

Chapter 31 : Spike a Tree for Jesus



In spite of all of the Corporate Media's claims that both Redwood Summer and *Forests Forever* could potentially polarize timber dependent communities into opposing "green" and "yellow" camps, and despite all of the efforts by Corporate Timber to manifest those divisions, Earth First! – IWW Local #1 continued to slowly gain support and influence among rank and file timber workers on the North Coast. As a result, Judi Bari was invited to participate in a "Labor and the Environment" workshop, called "Bridging the Gap" at the Public Interest and Environmental Law Conference in early March in Eugene, Oregon.¹ Several Earth First!ers from the Pacific Northwest were invited to participate and did, including Karen Wood from an Oregon Earth First! chapter; George Draffan, Mitch Friedman, and Mike Jakubal from various Washington Earth First! groups; as well members of the Save Opal Creek, the Eugene Springfield Solidarity Network (ESSN), and Jeff Debonis of Association of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics (AFSEEE). Oddly, however, no rank and file timber workers received invitations.²

The Labor and Environment Panel consisted of Judi Bari, a university professor whose area of study was physics, and "the owner of a company who (made) fancy yuppie houses out of old growth wood and doesn't want the old growth eliminated." Bari felt that the panel wasn't representative enough, so she gave the organizers the name of a certain rank and file mill worker from Roseburg, Oregon, with whom she had happened to have been corresponding. Gene Lawhorn had recently been speaking publically for the preservation of the Spotted Owl, against the yellow ribbon campaign, and in defense of union timber workers, and Bari intended to cede some of her time to him, because the organizers had not thought to include any actual timber workers on the panel, and they had refused to let Lawhorn be on the panel.³

A week before the conference it seemed as if the AFL-CIO intended to keep both Bari and Lawhorn off of the panel. Bari received a phone call from Paul Moorhead of the Western Council of Industrial Workers (WCIW) who identified himself by name, and said, nastily, "You better not think that you can

come to Oregon because you won't find a welcome... If any member of my union talks to you, they'll be out of a job."⁴ Moorhead also contacted the conference organizers and the University of Oregon and told them that Bari was an inappropriate speaker for the panel.⁵ He had no real grounds to complain, however, because the WCIW no longer represented any workers in Mendocino County, as its last bargaining unit had been eliminated in 1986. In response to his threats, Bari notified the press and conference organizers. She also contacted the WCIW and requested that they openly debate the issue with Bari (and Lawhorn) at the conference. The conference organizers agreed to the debate, but the WCIW declined the invitation.⁶

Gene Lawhorn would get his chance to speak. There was just one small problem, however. In between the time that Bari had extended the invitation to Lawhorn (who accepted) and the conference, an IWW member in Oregon gave the latter a copy of Darryl Cherney's album, *They Sure Don't Make Hippies Like They Used To*, which has four songs on it that include references to tree spiking, all of which are favorable to the tactic. In spite of the fact that Cherney had declared two years earlier that he "would never spike a tree (himself)"⁷, at the same time he had written "pro spiking" songs, including *Earth First! Maid* (set to the tune of *Union Maid*), *They Sure Don't Make Hippies the Way They Used To*, *Ballad of the Lonesome Tree Spiker* (coauthored with Mike Roselle), and *Spike a Tree for Jesus*.⁸ The last song particularly incensed Lawhorn. In their entirety, the lyrics were:

Now some say the Romans killed Jesus,
And some say it was the Jews,
And some say that it was King Herod,
And some say it was me and you.

But when I think of the cross he was nailed to,
And the tree that was logged for the wood,
I realize 'twas the loggers killed Jesus,
And it's time that we got them back good.

Chorus

¹ "1990: A Year in the Life of Earth First!", by Judi Bari, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, January 2, 1991.

² "Notes on the Renunciation of Tree Spiking, unpublished letter, by Karen Wood, March 19, 1989; letter courtesy of Gene Lawhorn's personal archives.

³ "In the Middle of Run Away History: Judi Bari, Earth First! Organizer, Mississippi Summer in the California Redwoods", interview by Beth Bosk, *New Settler Interview*, issue #49, May 1990.

⁴ "IWW Defends Mill Workers", by Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney, *Industrial Worker*, March 1990.

⁵ Bosk, May 1990, op. cit.

⁶ Bari and Cherney, March 1990, op. cit.

⁷ "Darryl Cherney: a Conversation with a Remarkable Candidate", by Michael Koepf, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, (in two parts) April 27 and May 4, 1988.

⁸ These songs are all featured on the album, *They Sure Don't Make Hippies the Way They Used To*, 1989, by Darryl Cherney;

*So spike a tree for Jesus, spike a tree for Jesus,
And Jesus will love you know,
Spike a tree for Jesus, spike a tree for Jesus,
And someday to heaven you'll go.*

Now the logger who cut that old tree down,
He was just going 'long with the mob,
When asked why he did it he answered,
I was just doing my job.

Chorus

I don't care what they do with the timber,
As long as they pay me my price,
They can go make a frame to hang a picture,
They can go make a cross to hang Christ

Chorus

Now as Jesus he hung on that cross there,
It was not something he liked,
And his last words were "Father I would not be
here,
If all of the trees had been spiked."

