

Revolution 101: The Ruckus Society

By Dan Baum

3,000 words

A longhaired boy with a billy-goat's beard is strumming a faux-Andean tune while a girl with a lip ring wheels her arms in some kind of free-association dance. Behind them, rain-soaked hippies in garbage-bag ponchos wait for bland vegan rations to be ladled out of waist-high pots. The whole scene at this disused surfing camp in Malibu – right down to the dogs with bandanas tied around their necks – could be a small-scale recreation of Woodstock 1969.

But this gathering has about as much in common with a softheaded psychedelic lovefest as, say, Eminem does with Donovan. For this is a training camp in political direct action put on by the Ruckus Society, which brings a stunning level of sophistication to the task of teaching non-violent revolt. These are the folks who rappel off skyscrapers to hang huge, ironic banners, who have perfected the technique of bicycle-locking

one's neck to an offending corporation's front door, and who have a knack for getting their demonstrations onto the evening news. It was Ruckus activists who disrupted the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999, hounded the International Monetary Fund summit in Washington, D.C., last April, and razed the Democratic National Convention in July. Even more central to Ruckus's mission than raising a ruckus, though, is teaching others to do it. Ruckus considers itself the training arm of the radical Left. Since its founding in 1995, Ruckus has trained some 2,500 people at 23 camps¹ like this one, which is preparing Students for a Free Tibet for a series of actions in February. It may look like a dreary conclave of the Rainbow People, but this is Revolution 101.

“What's effective about this action?” asks John Sellers, Ruckus's bullet-headed 33-year-old director. He works a slide projector for a large group of students huddled inside a concrete gazebo, and on the screen is a shot of young people chained together in a Seattle intersection, their arms locked deep inside steel pipes so the police can't pull them apart. “Notice how they've got ‘No to WTO’ not only on their signs, but also on stickers on the lockdowns, so in case that's the media shot that goes out, the message goes with it.” Sellers, the son of a Pennsylvania rubber

¹ John Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society, 510-848-9565, or 510-772-3168 cell

worker, was himself recruited by a snappy soundbite and choice image. At age 10, he watched a “60 Minutes” segment about Greenpeace activists zipping in rubber boats between whalers and their prey, and has been a direct-action junkie ever since. As the rain whips against the outside of the gazebo, Sellers runs through a history of direct action protests, from Gandhi to King to the Vietnam war and beyond. A picture of Rosa Parks appears and Sellers explains that Parks’s refusal to give up the bus seat in 1955 wasn’t a spontaneous act of individual protest as the legend has it, but rather a well-planned action for which she was trained. A slide comes up of a man dressed as Death walking among people sprawled on the sidewalk in front of the White House. “This is an okay action,” Sellers explains. “But you can’t tell what it’s about. If Death had had, say, the nuclear symbol on his chest it would have gotten the message across.”

Ruckus continues an American tradition of flamboyant direct action that goes all the way back to the Boston Tea Party. More immediately, though, it grows out of Greenpeace, which pioneered daring, mediagenic demonstrations by sending the ship Rainbow Warrior into nuclear test zones, dangling people off bridges to trap toxic-waste barges in port, and photographing the clubbing slaughter of baby seals.² When Sellers and a

² The Greenpeace Story (book)

couple of other Greenpeace footsoldiers founded Ruckus to teach direct action, their focus was the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. But then something unexpected happened. “We had human rights people wanting to come to our camps,” he says. “Then labor. Then the free-Tibet folks. What we saw was that the combining theme was corporate audacity, the unchecked spread of corporate globalism.”³

This is what makes the Ruckus Society a 21st century phenomenon, and not a throwback to the 1960s. Global capitalism in the post-Cold War era is a hydra-headed target that cannot foreseeably be “ended” the way a war can. It can, however, be badgered, heckled, bullyragged, boycotted, shamed, and legislated into reforming. Grasping the complexities of the global economy takes a higher level of economic and political analysis than do such single-issue movements as drug-policy reform or animal rights,⁴ and for all their youth and hippie trappings, Ruckus-trained activists are uncommonly well-informed. Nobody reads from the Book of Duh at a Ruckus camp: There are no platitudes about “greedy fatcats,” no giddy Earth First!-style songs demeaning humankind, no quasi-spiritual handholding for Mother Gaia or animal souls, no referring to the police as “pigs.”

³ John Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society, 510-848-9565, or 510-772-3168 cell

⁴ I’ve done extensive reporting in both fields.

