

Dale Farm - What we could have done differently

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“Dale Farm” is a Traveller site near Basildon, Essex. Even though the land is owned by the Irish Travellers that live there, the council decided to evict half the families from the former scrapyard because they did not have the right planning permission. [1]. While it took years for them to get around to it due to legal challenges from the residents, in 2011 the council finally went ahead with their plans and paid Constant & Co to organise an army of bailiffs to evict the families, with the help of the police. This Traveller eviction was unusual for two reasons. First of all, it was getting media attention. Normally issues effecting Travellers are swept under the carpet with Roma, Gypsies, and Irish Travellers used only as comedy figures or scapegoats.

Second, the eviction was not only being resisted by the residents of Dale Farm, but also by a number of supporters, largely mobilised by anarchist groups such as No Borders. These activists had been visiting the site regularly in the years leading up to the eviction – building relationships and building barricades. In the final months they set up “camp constant”, which enabled hundreds of supporters to come and help out. I was one of supporters who went and lived on site to help fight the eviction. This show of support from settled people was unprecedented. We were asked to be there and I definitely felt that our support was appreciated by most residents on the site. [2] However, there were some things which we could have done better. Since the third anniversary of the eviction has just passed, I think that now is a good time to discuss this. I will not be looking into the strategy and tactics behind the eviction resistance itself – as a supporter I do not feel that is my right or my place. Instead I will be looking at three ways our support and resources could have been better organised.

1) We should have formed local support groups

In an army, only a small number of troops are ever on the front line, and the fighters themselves are not a majority. Even in clandestine guerilla groups two wings exist – the militia that do most of the attacks on infrastructure and enemy forces, and the ‘civilian’ resistance that live undercover lives – gathering intelligence, building support, forging papers, guaranteeing supplies. So, especially in activism, the roles that we call ‘support’ should never be seen as less important, but as a vital, inseparable, part of revolutionary struggle. In an era of psy-ops and “cold” wars, emotional and psychological support must be a bigger part of this than ever before. Dale farm could have used a ‘civilian’ support base: for recruitment, awareness raising, and supplies – but also for personal support.

This is important, because a big problem at Dale Farm was that things were stretched. There were many things that could have been done better during the resistance, but the underlying cause was that for the people there, there was not enough time and energy to do those things. At the same time, there were many people who wanted to lend support, but could not travel to Essex. So a good strategy would have been to make use of all the people that could not physically go to the site, in order to take pressure off of the people there. This did happen a bit – there were fund raising events, info nights, and a group called Dale Farm Solidarity London – but there was room for a lot more local action and organising. Even just providing emotional support would have been a great help – things were stressful and traumatic, and many people who were there for the eviction still have problems to this day as a result. If everyone had been part of a local group that ‘sent’ them and looked after them when they got back, I believe that much of this could have been prevented.

I don’t know exactly what form these local groups should have taken. They could just have been based around Dale Farm support, but it might have been better for them to be based around “eviction resistance” in general. At the time of the Dale Farm eviction, the government was discussing a ban on all squatting – including industrial buildings and land squats – which would have effected Travellers too. So, there was a clear link between resisting evictions of house squatters and resisting the eviction of Travellers from land (even though Dale Farm residents owned the land they were being evicted from). There was also the issue of settled people being evicted from their houses due to cuts and the ‘bedroom tax’. Making links between all evictions would have meant the people supporting Dale Farm had some self-interest in it. This link would also have helped to avoid the dynamic of a few people offering resistance as a kind of ‘charity’. Anarchists should stand for solidarity and mutual

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aid! There was an attempt to do this by linking the Dale Farm resistance with a group called “Basildon Uncut”, but we could have gone much further.

2) We should have relied on Travellers to plan the resistance strategy

Before I went to Dale Farm, I had taken part in a few squat eviction resistances. In a normal squat eviction, squatters would let people know when they got papers (basically, a notice of eviction), and along with friends start getting ready – building defences, getting valuables out, etc. When the bailiffs showed up, the squatters would send a text out to supporters, who would then pass the message on to people they knew, who would then do the same in turn. This informal resistance network where I live meant that at the high point, we could get a group of supporters outside of evictions very quickly who were all ready to actively resist bailiffs. The squatters were expected to have some kind of a plan, and would have the final say in any negotiations with bailiffs. The supporters would just go along with whatever the people living in the building were doing.

So, coming to Dale Farm was a bit of a surprise – it seemed like it was the supporters doing most of the planning, with the Travellers being ‘consulted’ and ‘invited’ to meetings! It’s not like this was always the case – the final decision to leave was made by residents on the site – but most of the time it was. For example, I still remember clearly how at one meeting there was a decision to be made, and one of the residents said we should vote on it. He was told by an activist (not asked, told), that we were using consensus and he couldn’t do that. In fairness, the big meetings weren’t where all the organising happened. Residents talked together and organised in their own ways, and much effort was put into going around and talking things over with people over cups of tea. These short chats were much better than just expecting people to come to big activist meetings, but still felt as much like a “consultation” as real collective decision making. To me, the question we asked often sounded like “what should we do FOR you?”, when what we should have been asking is “what should we do TOGETHER?”.