Chorus⁹

The lyrics were tongue-in-cheek, but serious sounding enough to upset a mill worker, such as Lawhorn, who had witnessed equipment damage in the mill due to spiked logs. He had already written a speech that he had intended to deliver, but upon hearing the song, he rewrote it. Here, in its entirety (with small grammatical edits), is what Gene Lawhorn said to the panel and the audience, on March 4, 1990:

"I have been working in the wood products industry here in Oregon for five years. I started out at Westbrook Wood Products in Norway. I injured my wrist on the job and had to have surgery. Shortly after I returned to work I was laid off out of seniority when they curtailed a shift. This was my first experience with the caring benevolence of the timber industry towards their workers.

"After several months of unemployment I got hired at International Paper's Gardner sawmill. About a year before I got hired the workers were forced to take wage cuts amount-

ing to \$3 an hour. The Reedsport City Council and the Chamber of Commerce got behind I-P because they threatened to close the mill if workers didn't take wage cuts. But if workers would take cuts, I-P promised to return the wages in the next contract and they promised to be around at least another 20 years. In December of 1987, 1½ years after the pay cuts and false promises, I-P gave its 400 employees a Christmas present of one week's notice of permanent plant closure due to selling the mill to Bohemia Lumber Co. This was my second experience with the caring benevolence of the timber industry.

"After four months of unemployment I got hired by Roseburg Forest Products and relocated to Sutherlin. After eight months on the job I got my third experience of the caring benevolence of the timber industry towards workers when we were forced to go on strike to keep from taking wage cuts amounting \$1.50 an hour. In a four month long (and very bitter) strike we ended up taking a \$0.60 wage cut (lost) three (paid) holidays, Sunday overtime, and lost vacation time.

"It was during the strike that I started to become vocal about environmental issues when I took notice all the cars and trucks that crossed my picket line had one thing in common. They all were displaying the yellow timber industry support ribbon. To many of us who stood on the picket line the yellow ribbon became a symbol of the scabs and the timber industry greed. Even today—a year after the strike—only a small handful of RFP workers will display the yellow ribbon.

"The strike became a real eye opener for me, so I began to study the environmental issues. The more I learned the more frightened and concerned I became. The poisoning of the rivers, lakes, and oceans; the pollution of the atmosphere, depletion of the ozone layer, the advancing of the greenhouse effect, and the rape and plunder of the world's ancient rainforest all alarmed me, and I began to see that all these things are tied to the profit motive mentality which cut our wages. I became fully aware that workers and environmentalists have more in common than workers and employers. For the sake of the great and holy profit motive of laissez faire capitalism workers and the environment are both being exploited beyond their

⁹ Spike a Tree for Jesus, lyrics by Darryl Cherney, used by permission, from the album, They Sure Don't Make Hippies Like They Used To. The album now contains the following disclaimer: "In 1990, Judi Bari and I renounced the tactic of tree-spiking, because it endangers timber workers. Nevertheless, this CD reissue contains four songs about tree-spiking for historical purposes only. It reflects an energy and time in Earth First! that is worth documenting."

means to cope, especially in third world developing nations.

“Unfortunately our labor union leaders have chosen to openly join forces with the timber industry. The ink was barely dry on our ignominious contract when the leadership of the two woods working unions and the two paper working unions along with the longshoreman’s formed a coalition with the timber industry to fight environmentalists’ efforts to get the spotted owl designated as an endangered species, and environmentalists’ rights to appeal timber sales in court. Then the leadership called the organization grassroots. They held a timber-labor rally in Salem on September 8th, which less than 500 showed up. The leadership estimated that 5,000 would show up because the timber industry and the paper industry was giving anyone a day off to attend. Two days before the rally I and a couple of co-workers called a press conference, we denounced the timber-labor coalition as a sellout to workers who just took pay cuts, and asked workers to boycott the rally. The timber-labor coalition caused a lot of bad feeling towards our local leadership within the plant I work at and many other RFP plants.

“To be sure, there are bad feelings towards environmentalists by a vast majority of wood workers. Many are third and fourth generation loggers and mill workers who feel a strong tie to the timber industry and many are frightened by the prospect of losing their jobs. Woodworkers perceive environmentalists as “lazy, barefooted, long-haired hippies who smoke pot, live on welfare, who sneak through the woods in the darkness of night spiking trees.” Many environmentalists on the other hand view wood workers as ignorant narrow minded stooges of the timber industry.

“Of all the environmental groups active the Earth Firsters are the most hated by wood workers and loggers. But I myself admire the courage and direct action tactics of many Earth Firsters. It takes a lot of courage to climb a 200 foot tree and sit for days to protest clear cutting. It takes a lot of courage to block roads with your bodies, or chain yourself to a tree. But to those who spike trees I say you are performing a cowardly violent act which endangers my fellow workers and me. The gap which separates environmentalists and labor will never be bridged as long as trees are being spiked.

