

Chapter 29 : Swimmin' Cross the Rio Grande



Corporate Timber's strategy for defeating popular resistance on the North Coast, whether union organizing, environmentalism, or citizen ballot initiatives depended heavily on keeping its would-be watchdogs and critics pitted against each other, or focused on a specific scapegoat. As the minutes of 1989 ticked away into 1990, the timber corporations were finding this an increasingly difficult prospect, and sometimes all it took to fracture whatever consensus they could muster was a perfect storm of indirectly related events. The arrogance of Louisiana Pacific in particular undermined Corporate Timber's ability to keep an increasingly fearful workforce focusing their blame for all that was wrong on "unwashed-out-of-town-jobless-hippies-on-drugs." In spite of all of the footwork done by Pacific Lumber with the help of TEAM and WECARE to manufacture dissent against the environmentalists' campaign to block THPs and draft measures like *Forests Forever*, the catalyst that lit the opposing prairie fire was Louisiana-Pacific's plans to outsource productions.

In December, the Humboldt and Del Norte County Central Labor Council, representing 3,500 union members from over two dozen unions in both counties rented billboards imploring the L-P not to move to Mexico.¹ Suggesting that the unions were forced to look beyond mere bread and butter issues, some of the billboards read, "Please don't abuse our community *and our environment.*" (emphasis added) L-P, who routinely paid for full page ads in the local press claiming to be "a good neighbor" touting their alleged pro-worker and pro-environmental policies, responded by claiming in their latest such entries that they were not exporting logs to Mexico, just green lumber for drying and planning. Although the handwriting should have been on the wall seven years earlier when L-P had busted the IWA and WCIW in the mills throughout the Pacific Northwest, there were several other unions which had a relationship with the company in various capacities. Hitherto they had been unwilling to bite the hand that fed them, and many wouldn't have even considered making an overture of friendship to Earth First!, but now, all of a sudden, the leadership of various AFL-CIO unions based in Humboldt and Mendocino County finally awakened to the possibility that their enemy *wasn't*, in fact, "unwashed-out-of-town-jobless-hippies-on-drugs."²

¹ "Don't Go to Mexico, Signs Urge L-P", by Charles Winkler, *Eureka Times-Standard*, December 28, 1989.

² "Labor Says L-P is the Enemy", by Tim McKay, *EcoNews*, January / February 1990.

At a press conference held on December 27, 1989, several representatives of the aforementioned unions explained their motivation for this hitherto unprecedented display of open defiance to Corporate Timber. They expressed concerns that the new \$12 million plant could expand into a \$100 million complex by 1995, thus resulting in further downsizing of the corporation's local facilities. Dave Funderburg, secretary-treasurer of the Building and Construction Trades Council of Humboldt and Del Norte Counties stated, "The bottom line is greed. Basically L-P's moving [to Mexico] for three reasons: cheap wages, no safety compliance programs such as Cal-OSHA and no environmental controls." He added that the unions would continue to pay for the billboards "indefinitely." Plumbers & Steamfitters Local #471 business manager Gary Haberman added, "The only jobs left in the lumber industry will be timber fallers, truck drivers to get logs to the barges and shiploaders to load the wood." He further noted that L-P hadn't been "union friendly" since they busted the IWA in 1985, and had been bringing in workers from out of the area to work in their local nonunion plants.³

Shep Tucker tried to blunt and isolate the growing opposition by dismissing both their claims and their standing among the local timber-dependent workforce. He continued to deny there would be any loss in local jobs.⁴ He then further declared that only \$12 million had been authorized for the Mexico plant and that it was not L-P's policy to "operate on speculation and rumor, and to do what we do because of the dictates of the consumer and what our competitors are doing."⁵ He then made a rather ridiculous statement that most of L-P's mills were nonunion because its workers were happy with their pay and benefits, a claim that was openly debunked by several of the *nonunion* L-P mill workers Tucker claimed to be representing.⁶ In any case, the issue wasn't whether L-P was union or not, but rather that their move to Mexico would negatively affect local workers regardless of whether or not they were union or nonunion and regardless of whether or not they worked for L-P. As Gary Tracy, President of the Humboldt County Building Trades Council explained, "We want to see

³ Winkler, December 28, 1989, op. cit.

