

Tackling Unocal's Corporate Crimes

By James B. Goodno

A coalition of activists and lawyers has asked California Attorney General Dan Lungren to initiate proceedings to revoke the charter of the Union Oil Company of California (Unocal), one of the world's largest energy resource firms. The coalition charged the company with a plethora of environmental, labor and human rights violations.

Kathy Spillar, national coordinator of the Feminist Majority Foundation, says California firms have a responsibility to follow the standards set by the state wherever they do business. "If you are going to enjoy the benefits of being a California corporation, of being a U.S. corporation, you have to abide by a set of rules that the American people have established."

Unocal, the coalition claims, has frequently violated environmental and occupational safety and health laws, released toxins at 82 Superfund sites and contributed to human rights violations in Burma. In addition, complainants have questioned the legality of some of Unocal's dealings with the Taliban, the extremist militia that controls most of Afghanistan.

Drawing attention to what Robert Benson, professor at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles and principal author of the complaint, describes as the "failure of the regulatory state," the coalition invoked a little-used course of action: California, like other states, retains the right to revoke corporate charters it has issued when it believes a company has violated the law.

"Rather than fight a losing battle against harms one by one," he says,

"the California attorney general has legal authority to ask a court to dissolve a company by revoking its corporate charter."

Unocal spokesman Barry Lane describes the action as "ludicrous." "This is about [Burma], the rest is window dressing," he says.

"They failed to get us out through the

ness and the difficulties activists face in challenging corporate power through conventional political and legal means. Members of the coalition, however, remain committed to a variety of tactics, including shareholder resolutions, boycotts, lobbying and litigation, and they bring a broad range of priorities to the table, notably concerns about the environment, democracy and women's rights.

The Feminist Majority Foundation, for example, signed the complaint because of Unocal's contacts with the Taliban in Afghanistan, through which a Unocal-led consortium hopes to build a pipeline. The Taliban has effectively imprisoned women and girls in their

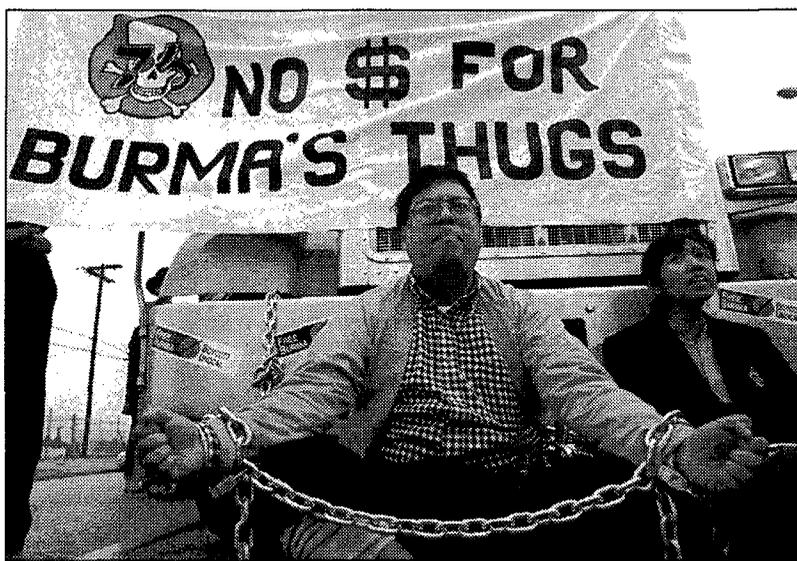
homes, preventing a them from working outside the house or attending school, and allowing husbands and fathers to determine when they may come and go.

Many complainants and other Unocal critics view the company's behavior in the United States and other countries as linked. "Unocal thinks it is immune to morality and public opinion," says Joe Drexler, of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW). OCAW, which is not a party to the complaint, once

represented roughly 1,500 Unocal employees. That number declined to 200 as Unocal sold its refinery and marketing operations. In the process, almost 900 Unocal employees lost their jobs. "This is a company that basically sold its U.S. operations to finance activities in places like Burma," Drexler says.

Proponents of the complaint hope activists elsewhere in the country will follow suit. The National Lawyers Guild plans to conduct workshops in various cities to encourage similar actions. "We hope lots of people will steal this idea and run with it," Benson says. ■

James B. Goodno is the editor of *The Urban Ecologist* and lives in Berkeley, Calif.



AFP PHOTO/ERIC SLOWANSON

Unocal has few friends among Burma's refugees.

democratic process," he adds, citing shareholder resolutions, consumer boycotts, punitive sanctions and lawsuits, "now they're asking the attorney general to overturn these decisions by fiat."

