

Marysville forest blockade attacked

// February 6, 2002

Issue 479

Picture BY NATALIE ZIRNGAST

MARYSVILLE, Victoria — On January 23, a forest blockade near Marysville was broken up by police. David Marsden, a spokesperson for the blockade organising group, Actively Conserving Marysville Environs (ACME), described the police measures as "extreme".

An anti-logging protester suffered hypothermia after his coat was removed and he was doused with cold water for almost two hours while locked to a tree protection device.

Sixty members of the Department of Natural Resources (DNRE), police, and Search and Rescue were involved in the attack on 17 protesters. Tents were damaged and some of the protesters' camping gear was wrecked when vegetable oil and fuel was poured over it.

The blockade began on January 13 to stop the completion of a road around a mountain that would open up 30 hectares of forest for logging. The area forms part of a wildlife corridor between the Cathedral Ranges National Park and the Alpine National Park, with the road completely dissecting the corridor.

The DNRE argues that the area is not pristine old-growth forest, but ACME points out that the area was affected by the 1939 bushfires and has never been logged. The area is habitat for endangered species such as the Leadbeaters possum, sooty owl, bawbaw tree frog, barred galaxias and astelia lily.

ACME was formed last year by local residents. Spokesperson Libby Mitchell explained that the group had organised lobbying, letter writing, market stalls and information nights, and when the destruction continued, decided to use the tactic of non-violent direct action. This was the first blockade that ACME members had organised and it was supported by other environmental groups, such as the Wilderness Society and Friends of the Earth.

The main aims of the Marysville blockade were to stop the construction of Keppel Road and to pressure DNRE to increase the size of buffer zones between logged areas. The existing 20-metre buffer zones consist of rocks and rubble and are unable to sustain wildlife, says Mitchell. There are also eight to 12 contentious coupes that ACME wants left untouched.

The protesters consciously avoided causing wage losses for the loggers, but were happy to disrupt

the work of the road-building contractors, who will be paid anyway. The loggers "believe that we are out to get them", Mitchell said, "but this is not the case".

A protesters' meeting planned for January 22 was postponed when ACME found out about a loggers' and unions' invitation-only meeting in Marysville on the same night. Around 350 people attended, including hundreds of loggers trucked in from across the state. The meeting called on the Victorian police and the DNRE to end the environmentalists' blockade and allow workers to do their job.

Gavin McFazden, Victorian campaign manager for the Wilderness Society, described the constant pitting of environmentalists against loggers as "deliberately misleading". He criticised the CFMEU forestry division for helping to perpetuate the myth that environmentalists are not interested in preserving jobs, and stated his concern at the continual coordination between forestry industry bosses and the union. "We are always working to find sustainable alternatives and new areas for job growth. We know that this is the only way to be socially and ecologically responsible. When the big employers lay off workers, it has more to do with their need to 'streamline' operations to save money than with environmentalists", he said.

McFazden indicated that negotiations were under way between police, Search and Rescue, DNRE and conservationists to develop a code of conduct for police handling of environmental defenders.