face-painted weirdos storming the field supported by some local kids and wielding 'Stop the Genetix Experiment' flags. We were rugby-tackled by plain-clothes security and five people were bundled into a police van, later to be released without charge. Undaunted and buzzing from adrenaline the next day we held a well-received check-out blockade at a Prestos supermarket.

After that the agriculture ministers were meeting at Newcastle Civic Centre so we organised a noisy party to greet them. Meanwhile round the back a commando-style squad of nutters were seen running up with a very long ladder. Three lasses climbed onto the roof and D-locked themselves on with a banner for the arriving delegates to see. Arrests followed but so far we've had a 100% success rate on charges being dropped against Gene-No!

The week wasn't over yet. We hired a coach for people, dressed up in white suits, and with giant fish and tomato costumes went to go and inspect



## The International Centre For Lies



The International Centre for Life (ICFL) is a high profile £50 million lottery funded project based in Newcastle. It's composed of three main parts:

- The Helix visitor attraction. This turns genetic engineering into a Disney exhibit, hiding the important questions and selling the message 'Isn't DNA wonderful, let's celebrate progress!'
- Newcastle University's expanded Genetics Institute.
- The Bioscience Wing, filled with commercial biotechnology companies.

There is also a 'superlab' where schoolchildren are indoctrinated by the businesses themselves. The ICFL basically mixes business and science in a way that places our bodies and futures under the increasing control of the corporate state.

Focussing mainly on awareness raising stunts Gene No! has charted its own independent course alongside the TAPP adventure. It was excluded from the ICFL's first public conference 'Making Biotechnology Happen' in February 1999. After this Gene No! linked up with Disability Action North East (DANE) to picket it. Due to the visual protest and the press interest it attracted, it forced the ICFL to allow two speakers from Gene No! in to make a five minute response to Monsanto's 'Feeding the World through Biotechnology' talk.

Due to occurrences like this, and the executives being well trained in the 'good cop' tactic of trying to contain, co-opt and stifle dissent, the ICFL has proved a most complicated target, stimulating debate on co-option and the right strategies for the group to use. An information pack on the ICFL is available from Gene No! For a copy send a large SAE to Gene No! at: c/o PO Box 1TA, Newcastle, NE99 1TA, UK.

Monsanto's herbicide-resistant oil seed rape out near Ponteland. We then saw the ministers off at the hotel where they were meeting, with one protester being arrested after infiltrating the conference and questioning whether the canteen food was genetically modified. The May week of action was great fun, and it served to bond the new group together by opposing the evil state-capitalist forces together.

Later in the summer, the Edge House Farm crop was 'decontaminated' by concerned locals who took the collected GMO plants to the Environment Agency to be destroyed as 'hazardous waste'. As a result of this and the decontamination of all other Northumberland GM fields, Edge House Farm decided to cancel growing GM crops.

## Forming Our Group Identity

After the anti-genetics week was over, we didn't want to stop doing things together. After such a Newcastle lull it felt good to be in a group of people who were willing to act on their beliefs, and could work together with respect and real friendship. So we did a couple of actions not on the genetics theme. We protested against the blocking of the Keelman's Way cycle route, picketed the Countryside Alliance Annual General Meeting (AGM) and blockaded the regional Shell depot on the anniversary of Ken Saro-Wiwa's execution. However we were still a little bit unsure of what we wanted out of the group and so we had a meeting where everyone could discuss their aims and dreams.

We discussed what our aims should be—and even whether we actually needed them, as maybe the aims were determined by each issue. Our principles are held individually by each of us, but as far as group principles go, we're decided that we're non-authoritarian, non-coercive and non-hierarchical. And that's it. But what's the point of the group? Were we a mix of representatives of different campaigning groups, or a separate activist group? Do we back up existing campaigns or create new ones? Well, we felt there's no necessary difference. If, for example, Tynebikes got organised, we'd support them. It's the energy of individuals committed to their causes that gets us activated. The rest of us join in.