“All the ramifications of tree spiking are negative! (1) Spiking endangers wood workers lives; (2) Spiking discredits all environmentalists; (3) Spiking alienates possible support from environmentally concerned wood workers; (4) Lastly spiking provides propaganda ammo for the big guns of the timber industry. Tree spiking must not only be stopped, but henceforth all spiking must be publically denounced by all Earth Firsters if they really and truthfully desire to bridge the gap.

“I myself have had a close call because of a spiked tree. While operating a log splitter, a saw not far behind me hit a spike. Saw teeth and metal from the spike flew around me like shrapnel from a bomb. Mill work is dangerous enough without the added dangers of spiked trees.

“The timber industry wants to cut all the ancient forest they can get away with cutting. Environmentalists on the other hand want to save all the ancient forest they possibly can. In the middle are the workers who just want to work and partake in the American dream. We face a double edged sword of either working ourselves out of work in the future or losing many jobs now because of environmental concerns. I myself want to save all the ancient forest we can possibly save, but if I have to lose my job I want other options available for me and others who may lose jobs. Retraining and relocation programs must be made available to any worker who may lose his or her job due to environmental concerns whether it be in the timber industry or the chemical and nuclear industries.

“There will always be enough trees to provide a certain amount of jobs within the timber industry, but not enough to sustain what we have within the industry now for an indefinite period, and certainly not enough to continue the exporting of raw logs.

“The industrialists of the world will continue to poison the rivers, lakes, and oceans; to rape the ancient forest; pollute the air; and play with deadly radioactive substances like an unruly child in a house soaked with gasoline for the sake of the most holy and high God—profits—unless we all—environmentalists and laborers—bridge the gap between us that is wider than the Grand Canyon and deeper than an abyss because of hard headedness, and narrow

minded convictions on both sides. Let us all do our part because the world tomorrow is the world we build today!”¹⁰

Lawhorn then admonished Bari to put her money where her mouth was and renounce tree spiking. Without so much as a hint of protest, Bari agreed, and intended to encourage all of Earth First! to follow suit, starting with the Earth First! chapters in northwestern California. To her great surprise, an overwhelming majority of the other Earth First!ers in attendance supported her move and likewise agreed to follow suit.¹¹ The Earth First!ers invited Gene Lawhorn and Dennis Gilbert to hold a further discussion in the students’ law lounge, where they discussed and debated the issue productively and positively.¹² Earth First!er Karen Wood conceded that the tactic was producing more negative results than positive, and that it was but one tactic among many in the arsenal of direct action available. Other tactics, such as civil disobedience, demonstrations, administrative appeals, letter writing and phone campaigns, solidarity with workers, and other forms of ecotage had proven to be far more effective.¹³ Gene Lawhorn agreed, as he later stated:

“Trees, wildlife, fish, birds, the air, oceans, lakes and rivers cannot organize to fight the massive degradation and exploitation they are subjected to, thus environmentally conscious and concerned people must organize to fight for them. Whether environmentally conscious people be woodworkers, paper workers, Earth First!ers, or mainstream environmentalists, we all must unite to fight not only the degradation of this small fragile planet we co-habit, but to also fight the increased employer attacks upon worker rights, health and safety, wages and benefits. Both battles stem from the same problem, the greed mentality which places profits above the well being of the environment, and the health, safety, and prosperity of the working class. I as a union woodworker,

hunter, and fisherman with a family to support have a greater stake in a healthy and sound environment than the Wall Street pencil pushers, or the greedy Northwest timber demagogues who have cut and run from one end of this Nation to the other.”¹⁴

The twenty Earth First!ers present, as well as Gene Lawhorn and Dennis Gilbert reached unanimous consensus that tree spiking must be renounced by Earth First!, at least in northwestern California and Southern Oregon. The alienation being caused by continued advocacy by Earth First! for the tactic, especially since—in northwestern California at least—it wasn’t actually used, was causing more harm than good.¹⁵ It was time to publically rethink it. Doing so would be controversial since tree spiking was deeply ingrained in Earth First! culture.

Nevertheless, a significant chasm *had* been bridged, and it is worth noting that it was mention of the injury to Cloverdale mill worker George Alexander by Barbara Hansen in the February 1988 *Industrial Worker* that had started the process and had brought Earth First! and the IWW to both Gene Lawhorn’s and Judi Bari’s attention in the first place. The various threads of history seemed to be weaving together in just the right way at the right time.

¹⁰ “Environmentalism and Labor: Bridging the Gap”, speech by Gene Lawhorn, given at the Public Interest Law Conference, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, March 4, 1990; used by permission.

¹¹ Bari, January 2, 1991, op. cit.

¹² “Press Statement on Tree Spiking”, by Gene Lawhorn, April 4, 1990, courtesy of Gene Lawhorn’s personal archives.

¹³ “Notes on the Renunciation of Tree Spiking, unpublished letter, by Karen Wood, March 19, 1989; letter courtesy of Gene Lawhorn’s personal archives.

¹⁴ Lawhorn, April 4, 1990, op. cit.

¹⁵ Additional Release by Darryl Cherney, *Mendocino Commentary*, April 12, 1990.