Instead, 36-year-old Stephen Kretzmann – a whipcrack petroleum-economics analyst disguised as a bushy-haired stoner -- summarizes the latest Securities and Exchange Commission filings by British Petroleum, which is helping the Chinese government build an oil pipeline across Tibet. “Keep in mind that your professors’ pensions are probably held by the investment house TIAA-CREF, which is a major holder of BP stock,” Kretzmann tells the group as pens burrow furiously into notebooks. “That provides us an organizing opportunity.”⁵ Celia Alario, a 32-year-old Bay Area radio journalist, explains the Wall Street principle of “reputational capital” – the investment a corporation makes in its image – and parses the difference between challenging that capital and destroying it. “You don’t want to demonize them,” she explains. “In some other respects, BP’s a good corporate citizen and we need to keep calling them to that higher standard.” This is no lefty jeremiad against “corporate media.” Alario details with Talmudic subtlety how the networks and mainstream papers can be coaxed into covering a demonstration. “Practice your soundbites in front of a mirror,” she says.⁶ And if you haven’t properly arranged coverage beforehand, she says, “reconsider whether to do your action.” (In the front row, 22-year-old Alma David puts her face in her

⁵ Stephen Kretzmann, cell 202-903-6630, work 202-785-1515 ext. 33, home 202-234-6790 or kretzmann@mindspring.com

hands and groans. While a senior at Smith College, she explains later, David staged a big demonstration against the investment bank Goldman Sachs, but because she forgot to work the media, the action got no ink or air time. The event might as well have happened on Pluto.)⁷

A touching thread of patriotism runs through the Ruckus rap. Many of the instructors have experience in, say, Indonesia or Colombia, and wax poetic about the First Amendment. “I feel really fortunate to live in America because we can express ourselves politically, which two-thirds of the world can’t do,” says “blockades” instructor John Bowling, who looks like a wizened old drug casualty but has the disciplined devotion to technique you’d find in an emergency-room doctor. “Blockades” is a harrowing class about how best to place oneself in harm’s way. “If you’re going to blockade a railroad track,” Bowling announces to the students sitting cross-legged around him on a blue tarp, “do it in a place where you’re sure the train has time to stop.” (An activist lost his legs ignoring that advice a few years ago, one of the few serious casualties this band of merry warriors has suffered.) If you chain yourself in port to a ship’s rudder, Bowling says, be sure the captain knows you’re there before he

⁶ Celia Alario, 310-721-6517 pager 800-761-5318

⁷ Alma David, 206-524-4504, 212-662-8180

throws the ship into gear. If you expect the police to use pepper spray, take out your contact lenses.

Like other Ruckus trainers, Bowling extends a brotherly class analysis to the police. Even when they are dragging you by the hair, he says, don't hate them. "They're working people with an unpleasant job," he says. "They are not the problem, they're victims of the problem."⁸ At the I.M.F. protests in Washington, police appeared in riot gear so dark and menacing they looked like Darth Vader's storm-troopers. Sellers greeted them with a portable P.A. system blaring the "Death Star Theme" and they pulled off their gas masks, laughing.⁹ This is a far cry from "Off the Pig."

The Ruckus Society itself is small, with only four full-time staff members based in Berkeley, California. But it maintains a gigantic Rolodex of the broadly defined "Movement," so it can call on experts to teach everything from the history of non-violence to the mechanics of scaling an office building. "A lot of wisdom about how to do effective actions has accumulated in the Movement since the sixties," says 36-year-old Ruckus trainer Ingrid Gordon as she supervises the five-story climbing scaffold that is the centerpiece of every Ruckus camp. "Our job is to gather that

⁸ John Bowling, (temporary) 510-843-0742 or try through Jim Ace's cell: 510-772-3087

wisdom in, and then disseminate it, so we can bring it to bear.”¹⁰ Unlike Earth First! and Greenpeace, which are often accused of having a testosterone-driven guy culture, Ruckus divides authority and participation pretty equally between the sexes. Gordon, who matches the brawny grace of a Green Beret with the piercing blue-eyed stare of a seasoned politician, is a star here.

The hallmarks of a Ruckus-style action are clarity of message, media-savvy visuals, technical wizardry, and safety. An action in October 1997 – in which Ingrid Gordon and another climber draped the Los Angeles headquarters of the oil company ARCO with a huge STOP GLOBAL WARMING banner and hung there all day beside it – is a good example. The operation actually began a month earlier, with Gordon scouting the building and realizing there was no way inside – the climbers wouldn’t be able to ride the elevators up and rappel down. They’d have to go up the outside.

“I found the tracks that the window washers use, and stood there feeling around inside them, drawing diagrams,” she says. “I sent the drawings to a guy we know back east, who was able to build us the devices we needed to climb.”