Another example I remember was a discussion that happened before the eviction, and led to the founding of the Traveller Solidarity Network (TSN). Even though it held in a trailer on their own land, no residents of Dale Farm were at that meeting. Every meeting of TSN that I’ve been to since (to be honest, not many), has been made up mostly of settled people. The point of me telling you all this is to show that, even though Travellers were consulted and their wishes listened to, the initiative lay with the supporters. Activists were constantly trying to involve travellers in their decision-making – from having gender-separated meetings, to going door-to-door. We had whole meetings about the issue – but the ways that we tried to change things still meant that the supporters kept full control of the situation. So the planning for the eviction, the actual decisions, were made mainly by the supporters, and not the Travellers we were there to support.

How could this have been changed? The main problem was that the supporters controlled the “official” means of organisation – no-one else could have co-ordinated the activists arriving, called meetings, etc. From experience, I’ve found that unless people can break a group – because nothing will happen without them – they will not feel involved in it. There are two ways of doing things differently which I can think of (though the residents of Dale Farm would probably have better ideas, being the people that live there). First, if the local groups I proposed above had existed, these could have been co-ordinated with by an organisation of residents. The Gypsy Council might have been able to do this at one point. If residents were a central part of the coordination of supporters, then it would have been very difficult for supporters to exclude them. If this was not practical, another way to prevent supporters dominating the resistance might have been ‘divide and conquer’ – that is, supporters could have been encouraged to not organise all together in one big group, but rather to do their planning in smaller affinity groups, or even teams dedicated to different areas of the site. These smaller groups could have maintained relationships with residents directly, and worked alongside them. This did actually happen to an extent – some of the teams that we set up to plan barricading spent time talking with residents – but we could have done far more than this. There would be new difficulties to overcome with both of these solutions, but the situation which arose was not acceptable. Something else had to be worth a try! [3]

3) We should have co-ordinated our own resources better

Things were stretched at Dale Farm, so there is not much more that could have been done to resist the eviction. One thing that would have helped us to do more though, was managing our own resources better. I’ll look at how work was divided up

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(human resources), and then at how tools and physical resources were used.

Work on barricading and building was divided up between four 'teams' – the red, yellow, green, and blue. Each of these took one quarter of the site. In theory this was a really good idea – it helped security and decentralised some of the planning. However, some teams ended up getting viewed as more interesting than the others (for example, the team responsible for the front gate), and so one or two teams tended to have more people, especially some of the most skilled people. The area the police broke through during the evictions was one of those that had too few people on it. The numbers in each team were not discussed openly due to security concerns, which is something that led to this situation – the teams needed to be more coordinated than they were. Another problem was that many people, due to lack of skills and confidence, did not join in barricade building at all. Taken together these two things meant that effort was overwhelmingly focused on a few small parts of the site. A better way to manage building would have been to keep teams as they were, but to take the actual task of the building away from them. If 'work crews' got together at the start of each day, that went around the whole site doing barricading, we would have accomplished a lot more and shared skills and expertise with each other in the process. The only time I remember us trying something like this was on the last day – and it went really well!

So that's people, now for physical resources. I'm not an expert in building, but even to me it was clear there was a lot of waste. I saw barbed wire (expensive!) strewn about where it served no purpose. Saws left out in the rain to rust. Tools that mysteriously went missing. At one point, we even had to break into our own tool shed because the key disappeared. I do not think that any of this was due to people being malicious. Rather it was a genuine ignorance of how to look after tools, and a bit of disorganisation. I have two simple suggestions that would have helped a bit. First off, resources like nails, wire, rope should all have been marked to show how valuable they were. This could have been done using colour-coding. Like, green for things that were basically free (pallets, old tires), blue for things in the middle (screws, nails, rope), and red for things that were harder to replace (barbed wire, scaffolding). The other thing needed was a better system for managing the tools. I don't know if it would have been best, but something that might have worked would be for each tool to have one person who was responsible for it. That way, people could be taught proper care and safety before using things, and tools would have been kept track of to make sure they were given back.

Conclusion

We achieved a lot at Dale Farm. Even three years later, it doesn't seem like a single politician can talk about Traveller sites without saying "we don't want a repeat of Dale Farm". Shortly after the eviction, the government released millions of pounds to help local governments open up new sites [4]. There are also lessons we can take away from it – such as those I've outlined above – that could mean a stronger resistance if a situation like Dale Farm ever happens again. With the benefit of hindsight, not only could we have held out for longer, but we could have done far more towards the ultimate goal – freedom and self-determination for travelling communities. The Dale Farm eviction was an unprecedented step in solidarity between Travelling and Settled people in the UK. I hope that in time, it will be seen not just as an example, but a beginning!

[1] The background to this is a racist planning system that systematically discriminates against Travellers, Gypsies, and Roma

[2] – <https://dalefarm.wordpress.com/2011/10/25/residents-address-dale-farm-supporters/>

[3] – for a more general look at some of the problems with left intervention in Traveller issues, I suggest you read the articles on the following blog written by a Romani Traveller- <http://pipopotamus.blogspot.co.uk> . For a well-thought-out perspective on racism within the anarchist movement, I highly recommend you read "Anarchism and the Black Revolution" by Lorenzo Kom'Boa Ervin.

[4] – <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/travellers-will-be-offered-sites-to-avoid-repeat-of-dale-farm-6286312.html>

<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2015/01/519270.shtml>