

Sabbing Shell

Office Occupation A-Go-Go!

On January 4th, the first working day of 1999, the Managing Directors at Shell-Mex House in London returned from their Christmas vacations to find their offices barricaded. The fact that it was Ogoni Day¹ was not marked on their corporate calendars. Nor was there a reference in their smart new year diaries to the massacre of the Ijaw people in the occupied lands of Nigeria.

Other activists, Shell employees and the media scrambled for more information on the office occupation, which was being broadcast on a live website from inside the building. Meanwhile, in Nigeria the Ijaw people were busy ensuring that Shell's image was not the only thing being damaged. Nigerian oil production has been cut by a up to a third thanks to occupations of oil refineries and machinery sabotage.² The resulting military crack-down had begun to filter through during the Christmas holidays. As an act of solidarity the action could not have been better timed. The Ijaw people had demanded the withdrawal of Shell from their lands by January 11th, 1999. The Shell-sponsored Nigerian state response had been to execute eight youths and commit a series of atrocities including rape, torture and looting in the first days of the new year (see article on page 260 of this issue). News of the occupation reached the Niger Delta via the offices of Environmental Rights Action in Port Harcourt. Perhaps it provided a few shreds of hope for the extraordinary people—Ijaw, Ogoni or part of the grassroots Chikoko resistance movement—who have consistently put their lives and livelihoods on the line by calling for a complete end to multi-national corporate oil production in their lands.

Back in the UK the occupation provided a taste of things to come for Shell and other multi-national corporations, in what is turning out to be an interesting year. Cries of "Our resistance is as transnational as capital!" are already reverberating in multi-national head offices. While refiling various bits of paper in one of the offices, activists found a document entitled 'Global Scenarios'. This booklet predicted a rise in the globalisation of protest which would be difficult to police and control. Shell had already decided that its strategy would be to detach itself from its global corporate domination image and focus instead on its contribution to local communities ['Glocalisation', in wanky new business parlance]. European environmental activists got a special mention. Apparently Shell and other multi-



national organisations are at a loss to explain our ability to become so angry at their behaviour. Their concern centred on our apparent ability to organise quickly and effectively via friendship links and the internet.

The occupation of the Shell-Mex offices in central London was looked upon as an outstanding success. While we would not wish to preach or claim that we have a monopoly on being organised, certain well known but too frequently ignored tactics used during the organisation of this action certainly helped. In a nutshell, a healthy cocktail of elaborate planning, a few splashes of chaos and a whole heap of luck ensured that bosses of multi-national corporations in London were reminded on the first working day of 1999 that their days are numbered.

Good and bad things about the Shell Action: A personal view.

We achieved our aims.

By the time the action happened, we were, as one of the participants put it, "a group that knows exactly what it wants to achieve and why". Some of us had become involved in the action simply in response to the question "We're going to hit an oil company on January 4. Wanna come?" The problem is that sometimes, as activists, we don't get any further than this. We know who the enemy is—what more could we need to know? On the Shell action we thought and thought about why we were doing it. Principles and objectives were thrashed out early on. At the time the process seemed pretentious but in retrospect it pulled us together. A briefing document was prepared so that everyone was equipped with the same amount of knowledge. It goes without saying that a sense of passion and anger provided the motivation to act. What made the Shell action a success was that this



passion was combined with pragmatic considerations of where to hit, how and why.