We had a competition to choose our name. Some of us felt we were an Earth First! group whilst others preferred a more inclusive name without the macho connotations of (American) EF! In the end it was agreed that in order to be able to draw more people in, we needed a name to identify ourselves with. We



settled for *Tyneside Action for People and Planet* (TAPP for short) and became a weekly forum in which different environmental/social justice campaigners could meet.

At a later meeting we described ourselves as an awareness-raising non-violent direct action group, and in order to be allowed to use an office-space in the city, we defined certain limits on our activities. These included; respect for individuals, no physical violence and no harm to people or planet. However we've got no set rules or policies, and in fact TAPP doesn't really exist outside the weekly meeting.

Early on, we decided to try and reach out to all the other campaigning groups in the area. We first held a pretty dismal meeting with the anti-nuclear groups, where common ground for action was not reached.

Next we had a slightly more successful 'activists' meeting in September 1998, where we brought together all kinds of folk from more conventional campaigning groups and environmental projects. Our most ambitious event, however, was our most successful. That same September TAPP joined with other (permaculture and solutions-based) environmental groups to hold a weekend of discussion, inspiration and direct action training. It was named Gathering Visions Gathering Strength (GVGS) after the national conference that some TAPPers had attended and been inspired by.

Not only did it get many new people involved but it demonstrated the amount of knowledge and skills we had between us, and proved an amazingly enjoyable bonding experience. I feel this weekend saw TAPP come of age, and soon afterwards we were having up to 25 people in meetings.

## **New Action Groups Set Up**

The TAPP forum quickly spawned issue-specific groups like Tyneside Action on Nuclear Convoys (TANC) and Tyneside Action on Transport (TAT) to do the acting whilst TAPP did the talking. Convoys of trucks carrying leaky Trident warheads up and down the country regularly go past Newcastle. TANC got together to pounce on these and hold them up, raising awareness by leafletting the people in the cars jammed in the traffic.

Meanwhile those with a bent for bikes had formed TAT and were holding monthly Critical Mass-style 'Safer City Street Parties' throughout town. As winter drew on, the costumes got sillier and our energy levels dropped, so we called it a day when we found ourselves dressed as Santas and snowmen stomping through the city streets.

## **How The Group Works**

After our GVGS weekend TAPP had reached a critical mass whereby if you planned an action, you'd know you'd get enough support to do it well. How we managed to create a healthy group is hard to pin down—perhaps it's just because we're new and fresh. Certainly at the beginning we were lucky in that it felt that there was nothing happening before we got together, so we could start from a clean slate and create something small, but cool! There was space within the meetings to discuss everything we fancied doing, and we were very chuffed to find common souls to work with. Now things have changed and expectations have been raised.

We have made conscious efforts to share our skills around, from doing good press-releases to facilitating meetings. I can't say we've had a complete success however, and within the group certain hierarchies of knowledge, skill and experience have persisted. Nevertheless, we try to be open and reflexive enough to guard against such hierarchies becoming too entrenched, and most agree that the TAPP forum has proven to be a welcoming and democratic space.

'Key members' have taken months out and so nobody has come to feel too indispensable. (We don't really have any 'full-time' activists in Newcastle so it was early on accepted that everyone needed time out to have lives.) Many participants have had experience of more dysfunctional groups, and keep the communication flowing, and us aware of the pitfalls and dangers they have seen in other groups. Individuals have also been pretty determined at keeping personal disagreements separate from getting things done.

## **How We Do An Action**

In a meeting, someone will raise an issue or an event which they feel is important—maybe the anniversary of Indonesia's invasion of East Timor, the proposed felling of some trees for road widening, or the visit to Newcastle of some arch-demon like Eddie George (Bank of England boss who said unemployment in the North is good for the economy). People will make enthusiastic noises if it grabs them, and maybe help the initiator to find out more for the next meeting. Then they'll propose an action related to the issue, we'll sort out a suitable date, chase up the materials we need, and assign roles like press releases and checking the legal situation. We'll meet up on the day, together with other interested parties we've contacted, do our blockading, leafletting or whatever



stunt we fancy. If the press are there we'll chat to them, get some photos and try and embarrass our target as much as possible. If the police turn up to play, we'll either face them off or avoid arrest by doing what they say—ideally in our own time and on our own terms. If there are arrests, someone will wait for the naughty law-breakers to be released. And often as not we'll spend the rest of the day in the pub.