⁴ "Labor, Activists Unite to Fight L-P", by Crawdad Nelson, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, January 17, 1990.

⁵ Winkler, December 28, 1989, op. cit.

⁶ "L-P Spokesman is Questioned", letter to the editor by Belinda Kruse, *Eureka Times-Standard*, January 17, 1990, and "L-P Worker Disputes Claims", letter to the editor by Bob Weatherbee, *Eureka Times-Standard*, January 19, 1990.

L-P stay in Humboldt County and use American natural resources to provide jobs for American Workers. (The billboards are meant) to inform the public about what L-P is doing.”⁷

As it turned out, Tucker’s lack of forthrightness extended far beyond just the mood of L-P’s nonunion employees. Within days of the unions’ press conference, the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* broke the news that the company was transferring \$1.5 million in milling equipment from its shuttered Potter Valley Mill to its new facility in Baja California.⁸ In the eyes of the critics, any pretense that L-P had opened this new facility for anything but increasing its profits at the expense of the workers and the environment had completely evaporated. Then, in early January, L-P poured salt into the wound by selling the closed mill plus another in Red Bluff—both of which combined had employed 300—to Fiberboard Corporation, a company that L-P had spun off.⁹ Adding to the betrayal, Congressman Doug Bosco had announced, the fall, that he would not interfere with L-P’s Mexico expansion, stating that the company had promised him that its redwood processing operations in Ensenada wouldn’t result in local mill closures. Upon hearing the news of L-P’s shipping its milling equipment south of the border, however, the congressman had to at least save face, which he attempted by stating, “If it doesn’t hold to its promises, we’ll find a way to make life difficult for Louisiana-Pacific.”¹⁰ Faced with these revelations, Shep Tucker backtracked from his initial promise stating, “We’ve never said that no jobs would be lost.”¹¹

The Humboldt County union leaders responded angrily by publically denouncing Tucker as a liar. Gary Tracy declared, “L-P was either lying to us in December or lying to us in January,” (but either way one of them didn’t jibe with the other). He assessed the corporation’s motivations as being driven by “greed”. Cindy Watter, president of the Humboldt County Democratic Party Central Committee joined Tracy and several other union officials in declaring L-P “disloyal and ungrateful” to the North Coast and promised to renew the boycott against the company that had lain dormant since 1985. Watter went one step further, calling for a coalition of labor and envi-

ronmental organizations, an idea hitherto reserved for radicals such as the IWW and Earth First!. “Big timber companies control our economy while blaming problems on environmentalists, but this loss of jobs can’t be blamed on the spotted owl. It is important that we stick together on this. Our community is united in opposition to this move,” she declared.¹²

Tucker was stubbornly defiant in his defense of L-P, however. “People keep wanting me to make crystal ball predictions of the future. I can’t do that, and neither can Gary Tracy, I might add. (Their complaints) don’t make sense. If those jobs don’t exist in the first place, how can they be lost?” he stated, ignoring the unions’ point that L-P was denying Humboldt County the opportunity to create additional jobs locally.¹³ Further, although Tucker obviously was aware of the connection, his attempts to deflect attention away from the jobs that L-P had already cut by closing its Potter Valley and Red Bluff mills were not likely to convince anyone.¹⁴ Not content with these denials, Tucker engaged in further job blackmail¹⁵, and declared that if *Forests Forever*, *Big Green*, or Patrick Shannon’s *Timber Bond Act* passed in November, the company would “have to shut down 50 percent of its operations.” Even members of TEAM, such as Don Stamps, who called Tucker, “an even bigger liar than the environmentalists”, weren’t buying this.¹⁶ The potential disaster resulting from a split between spokesmen from TEAM and WECARE, especially in light of the need for Corporate Timber hegemony in facing those ballot initiatives, was enough to prompt an angry response to Stamps by Tucker himself.¹⁷ On the other hand, the once divided mainstream labor and environmental movements were now coalescing further.

Late in the morning, on Thursday, January 11, 1990, 200 union members *and* environmentalists, representing over a dozen organizations rallied in Samoa at L-P’s giant pulp mill to protest the company’s “Baja Boondoggle” in particular, but also several other egregious practices of L-P’s that angered them.¹⁸

¹² “Union Leaders Claim L-P Lying About Mexico Move,” by Charles Winkler, *Eureka Times-Standard*, January 18, 1990.