The aims of the action:

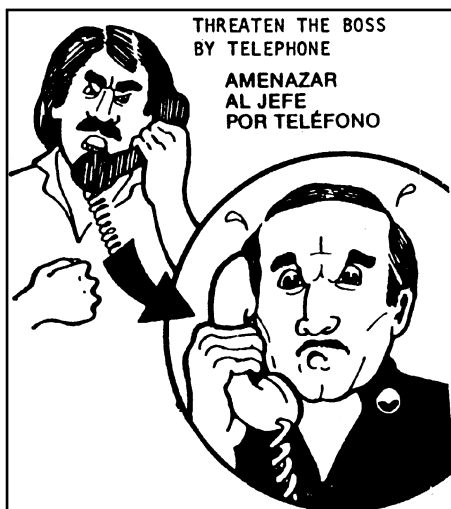
- To show real solidarity with people in the Niger Delta rebelling against Big Oil and its private security force (the Nigerian army). It has become increasingly easy for multi-national corporations to isolate struggles and resistance. The strength of linking together undermines their ability to do this.
- Economic sabotage, in the form of disruption of Shell's working day by direct action. An important factor highlighted at one of the planning meetings was that the Shell-Mex offices was where images were manufactured. The office occupation and banner drop made it harder for Shell to maintain their respectable facade for a day.
- To spread dissent and lower the morale not only of Shell's workforce, but of other oil industry companies and the corporate world in general.
- To carry out a symbolic occupation of the seat of power within Shell-Mex House.

In this glorious anti-corporation year the message was clear and simple. Shell also provided an ideal target. Too often we get side-tracked on single issues. Oil companies, with their hideous environmental and social record, combine a series of struggles not only in the developing world but in the UK too.

It was well planned.

Meetings were held well in advance to ensure that the jobs that needed to be done were parcelled out. Tasks were taken on and separate working groups sorted out the internet site, the banner, the text of the leaflet to employees. Each job was valued, criticism was kept to a minimum and praise was dished out regularly. People split up into discussion groups to make decisions and affinity groups were sorted out.

Logistics of how to get into the building, where the Managing Directors' offices were, how to get there, how to barricade, what to wear, and how to negotiate were discussed well in advance. Too many office occupations simply fail because the main concern is how to get into the building. Once we've made it through the door all hell breaks loose. This time we knew where we were going and how to get there. As one group walked up the stairs, they had a long and detailed conversation about someone's sister who was undergoing fertility treatment. The result was that we were calm and other office staff smiled as they overheard the conversation.



Tips:

- People always judge you by your shoes—shine them up.
- Iron clothes, however smart they are—if they're creased you'll give the game away.
- Take earrings out of noses and don't go overboard on jewellery.
- Pay special attention to how you want your character to look.

We had the joy of watching Shell's offices get totally trashed

...not by us, but by the forces of evil themselves. Knowing how to barricade an office certainly helps. Filing cabinets, expensive desks, computers and chairs were piled high in front of doors and inner walls. Shell employees and the police then decided to smash through the walls after failing in their exasperating attempts to 'negotiate' with us (the usual "Come out now, you've made your point"!), and they caused thousands of pounds worth of damage. The 'situationist' group occupying Malcolm Brinded's office on the fourth floor arranged seats for a theatre-like view of the Tactical Support Group as they smashed their way in. Offers of tea and biscuits neatly arranged on the coffee table somewhat undermined the police's orders of "On the floor! Now! Everybody!" The police were made to look like fools and we had a good laugh!

It was well-timed.

Firstly because of what was happening in Nigeria. Activists' access to the Web while in the building



meant that we could get hold of information directly. News of the recent killings in the Niger Delta was still coming through, which had the effect of making us ever angrier. Doubts and fears about what we were doing were instantly dispelled as we continued to hear of the atrocities being carried out by the Nigerian Army. As one activist stated to a Shell bigwig: “You have blood on your hands.” Secondly because January 1999 marked the handover from the outgoing head of Shell UK, Chris Fay, to the new man at the top, Malcolm Brinded—both their offices were occupied on January 4th, letting them know that whoever’s in charge we’re going to be watching them. Also, when Shell turned off the phones and electricity we were self-sufficient. Mobile phones meant that we could continue contact with each other and the outside world.

We didn’t go to jail.