## Transcending Protest

We've tried to use the group to do something more than protest however. We made nice photo-posters about local direct action to go in peoples loos, we researched and put together a booklet about historical radicalism and resistance on Tyneside and we joined together to put in mass food orders. We also shared computer login codes, dog-sat, got allotments together, had mass orgies... oh no, that was just a dream. Oh well, I feel safe in saying that taking collective direct action has enhanced our sad little lives and given us back as much as we put in. And it's dead easy to create something extra from protest — TAPP recommends it!

## Debates We've Had

We have quite good arguments in the pub sometimes. As perhaps an unusually diverse bunch (ages, backgrounds, lifestyles, faiths, ideologies, dress-sense, hairstyles, taste in music—is Bruce Springsteen a god or not?), we can't help but tolerate each other's peculiarities. Issues discussed have included; the welfare state—defend it or let it die?, support people wanting jobs or encourage them to drop out? using violent language or images, being 'reasonable' critics or chucking rotten tomatoes, working with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) against the war or refusing to deal with them, being public about something or keeping it hush-hush, how to attack the consumer lifestyle without pissing people off, christianity and spirituality, having waffly meetings or being a fascist facilitator, gobby people dominating meetings, individuals taking too much on, how to get new or shy people activated, whether to try and kick-start other groups into action or just do our thing and of course, the usual jostling of causes and priorities.

## Use Of The Earth First! Network

Our group formed spontaneously from the need of North East activists to join together. A handful of members had previously done EF! stuff but others didn't even know what EF! was and we basically formed outside of that network. Much of what drives

us does not easily fit into the standard Earth First! ideology—we're our own distinct group. When seven of us travelled down to the EF! Winter Moot in January 1999 it was the first time that we as a group had encountered EF! properly. We found a network that presented itself as being in crisis and we went away feeling happy that our little group was free of the stresses and strains of those more established. We heard groups vow never to use the media again, but we were finding both TV and press vitally important in carrying our message across to people. We thought about how we'd deal with 'problem people' and felt we'd so far skillfully avoided everyone locally we wanted to avoid and that we communicated between ourselves enough that we could deal with potential problems. We were baffled by the elaborate facilitation strategies needed to co-ordinate such large numbers of people. But we've gained from the sharing of experiences, like burn-out and accidental elitism. Now we're pretty well networked in with EF! and other national circuits, and we find it really funny that we've acquired a reputation as a 'sorted' group—cheers!

## More Recent Developments...

Radical activities and campaigns in the North East this year have outgrown TAPP, and it is now only one node in a diversified network. But TAPP played a very useful role as an initial catalyst-group for submerging networks to get going again. I'll not list the active groups in Newcastle now, officer, but it's all changed in the last few months, with more going on than I can keep track of.

Last week there was a blinding West End house party with three rooms of DJ's backed by huge Reclaim The Streets and 'Take Action' banners, the Toon is covered in stickers and posters of all types, from June 18 to anti-Asylum bill, the police regularly ask after us and there's way too many meetings to go to each week!

Perhaps the most positive and life-giving development for us has been our growing involvement with artists, musicians and other creatively green people. And all this while the *Think Globally Act Locally* newsletter, which was going long before TAPP formed, has provided monthly coverage of local protest activities and issues, with a rotating editorship and an inclusive line keeping it on-the-ball.

To contact TAPP, and for a copy of *Think Globally Act Locally*, send some stamps to: PO Box 1TA, Newcastle, NE99 1TA, UK.