⁹ John Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society, 510-848-9565, or 510-772-3168 cell

¹⁰ Ingrid Gordon, 206-784-5141 or better still, ingrid@drizzle.com

The action itself started before dawn, with half a dozen people fanning out to keep an eye on the security guards and keep them distracted while Gordon and the other climber scrambled up the side of the building. Once the banner was unfurled, the police arrived in a huff, threatening to climb up and pull the climbers off. A crucial piece of the Ruckus style, though, is openness to law enforcement. The action's safety coordinator, 36-year-old Dave Augeri of Missoula, Montana, stepped forward with a smile, explained how the climbers had gotten there, and said that everybody would be safer if they were left alone. He detailed exactly how they'd climbed and how they intended to come down. The police and fire department were so charmed by Augeri and the technical elegance of the climbers' equipment that Augeri was able to defuse the cops' anger and keep the banner up for hours, with nobody getting hurt. "The LAPD SWAT team was totally into it, begging me to show them our devices," laughs Gordon. (She didn't.) Also there that day was a media team to make sure the cameras showed up and got the best angles; a "campaigner" from the larger ARCO fight to provide the microphones with soundbites about the company's depredations; and a video crew to capture the action for publicity, debriefing, and possible lawsuits if the cops got out of hand. Standing by downtown was an

activist with a bag of bail money. A lawyer was on call. Altogether, about 15 people supported the two in the air, all of them connected by an expensive network of beepers, radios, and cellphones, and backed up by a truck full of scanners to monitor the police bands..¹¹

“They say ‘the masters tools will never dismantle the master’s house,’ but (all this communications gear) was developed by corporations for their own gain, and we got it when the price went down,” says John Passacantando, executive director of Greenpeace.¹² Adoption of the latest technology, say Ruckus organizers and their allies, is central to the anti-globalism campaign.

“Look at the internet, which was invented by the Defense Department,” says 50-year-old Kevin Danaher, founder of Global Exchange and a longtime Ruckus supporter. “I’m sitting here in front of 122 emails from people in, let’s see, Managua, Port au Prince, Mozambique, Johannesburg. . . . Right in front of my eyes a common democratic culture is developing.”¹³ To financial analyst Kretzmann, “the internet has changed everything” because he can analyze a corporation’s

¹¹ Ingrid Gordon, 206-784-5141 or better still, ingrid@drizzle.com and Dave Augeri, 406-825-8258 or augeri@wildrockies.org

¹² John Passacantando 202.462.1177

¹³ Kevin Danaher phone (415) 255-7296 fax (415) 255-7498 home (415) 648-7015 kevin@globalexchange.org

S.E.C. filing and instantly contact activists about it worldwide.¹⁴ At the Democratic Convention last summer, the big Ruckus banner – an American flag with corporate logos for stars and the word SOLD slashed across it – failed to unfurl all the way. For its newsletter and press releases, Ruckus simply doctored the picture with PhotoShop to make it hang right.¹⁵

Ruckus' broad definition of "the movement" as resistance to corporate power has helped make confederates of such diverse groups as the AFL-CIO, the Rainforest Action Network, and the Free-Tibet people. "For many years, the Tibet cause just loped along," says 30-year-old Josh Schrei, campaign coordinator for the Milarepa Fund, which was founded by Beastie Boys singer Adam Yauch (stage name MCA) in 1994 to support the Free Tibet cause. "Now we're making a very conscious effort to focus on BP's role in Tibet, and that brings in the anti-corporate activists." The BP angle helps explain why Tibet has captured the fascination of young activists in a way that, say, the Kurds or the Rwandan Tutsi haven't. But the Tibet activists also freely acknowledge that the Tibet appeal is largely aesthetic – all those mountains and gaily dressed monks – and the Beastie Boys' regular Free Tibet concerts haven't hurt, either. "You use what

¹⁴ Stephen Kretzmann, cell 202-903-6630, work 202-785-1515 ext. 33, home 202-234-6790 or kretzmann@mindspring.com

you've got," says Schrei. Two years ago, Schrei says, the Free Tibet movement used Ruckus tactics at a series of Washington, D.C. demonstrations to help persuade the World Bank to withdraw support for A big Chinese development project in Tibet – a major victory.¹⁶

Organizations like Students for a Free Tibet don't hire Ruckus to train their activists; they co-sponsor Ruckus camps. "There's a lot of cross-pollination," Sellers says. "We bring some skills, they bring others." Ruckus has turned down requests for political reasons – from a pro-life group, for example – but usually it's because "the organization hasn't done its homework and isn't ready for what we do," Sellers says. "A lot of the people coming into the movement are fascinated with action, and aren't as steeped in the down-and-dirty grunt work that keeps movements alive and growing." People who want to attend a Ruckus camp have to write a long application – explaining the cause they want to fight and their experience with direct action – and pay a \$100 fee.¹⁷

Ruckus's \$400,000 annual budget¹⁸ comes mostly from a handful of rich donors, plus a few foundations. Ted Turner's personal foundation was Ruckus's biggest donor – at \$50,000 a year – until the WTO protests

