

HARD ROCK 82

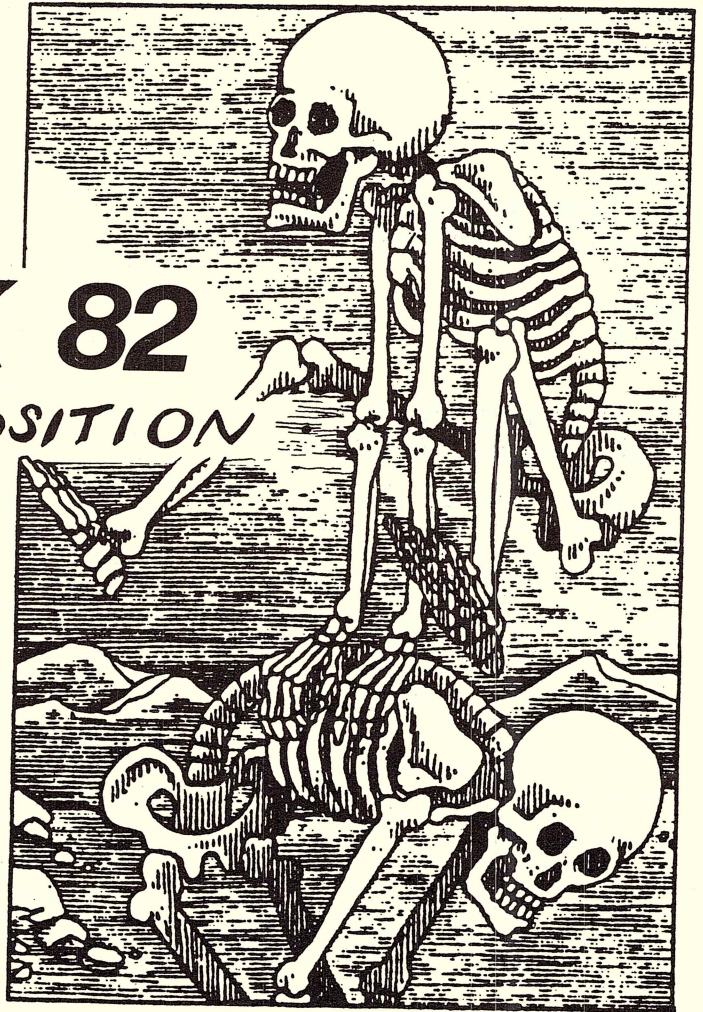
"NUCLEAR FREE" OPPOSITION

This is the second article in our series on Hard Rock 82, Britain's NATO home defence exercise, to take place this autumn from September 29 to October 5.

The first article, ("Stirrings from the Bunker" PN May 14, available from us for 40p inc p&p), described what Hard Rock 82 is intended to achieve, the form it will take, and possible fruitful areas for oppositional action.

In the following article Andrew Rigby discusses the role that those local authorities that have declared themselves Nuclear Free Zones can play in exposing and opposing civil defence preparation. Also how local peace groups can work, both with their local authorities and independently, to make this opposition more effective.

There is a growing public awareness not only of the futility of civil defence pretensions in the event of nuclear war, but also a widening concern that proposed home defence measures are geared more to controlling civilians and suppressing dissent than actually preserving lives. Consequently, it is crucial that local peace groups prepare their opposition to Hard Rock in order to expose it for what it is — a further step along the road to the strong state and to war.



In considering ways of opposing the autumn exercise, there is a lot of interest in the role that the 140 or so "nuclear-free" local authorities might play. It is generally accepted that a nuclear-free declaration, if it is to be anything more than pure symbolism, involves a commitment not to participate in war preparations such as civil defence. However, under the Civil Defence (Planning) Regulations of 1974 local authorities have a statutory duty to make plans for a variety of purposes associated with a war emergency. Indeed, one of the declared aims of Hard Rock is to enable authorities to test the "effectiveness" of such plans. Moreover, if the Secretary of State decides that an authority has failed (or refused) to properly fulfill its civil defence obligations, he can use reserve powers to appoint Commissioners to carry out these functions, with the resultant cost being charged to the local authority. At the present time the minimum legal level of local authority civil defence preparation is unclear, although a number of authorities have declared that they will not participate in the Hard Rock exercise.

This "grey area" of local authorities' legal obligations with regard to civil defence should be borne in mind when local groups plan their campaign of opposition to Hard Rock. Even if their council has declared itself "nuclear free", it is unrealistic (and undoubtedly counter-productive) to expect local councils to take the initiative. Local authorities are not renowned for their commitment to principle in the face of threatened financial and legal sanctions. This is not to say, however, that nuclear free authorities do not have an important role to play in supporting and facilitating the wider peace movement campaign against Hard

Rock in particular and civil defence in general as part of the wider campaign for nuclear disarmament. The resources of local authorities enable them to do things which are beyond the scope of local groups, whilst local groups can initiate actions which it would be unrealistic to expect from local councils.

The main potential role of nuclear free authorities lies in the area of public education — promoting discussion and awareness of the nuclear threat and helping to create mass opposition to it. They can make public the state's plans for the local populace in the event of war. They can publish the specific details of the Hard Rock scenario — how many people are expected to survive etc. (There were no survivors in Coventry in the Square Leg exercise!). They can make public the nature and location of home defence facilities in their area — details about regional war headquarters, telecommunications centres, emergency food depots, emergency service routes and the like. (Why not have "open days" at the district bunker during Hard Rock?).

They can publicise the nuclear war plans for public service workers in areas such as health, sanitation, power supply, police, fire service — not forgetting those involved in "providing facilities for the disposal of human remains in the event of a hostile attack", one of the functions for which local authorities are required to prepare under the 1974 regulations. All with the aim of promoting mass awareness and opposition to the nuclear threat embodied in civil defence, and thereby helping to create a fertile public ground within which the specific actions and initiatives of local peace groups can take root.

An obvious general area for local group activity is working to stiffen the resolve of nuclear-free councils, pushing them to take these types of modest steps. In addition, local groups have an important educational role to play prior to and during the exercise — poster campaigns; establishing contact with voluntary groups like the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS), the Scouts, St John's Ambulance etc. who will be expected to participate in civil defence; "counter-information" press conferences and day schools to "launch" Hard Rock; weekend non-violent training workshops in preparation for the exercise itself.

As regards direct action during the exercise — this can range from street theatre co-ordinated with the Hard Rock scenario, (deaths, summary trials and the like), through to action that more directly challenges the exercise: like setting up your own "road blocks" on emergency service routes which will be closed to private vehicles in a war emergency, laying siege to regional war headquarters, "requisitioning" emergency food supplies and the like from local stores and supermarkets. . . .

This kind of direct action needs to be seen as part of the wider education campaign to create mass opposition to preparations to make nuclear war. Civil defence is one area where the seemingly impervious war machine is relatively more vulnerable to public opposition; peace groups and nuclear-free local authorities have their own roles to play in this opposition movement. Hard Rock could be our learning exercise not in civil defence but in exploring ways in which local groups and local authorities can work co-operatively together.

ANDY RIGBY