¹³ Winkler, January 18, 1990, op. cit.

¹⁴ McKay, January / February 1990, op. cit.

¹⁵ “Fear at Work”, by Dan Faulk, *Country Activist*, July 1990.

¹⁶ “Explaining Dissenting Views”, letter to the editor by Don Stamps, *Eureka Times-Standard*, January 8, 1990.

¹⁷ “L-P Expansion Only Fair”, letter to the editor, by Shepard Tucker, *Eureka Times-Standard*, January 23, 1990.

¹⁸ “200 Workers Protest LP Plan: Pacific Lumber Harvest May Threaten Seabird”, *AP Wire*, *Ukiah Daily Journal*, January 12, 1990.

⁷ Winkler, December 28, 1989, op. cit.

⁸ McKay, January / February 1990, op. cit.

⁹ “L-P Sells Two Operations in Red Bluff California”, staff report, *Mendocino Beacon*, January 4, 1990.

¹⁰ McKay, January / February 1990, op. cit.

¹¹ “Labor, Activists Unite to Fight L-P”, by Crawdad Nelson, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, January 17, 1990.

Among the local unions represented were the IWW Local #1, IWA Local #3-98, ILWU Local #14, Plumbers & Steamfitters Local #471, Sheet Metal Workers Local #104, the Building and Construction Trades Council of Humboldt and Del Norte Counties, and the Humboldt-Del Norte Central Labor Council of AFL-CIO. They were joined by Boilermaker's Lodge #549 of Pittsburg, California (in Contra Costa County), the Building and Construction Trades Council of Contra Costa County, and the Painters and Allied Trades Local 4 from the City and County of San Francisco. The Humboldt Democratic Central Committee was represented along with Earth First!, Rainforest Action Network, the Sierra Club, the Surfrider Foundation, and the North Coast Environmental Center.¹⁹

Judi Bari would later describe the rally as mostly symbolic and ineffectual²⁰, but it did represent a major step forward in one very important sense: it was clear from the speeches from all of the various constituencies that the *corporations* were seen as the common enemy. Gary Tracy, President, Building Trades Council declared, "(L-P's) simply moving to Mexico for greed, money in their pocket."²¹

Gary Haberman, a member of the Yurok Tribe, agreed, declaring, "I see us all on the same reservation now."²²

Humboldt County Supervisor, Wesley Chesbro read prepared statements from Dan Hauser and Barry Keene denouncing L-P's Mexico move. Hauser claimed he would "show L-P there's more to business than just the short term."²³ Chesbro also repeated the famous line from the movie, *Network*, shouting, "We're mad as hell, and we're not going to take it anymore!" and stated, as far as the shotgun wedding between capitalism and the local community was concerned, "it may be time for a divorce."²⁴

Bonnie Sue Smith, spokesperson for IWA Local #3-98 in Arcata declared, "To help the timber companies we fought the Sierra Club, Earth First!, and government regulators, because we thought we were saving our jobs. But now we know L-P is our

economic enemy, not the Sierra Club."²⁵ She added, "They wait until you're down and then they stick it to you."²⁶

Bill Chancellor, also of IWA Local 3-98 stated, "L-P has made the statement that opposition is coming from a small group of radicals. Well, it's not... The jobs in Mexico are ours and we're going to fight to keep them."²⁷

"L-P is more concerned with a few points on its profit-and-loss line than with people's lives. It is socially irresponsible," said Richard Khamsi, business manager for Humboldt-Del Norte Central Labor Council of AFL-CIO.²⁸

"They shouldn't send that wood to Mexico, they should keep it here for the people and the communities that helped make this company what it is. Practically all the oldtimers are against this," said John Stewart, president of a group of retired Teamsters.²⁹

"When it comes to the timber wars this is really historic. When labor and environmentalists come together, watch out," proclaimed Judi Bari, putting the exclamation point on the event (in spite of her skepticism of it).³⁰

A musical performance by Judi Bari, Darryl Cherney, and George Shook (under the name Earth First! – IWW Local #1 complete with a banner announcing this new union local's existence), including now standard protest songs such as *Where are We Gonna Work When the Trees are Gone?*, *Potter Valley Mill*, and *El Pio*, further punctuated the demonstration.³¹ Cherney had also been performing a new song he had written in relevance to the recent revelations of Louisiana Pacific's impending exodus to Mexico called *Swimmin' Cross the Rio Grande*.