¹⁵ John Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society, 510-848-9565, or 510-772-3168 cell

¹⁶ Josh Schrei, 212-226-4739

¹⁷ John Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society, 510-848-9565, or 510-772-3168 cell

¹⁸ Ruckus's 1999 IRS form 990

in Seattle, when Turner shut off the tap. “Ted’s a big trade fan,” says Sellers. As he splashes around in the mud arranging alternative tent locations in the event of flash flood, Sellers chuckles happily. “I just got word that (actor-director) Tim Robbins donated \$5,000 and (Robbins’s wife) Susan Sarandan \$1,000.”¹⁹

Ruckus’s relatively big budget and its sources raise a question: how radical can you be when you’re living on handouts from the rich? The so-called “Black Bloc” of anarchists – the black-clad folks in ski masks who did the window-breaking in Seattle -- dismiss Ruckus as milk-and-water liberals. The system doesn’t need reforming, anarchists argue, it needs destroying. Ruckus’s “pious-gesture ritualized play-by-the-rules dancing-puppets shit,” plays into the hands of the capitalists by lending the illusion of resistance, says 57-year-old John Zerzan of Eugene, Oregon, who is as much of a leader as the anarchists will own up to having.

Anarchists breaking windows and burning dumpsters is perhaps even more attractive to the cameras than activists rappelling from cranes to unfurl banners, so the Black Bloc is a problem for Ruckus out of all proportion to its numbers. (Nobody knows how many Black Bloc activists there are; being anarchists, nobody keeps a roster. Still, the number of

¹⁹ John Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society, 510-848-9565, or 510-772-3168 cell

window-breakers was relatively small in Seattle.) The violence often becomes a demonstration's dominant image, and perhaps because of its name, the Ruckus Society gets blamed. Sellers was arrested in Philadelphia before the Republican convention in August, and held on an unprecedented \$1 million bail, because, prosecutors said, he instigates violence.²⁰ (Sellers was later released, all charges dropped. He is contemplating a lawsuit.)

The question, says Kevin Danaher, becomes one of how to practice democracy. "If you have a protest in Seattle, and 99 percent of the people have decided on non-violence and one percent decides to break shit, the question is, does that one percent have the right to overturn the decision of 99 percent?" he asks. "My personal answer is 'fuck no.'"²¹ In Seattle, Ruckus-trained activists stood between the anarchists and Gap store windows,²² a stance, anarchists say, shows Ruckus's true pro-capitalist colors. "They talk about the Zapatistas, who carry guns and shoot people to protect themselves," says anarchist videographer Tim

²⁰ \$1 Million Bail Ordered For Protesters / Berkeley-based activist allegedly led 'mayhem' San Francisco Chronicle; San Francisco, Calif.; Aug 5, 2000; Janet Wells,

²¹ Kevin Danaher, work (415) 255-7296. home (415) 648-7015

²² "Breaking the Spell," video of the Seattle demonstrations by Tim Lewis

Lewis of Eugene. “But when it happens around them, fuck that man, let’s protect the windows until the cops show up. What’s up with that?”²³

Ruckus and its allies had better figure out how to deal with the Black Bloc, says Ruckus co-founder Mike Roselle, because anarchist violence is already driving people away from demonstrations. Fewer people showed up for the World Bank/I.M.F. protests in Washington, D.C. than for the WTO protests in Seattle, and fewer still at the one-year anniversary of the Seattle demonstration. “People see (the violence) and say, ‘I don’t want to get in the middle of that,’” Roselle says.²⁴

Students for a Free Tibet plan to use their Ruckus training on February 15, for a “worldwide day of protest” against British Petroleum. Then comes Ruckus’s annual Spring Break camp in Florida and something new in the fall: an “eGenius” camp for “digital activists.”²⁵

For its part, the World Trade Organization – the target of Ruckus’s biggest-ever protest – dismisses the notion that several hundred thousand angry protesters had anything to do with the failure of its meeting in Seattle. Developed and developing countries couldn’t agree on whether to implement environmental and labor standards, so the talks would have failed even had the WTO “held this meeting on a desert island

²³ Tim Lewis, 541-607-5604

²⁴ Mike Roselle, Work 202-319-2433 Cell 202-251-0226 Cell#2 202-246-0229

with no press, no NGOs, and no demonstrators, Werner says. “We were perfectly capable of derailing the round on our own.”²⁶

Excellent ironic soundbite. Had Werner tried that out at a Ruckus Society training camp, he’d have gotten high marks for it.

End

²⁵ John Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society, 510-848-9565, or 510-772-3168 cell

²⁶ email from Hans-Peter Werner, WTO, 00 41 22 739 52 86 Fax: 00 41 22 739 54 58 or peter.werner@wto.org