We thought we would. But we didn’t. Instead, we got a few hours in a police cell, followed by release with no charges, presumably because Shell did not want the embarrassment of a court case. All this had the added bonus of the police being cheesed off with Shell for using them as their private security force. Pissed off Shell, pissed off the pigs, and we’re free. Cool.

The website.

One of the concerns around this ‘innovation’ was that it might be a media gimmick. In the event, this concern was well-founded—the *Guardian*’s piece on the action focused entirely on the website, went on about other revolutionary groups who use the internet (my, how clever of us), turned it into an advert for Undercurrents, and didn’t mention the Ijaw once. Seriously.

However, that says more about mainstream media than about the real reason why we went live on the internet with a site which closely resembled Shell’s own. We were both using our own media and subverting theirs. By the end of the week a large number of people had visited the site, including Shell in the UK, the Netherlands, the US and Australia; Texaco in the UK and US; oil company Amerada Hess; the US military and US gov-

ernment and some dodgy-looking Romanian finance house. The site received 10,230 hits on January 4th alone. The next day Shell threatened to injunct the web site which appears alongside its own when the word ‘Shell’ is searched for.

The banner.

The banner which appeared mid-morning between two lamp posts on Waterloo Bridge as crowds were beginning to gather around the Shell-Mex offices was excellent. It read ‘Shell: Filthy, Thieving Murderers—It’s Time To Go’. Our message, our thoughts, completely unadulterated by the media circus. Discussions that we had after the action focused on how this had more power than any press article. Imagine if there had been a series of banner drops around London to coincide with the occupation!

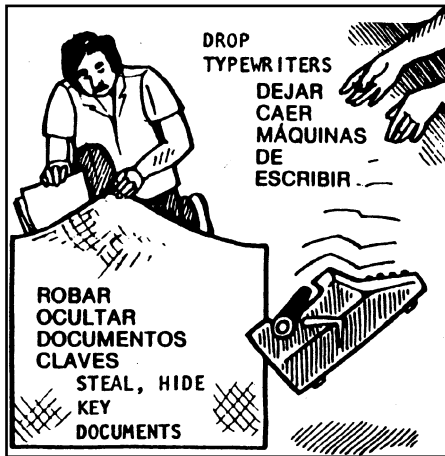
The leaflet.

A group of five individuals went back the next day and leafleted employees. Shell employees were dying to know what had happened and why. Workers had to file through police lines, collecting flyers as they went. After, suggestions were made about writing up a version of the action and distributing this to workers with an invitation to leak further information to us. Such follow-ups limit the ability of companies to whitewash actions and lower morale generally.

The affinity groups worked.

Of course, it’s easy to be all luvvie and self-congratulatory after a good action, but there are good reasons why the group dynamics worked surprisingly well:

- We didn’t agree on everything, but through some fairly heavy and long discussions before the action (actually, even before we got down to the planning), we thrashed out what our aims were and whittled them down to some fairly hardcore objectives.
- There were differing levels of experience within the group, but everyone worked on respecting each other. There were disagreements but we had the tools to deal with these and the ability to finally reach a consensus. We also didn’t break the agreements that we’d made with each other about how we would conduct the negotiations.





- The actual affinity groups were very small (4, 4 and 5), which both made us focused and enabled individuals to work very closely with one another in equality.

We were ‘experts’ on the Niger Delta situation.

Thanks to the briefing document it was difficult for Shell to sidetrack us. When the outgoing Managing Director Chris Fay wheeled out a Nigerian employee who assured us from behind the barricades that he knew we were doing this for him, activists promptly replied and demanded to discuss the current situation in the Delta with the Ijaw. The Nigerian employee disappeared as quickly as he had arrived.

Things that were not so good.

We wanted to be in there for 24 hours.

Unfortunately the combined force of 30 Tactical Support Unit bods in riot gear smashing through the walls and our lack of ingenuity (D-Locking ourselves to a wheelie chair in one instance) meant that we were dragged out once the office had been dismantled.

