

Chapter 28 : Letting the Cat Out of the Bag.



At their first meeting, the members of IWW Local #1 had agreed upon a policy that they would not consent to interviews in the press because—while Earth First!ers could be open about their militant radicalism, since they didn't have a direct economic relationship with the big timber companies or the gyppos—the workers, on the other hand, risked the loss of their job, or even their standing in the community if they spoke out. The G-P mill workers hit by the PCB spill were the exception, of course, because by the time they had turned to IWW Local #1, they had already had their standing taken away from them, and some—such as Treva Vandenbosch and Frank Murray—had been forced to quit. On the other hand, the P-L dissidents—such as Kelly Bettiga, Pete Kayes, Les Reynolds, and Bob Younger were already under intense scrutiny for the ESOP campaign and their unsuccessful appeals to the NLRB—and the L-P workers feeding information to Bari—including Don Beavers and Randy Veach, all could be fired in a heartbeat if they were linked to the “unwashed-out-of-town-jobless-hippies-on-drugs.”¹

After the FBI sting operation that entrapped five of their comrades in Arizona, North Coast Earth First!ers were understandably wary of their dealings with the press, with good reason. With the region increasingly resembling a pressure cooker on overdrive due to the Corporate Timber reaction to Earth First!'s direct actions, EPIC's lawsuits, the potential listing of the spotted owl as endangered, L-P's outsourcing, and several ballot initiatives, the bosses were more likely than ever to ramp up their propaganda mill. The added pressures of underground IWW union organizing activity required especially tight security from the activists. Sometimes even the left-liberal press, small and limited though its circulation tended to be, could cause more harm than good. Judi Bari was especially aware of this fact.

Even if a press interview was sympathetic to the efforts of IWW Local 1 and the workers' privacy respected, there was a sense that reporters might sensationalize the matter. In December of 1989, freelance reporter Julie Gilden, whose articles often ran in publications such as *The Village Voice* approached Judi Bari about conducting just such an interview with her and timber-worker members of IWW Local #1. Bari informed Gilden of the branch's aforementioned policy, and the latter claimed to agree to respect the IWW members' wishes, but wanted to ask Bari some background questions on the IWW's history and the

local culture of Humboldt and Mendocino County. Bari consented, assuming that Gilden was completely forthright. She wasn't.² In less than a month, Gilden had submitted an article to *The Village Voice* and *In These Times* featuring quotations from Judi Bari, Pete Kayes, and IWW General Secretary-Treasurer, Jeff Ditz (who served in that capacity for 1990 after being elected by the membership the previous year), strung together as if they had been given in an actual interview.³

The article came across as factual and sympathetic to the IWW well enough, stating matter-of-factly, that IWW Local #1 had been formed with 26 members initially. It gave a summary of the IWW's then current membership and its age demographics, which showed that a great many younger members had joined the IWW in recent years. It quoted labor folklorist Archie Green, who had written extensively about IWW culture. It also quoted Pete Kayes, who said of the mainstream labor unions, in comparison to the IWW:

“(they are) more management tools to control employees than attempts by employees to control their own destinies. Once people figure out what we're really about, maybe they won't feel so stuck. The way it is now, people are so intimidated by management, they can't differentiate Wobblies from Girl Scouts. But sooner or later the management will do something bad enough to force action.”⁴

This was reasonable enough, as were the following statements from Judi Bari:

“(We're) all trying to keep the timber companies from liquidating their assets and selling out. It's desperate here We're near the end. Tree sitters and millworkers will all be left without forests or jobs if we don't do something to stop them... (loggers) often are more attuned to environmental issues than anyone else—after all, it's their lifestyle, their homes, their work.”⁵

² Letter to the editor, by Judi Bari, *Industrial Worker*, February 1990.

³ “Minutes of the February 1990 IWW Local #1 General Membership Branch meeting”, recorded by Judi Bari, February 4, 1990.

⁴ “Earth First! Brings Wobblies Back into the Woods”, by Julia Gilden, *In These Times*, January 17, 1990.

⁵ Gilden, op. cit.

¹ “Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting of IWW Local #1”, recorded by Judi Bari, November 19, 1989.

However Gilden also inserted wrap around comments that were not quotations by Bari that still implied that she meant for the information conveyed in them to represent her thoughts⁶, such as comments about some of the Earth First!ers “being the original back-to-the-landers whose marijuana farms have been stoking the local economy since then.” Gilden also quoted Jeff Ditz as saying, “I didn’t come here to run a museum...this is the new IWW for the 1990s.”⁷ The problem with Gilden’s framing of Ditz’s statements is that it suggested that the IWW—hitherto the dialog between itself and Earth First! begun in May of 1988—had *indeed been*, historically irrelevant, which was both inaccurate and unfair to the many IWW members who had kept its flame burning in the face of unfavorable historical conditions. It was felt by Bari, that Gilden’s presentation of the information, which she wasn’t supposed to have made public in the first place, could only serve to discredit the work IWW Local 1 was attempting.⁸ Gilden’s sensationalizing of an obscure and largely insignificant attempt by neo-Nazi Tom Metzger to overtly infiltrate an Earth First! chapter in Southern California and the burning of American flags displayed at a recent Earth First! gathering by some discontented Earth First!ers with more internationalist leanings—events which did not accurately describe the overall cohesion of the loose, but mostly united radical environmental movement—didn’t help matters much.⁹

Bari hoped that the damage from the article would be minimal, and she noted that few timber workers read either *In These Times* or *The Village Voice*, but she urged all IWW members to shun any future contact with Julia Gilden.¹⁰ Local 1 decided to modify their “no interviews” policy, finding the original plan unworkable, so that future interviews focused on the workers and their issues, and to try and use that to build the organization.¹¹ In a promising development, Judi Bari’s interview with Jane Kay on the *San Francisco Examiner* focused on the workers’ own statements, and Kay’s piece was fair and accurate.¹² Unfortunately, Gilden’s article would not be the last time that Earth First! or IWW Local 1 would be quoted out of

context or their words misconstrued. Like it or not, Earth First! and IWW Local 1 were in the corporate media spotlight, and the timber corporations, lead by G-P, L-P, and P-L were likely to milk any negative press about their adversaries to infinity.

⁶ Bari, February 1990, op. cit.

⁷ Gilden, op. cit.

⁸ Bari, February 1990, op. cit.

⁹ Gilden, op. cit.

¹⁰ Bari, February 1990, op. cit.

¹¹ “Minutes of the February 1990 IWW Local #1 General Membership Branch meeting”, op. cit.

¹² “Redwood Wrangle: North Coast Split Over Logging of Old Growth”, by Jane Kay, *San Francisco Examiner*, January 21, 1990.