¹⁹ "Crawdad Nelson, January 17, 1990, op. cit.

²⁰ "1990: A Year in the Life of Earth First!", by Judi Bari, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, January 2, 1991.

²¹ "Unions Say L-P Move Will Cost Jobs, by David Forster, *Eureka Times-Standard*, January 12, 1990.

²² "Crawdad Nelson, January 17, 1990, op. cit.

²³ McKay, January / February 1990, op. cit.

²⁴ "Crawdad Nelson, January 17, 1990, op. cit. Mike Geniella attributed this quote to Bonnie Sue Smith in "Labor Joins Protest Against L-P; Eureka Rally Aimed at Timber Giant's Expansion in Mexico", by Mike Geniella, *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, January 12, 1990.

²⁵ McKay, January / February 1990, op. cit.

²⁶ "Crawdad Nelson, January 17, 1990, op. cit.

²⁷ "Labor Joins Protest Against L-P; Eureka Rally Aimed at Timber Giant's Expansion in Mexico", by Mike Geniella, *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, January 12, 1990.

²⁸ "Crawdad Nelson, January 17, 1990, op. cit.

²⁹ Geniella, January 12, 1990, op. cit.

³⁰ Geniella, January 12, 1990, op. cit.

³¹ "Crawdad Nelson, January 17, 1990, op. cit.

Swimming 'Cross the Rio Grande³²

By Darryl Cherney, and featured on the album *Timber*, 1991
and in *Uprise Singing*, circa 1992 and 1995.

Well I was born south of the border,
But I could not find a job,
I swam across the Rio Gran-de,
I paid a thousand to the Mob,
I traveled up to Mendocino,
Where I found work in forestry,
They paid me seven bucks an hour,
Pulling green chain for L-P...

*But now L-P they move to Mexico,
And I'm feelin' pretty bummed,
The thousand bucks I paid the coyote,
It didn't come with no refund,
They left Ukiah a ghost town,
I didn't know that's what they planned,
And now my arms are getting tired,
Swimmin' 'cross the Rio Grande.*

Well I was born here in Ukiah,
I worked here at the L-P mill,
I watched them kill the Russian River,
And a couple of friends of mine as well³³,
I worked six ten-hour shifts a week,
So where's my pat on the back,
If I wanna keep on milling redwood,
I'd better learn some Spanish Jack...

*Because L-P they've moved to Mexico,
And this good ol' boy is sour,
I had to move south of the border,
They pay me fifty cents an hour,
They left Ukiah a ghost town,
I didn't know that's what they planned,
And now my arms are getting tired,
Swimming 'cross the Rio Grande.*

Jim Wilson, spokesman for the Boilermaker's Union, Lodge 549, who had provided soda and hot dogs for the rally, stated that they could no longer blindly support big industrial corporations, like L-P, because it no longer had and sense of American patriotism. "We've been taking little pieces and losing the pie...we've had this fight in Stockton, in Pittsburg, in Redding. It's going on in towns all over America." In response to being dismissed as "outsiders" by the local media, the Boilermakers reminded the mostly

sympathetic crowd that the highly specialized techniques used in the high pressure fittings involved in the construction of boiler equipment and smokestacks in mills required highly skilled laborers. Wilson explained that the members of the Pittsburg lodge typically worked on such jobs all over California. He pointed to large rectangular scaffolding on the nearby Samoa pulp mill and declared that the real outsiders were the unskilled and unqualified nonunion labor, and noted that 34 out of the 50 vehicles used by that particular construction crew were from out of state. Evidently L-P was well practiced at shifting the blame to the innocent if not the victims of their corporate criminality. Although only a small group of timber workers attended the rally, at noon, one union worker from Simpson claimed that he would have been able to bring along seventy of *his* willing fellow workers had the rally been held outside of normal working hours.³⁴

Shep Tucker's pooh-poohed the event. His dismissive response to the growing coalition of unions and environmentalists was to say, "(I'm not) really sure what the goal of these people are today...I'm very unclear who all these people are."³⁵ However, relations between the union officials, timber workers, and the environmental activists were cordial, even sympathetic. Union officials and environmental activists from both Humboldt and Mendocino Counties agreed to organize a combined panel to seek common ground and raise awareness about various issues on which they had common interests, and as it turned out, they had many.³⁶ L-P's lack of sensitivity helped unite the opposition once again, and as if the mill closures hadn't been enough, the company had recently announced that they would resume aerial deployment of Garlon 4 in the woods.³⁷