Planning an action over the winter holidays.

The resulting disruption (no-one was where they usually were) on top of a few hangers and transport nightmares caused plenty of preparation stress which should have been unnecessary. Not least of these was a few of us arriving really late to the planning meeting the day before the action. But then perhaps it’s a cop-out to blame it all on Christmas—maybe the truth is that deep inside every sorted activist there’s a lunchout dying to escape.

[Damn right! (See ya...)—Ed.]

Lack of a collective decision about the presence of the ‘alternative’ media.

Those who invited Undercurrents assumed that it would be okay with everyone else, while those who would have preferred them not to be involved had not articulated the good reasons why not. This was then compounded by the issue being discussed the night before the action with the Undercurrents person already part of the group. Kinda hard to start a big political discussion at that point.

Total lack of security after the action happened.

Most activists appear to have rather large egos! Enough said!

Liaison with Nigerian groups in London

...prior to the action was a bit farcical. But then it’s not realistic to expect an action-level relationship after two rushed phone calls to a group or person not familiar with the direct action ethic. Fortunately, such relationships are beginning to be fostered since the occupation took place.

Post-action idea: Reallocating the press role.

Given the emphasis above on ‘direct communication’ it might be thought that the action did not bother with conventional press. Wrong—we had a ‘press officer’, put out a press release, and also had the participation of an Undercurrents activist. One participant lost all their hardcore credibility instantly when, upon learning of the arrival of TV crews outside, they danced across the room saying “The cameras are here! The cameras are here!”

Some interesting suggestions were made after the action about an alternative role for a press worker or Publicity and Communications Person as they could now be known, such as:

- Ringing around EF! and other similar groups to let them know about the action and asking for support—support possibly taking the form of a phone or fax blockade, bogus press calls, leafleting and shutting down local Shell garages.
- Faxing other oil companies to let them know what’s happening and informing them that they are equally a target.
- Contacting groups in other countries struggling against the same company.
- Directly contacting the group you’re trying to support in your solidarity action.

There was a feeling amongst individuals that far too much time was spent discussing the conventional press. It is well to remember that the deep fundamental change we want will never be achieved by relying on the media industry, which after all is as much part of global capitalism as Shell.

Conclusion.

Clearly a one-off office occupation in solidarity with indigenous groups in the Niger Delta is not going to change the world nor indeed bring a company like Shell to its knees.

However as a symbolic act of solidarity it made its point, made the participants feel positive and with any luck gave some hope to those fighting in the Niger Delta. In the game of cricket that has developed with the state (our tactics are well known and the police know how to deal with them), the Shell action proved that if we spend the time and energy in preparation and organisation then office occupations and other such actions still have a role to play. As we were occupying Shell-Mex House, news filtered through of the Reclaim The Streets occupation of London Underground’s head offices in support of the striking tube workers, and of 60 people up trees and down tunnels in a Crystal Palace eviction alert: Triple Whammy!!!!!!



Update: 21/4/99 The Shell Centre—their other London headquarters—splashed with red and green paint as Mark Moody-Stuart (annual salary £1.4m) launched Shell's second annual report, called *People, Planet, Profit—An Act of Commitment*. This was an act taken in solidarity with the people of the Niger Delta and to make clear that despite the greenwash, there is blood on their hands and there can never be a 'green' or 'ethical' oil industry.

Notes

1. Ogoni Day has been celebrated since 1993 to mark the anniversary of the day the Ogoni people launched their struggle against Shell and forced the oil company off their lands.
2. Nigeria produces 2 million barrels a day of oil—“up to a third of output was halted at one point last year by piracy and sabotage by activists demanding a fairer share of revenues for the region's impoverished inhabitants”—*The Financial Times* 09/06/99.

Contacts

Contact the Occupiers:

E-mail: nomoreshell@hotmail.com

Web: www.kemptown.org/shell/

Delta

Box Z, 13 Biddulph St., Leicester, LE2 1BH, UK.