Indeed, for a time at any rate, L-P's and Tucker's defenders, locally at least, were reduced to those who were ideological predisposed to corporate dominance or suffered from what Pete Kayes told Judi Bari was a case of the Stockholm Syndrome (the same malaise that he suggested affected his own fellow workers who had gullibly thrown their lot in with the

³⁴ "Crawdad Nelson, January 17, 1990, op. cit. The identity of this person is not given, but based on very similar comments made by Dave Chism, at a rally held several months later, he best fits the description of this unnamed individual.

³⁵ "Labor Joins Protest Against L-P; Eureka Rally Aimed at Timber Giant's Expansion in Mexico", by Mike Geniella, *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, January 12, 1990

³⁶ "Crawdad Nelson, January 17, 1990, op. cit.

³⁷ "Dozens Rally at L-P Pulp Mill to Protest Herbicide Spraying," by David Forester, *Eureka Times-Standard*, April 13, 1990.

³² Cherney once said that the idea for this song came to him "in a vision" of an American worker and a Mexican worker meeting each other as they crossed the Rio Grande in opposite directions. As if in a comic strip, each character would have had a thought-balloon with a question mark in it as they saw the other.

³³ This is a reference to Fortunado Reyes.

likes of TEAM). There were always enough reactionaries who could always be counted upon to twist logic into a pretzel, such as Audrey Sydell, who laughingly tried to defend L-P as a “local business”³⁸, and Lowell S Mengel II, who blamed the victim for the company’s capital flight and even described the protesters’ opposition to it as “racist”.³⁹ And, if all else failed, even in the days when the Soviet Union was clearly unraveling, at least someone (Hal Whittet) had to resurrect the evil “Communist” boogeyman, offering the false dichotomy between unrestrained corporate pillage and Stalinist gulags.⁴⁰ Yet it was *these* voices that the Corporate Media tended to identify as being those of the timber workers. Reality was, of course, far more nuanced.

Some of the truckers transporting material in and out of both the L-P mill and the nearby Simpson Pulp mill in Fairhaven *were* clearly on the side of the companies, as evidenced by them uncaringly driving their trucks through the unions’ informational picket lines. Conversations overheard on radio frequencies monitored by the more sympathetic workers included statements like, “Those bastards (are) getting in the way again,” no doubt recalling the Earth First! – IWW greenhouse demonstration from two years back or the anti log export demonstration held the previous year. Others honked their horns in support of the rally, however.⁴¹ It was evident that L-P’s divide and conquer tactics were failing.

This rally, by itself, may have been mostly symbolic, even superficial, but it signaled the potential for far more reaching systemic change. It clearly showed that the struggle was not one of workers versus environmentalists, but rather the *99 Percent*, made up of the people, including unions, workers, environmentalists, small landowners, small businesses, fishermen and the like versus the *One Percent*, composed of mostly absentee corporate owners who had no direct stake in the economic or environmental health of the community. The power of the latter depended heavily on sowing divisions between the former. For the corporations, far too much was at stake to allow their opposition to unite in common cause.

In their eyes, the only thing preventing that from reaching its full adversarial potential was the emergence of a charismatic leader, and there were signs that one individual in particular, Judi Bari, might already be that person. The fears of Corporate Timber were about to be realized in a big way.

³⁸ “Democrats are Teamed with Labor”, letter to the editor by Audrey Sydell, *Eureka Times-Standard*, January 31, 1990; Sydell’s letter was elicited at least one response: “L-P Hardly Has the Answers”, letter to the editor by Virginia Funderburg, *Eureka Times-Standard*, Feb. 16, 1990.

³⁹ “Protestors are Inconsistent”, letter to the editor by Lowell S Mengel II, *Eureka Times-Standard*, Feb. 1, 1990.

⁴⁰ “L-P Viewpoint Not All Bad”, letter to the editor by Hal Whittet, *Eureka Times-Standard*, March 1, 1990.

⁴¹ “Crawdad Nelson, January 17, 1990, op. cit.