Tel: +44 (0) 116 270 9616

E-mail: lynx@gn.apc.org

MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People)

3 Albion Place, Galena Rd, London, W6 0LT, UK.

Tel: +44 (0) 181 563 8614

E-mail: mosop@gn.apc.org

Oilwatch Africa

c/o Environmental Rights Action, 13 Agaduma Street, D-Line, PO Box 13708, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Tel: +234 84 236 365

E-mail: oilwatch@infoweb.abs.net

Oilwatch North America

c/o Project Underground, 1847 Berkeley Way, Berkeley CA 94703, USA.

Tel: +1 510 705 8981

E-mail: project_underground@moles.org

Project Underground have just produced the *Shell-Shocked Refugee* report: This booklet features testimony from several of the Ogoni peoples, who have been forced to flee Nigeria since 1996, into a refugee camp in neighbouring Benin. Reading their stories, the plight of these corporate refugees—victims of Anglo-Dutch oil multinational Shell and the Nigerian military's reprisal—becomes clear and palpable. Order your copy now for just \$5 inside the US or \$7 international.

Also available from Project Underground is *In Remembrance: Ken Saro-Wiwa*, a 50 minute documentary detailing the struggle of the Ogoni people against Shell and the military dictatorship. Available for \$15 plus \$3 postage.

Oilwatch Europe

c/o A SEED Europe, PB 92066, 1090 AB, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Tel: +31 20 668 2236

E-mail: oilwatch@aseed.antenna.nl

Make Your Own Millennium Bug!

There's a lot of job satisfaction in de-activating silicon-based life forms on an office occupation, so we thought we'd offer you the benefit of years of our experience at crashing computers. The three basic techniques that follow apply to Windows 95 or 98, and probably to Windows NT too. Start by opening the Windows Explorer and check how many drives there are—if there are more than 4, the computer is probably attached to the office network.

Re-formatting: While this may cause the least damage of the three methods, if there is no network attachment it may be your best option. To format the disk, simply select 'Start menu - shutdown - restart computer in MSDOS mode'. When you get the C:\> Prompt, type 'format c:/u'.

Repartitioning: If you're going to re-format a hard disk, you might as well repartition it too—this makes it harder to recover data than just re-formatting it. Stick a floppy disk in when you get to the C:\> Prompt, and type 'sys a:', followed by 'copy c:\windows\command\fdisk.*a:'. If no file is found, type 'copy c:\dos\fdisk.*a:' and format as described above. Reboot the PC with the floppy disk in the machine and type 'fdisk'. Delete all partitions, reboot again, type 'fdisk' again and finally create 2 or 3 new partitions.

Deleting files on the hard disk is pretty straightforward. Highlight those you want to delete—select lots by holding the 'Shift' or 'control' key down as you click. Hold down the 'Shift' key before you press the 'delete' key, and don't release it until the 'confirm file delete' box appears. It is also worth emptying the recycle bin after deleting—click on the bin and choose 'empty recycle bin' from the 'file' menu. Installing a Disk cleanup utility (www.execpc.com/~sbd/CleanUp.html) after deleting should make it almost impossible to recover the data, is much more effective than simply formatting the disk, and the utility is also small enough to fit conveniently onto a floppy disk.

To delete files from a network drive follow the same procedure as above, but when you've deleted something, go to 'Start menu - Run' and type 'command'. Change to the drive that you have deleted from by typing the drive letter and a colon (eg. 'u:'), then type 'cd/', followed by 'purge*/a'. On most networks this should ensure that files are completely deleted.

(This is condensed from a more extensive article in the April 1999 *EF! Action Update* (available from Action Update address—see contacts on p. 344—or at: www.eco-action.org/efau). See also the *Hacktivism* section on p. 322 of this issue.)

We Must Devastate the Hard Drives Where the Wealthy Live!