To an extent, Lane is right: Activists are broadly opposed to Unocal's Burma operations. In conjunction with Thai and French firms, Unocal is developing an offshore natural gas field and an overland pipeline in Burma. Critics charge the company with complicity with the Burmese dictatorship in the use of forced labor, the suppression of independent trade unions and the destruction of the rainforest.

It is also true that the action against Unocal reflects a broader concern about the way many large corporations do busi-

Chemical Warfare Comes to the Ozarks

By Peter Downs

The Mark Twain National Forest in southern Missouri's Ozark Mountains is known for its crystal clear streams, natural springs, ancient caves and fragile forest glades. Soon it will have another claim to fame: the home to one of only two nerve gas production facilities in the world authorized by the International Chemical Weapons Convention.

Last June, the U.S. Army broke ground at Fort Leonard Wood, the future home of the Army's Chemical School. Nestled around three sides of the fort is the national forest, where the Army will use 96,000 acres for training exercises. Soldiers and equipment will crisscross the forest floor and drive through streams while surrounded by a chemical fog of tiny metallic flakes designed to hide them from enemy eyes and electronic devices.

In 1995, as the Defense Department faced spending cuts, the Base Realignment and Closing (BRAC) Commission slotted for closure Fort Leonard Wood, which houses an artillery school and a basic training camp, and Fort Mead McClellan in Alabama, the location of the Army Chemical School. The BRAC Commission later decided one of the two bases would remain open to absorb the duties of the other. Local business leaders and state politicians—worried about the negative effects Fort Leonard Wood's closing would have on the local economy—rallied to keep the base alive. Later that year, the BRAC Commission ordered the Army Chemical School to relocate from Fort Mead McClellan to Fort Leonard Wood. For their part, the Missouri Air Conservation Commission and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources exempted Fort Leonard Wood from pollution regulations in June 1996, allowing the Army to exceed state opacity (or smoke density) standards during training.

The U.S. Army Chemical School trains soldiers in "force protection,"

which Hershel Chapman, media chief at the Fort Mead McClellan, says consists of hiding troops, and detecting and combating chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. The school also practices "live agent training," which entails the use of actual radioactive isotopes, microorganisms, nerve gas and mustard gas in military exercises. The rationale for live agent training is that soldiers become more skilled at protecting themselves if they are exposed to real health dangers.

At the new Fort Leonard Wood school, the Army will manufacture two types of nerve gas, sarin and VX. In a report on chemical weapons, Ron Purver, strategic analyst with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, writes, "The amount of VX that one can

place on the head of a pin is sufficient to produce death in a human being."

Another environmental concern involves oil fog, the smoke emitted to hide troop movements during live agent chemical weapons training. Oil fog contains high levels of furan, a chemical that harms the immune, nervous and reproductive systems. According to Paul Connett, a chemist and hazardous waste specialist for the environmental group Work on Waste, furan is closely related to dioxin and similarly toxic. The concentration of furans released by Army smoke generators is one million times greater than the level the World Health Organization has set as safe for humans.

Earlier this year, the Army filed an environmental impact statement asserting that none of the activities at the chemical school would adversely affect the environment. The report also explained that little is known about the long-term health or environmental effects of most of the chemicals used in training. Robert Schreiber, an environ-

Continued on page 6

Terry LaBan



Appall-o-Meter

The In These Times Index of Indecencies

By David Futrelle

White Humor (9.5)

What better way to celebrate Labor Day than to dress in blackface and stage a comedic re-enactment of a brutal racially motivated slaying? In this year's Labor Day Mardi Gras Parade, sponsored by the village of Broad Channel's volunteer fire department, a group of men from the mostly white neighborhood in Queens, N.Y., covered themselves in blackface makeup and danced in the back of a pickup truck while drinking from 40-oz. bottles. "One member of the group briefly hung from the moving truck's tailgate in an apparent mockery of the dragging death of a black man in Texas earlier this year," *Newsday* noted.

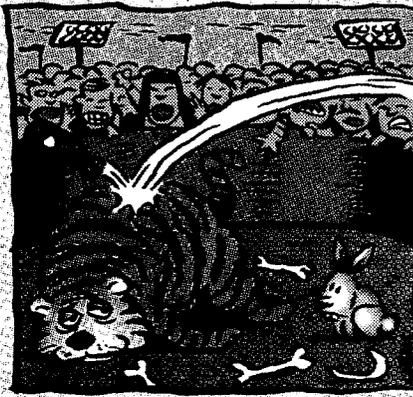
After the incident came to media attention and was denounced by everyone from New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to Al Sharpton, several of the blackface actors came forward at a news conference to offer an explanation. "The men said they had entered floats in Broad Channel's Labor Day Mardi Gras parade for the last nine years," *Newsday* reported. "Many of the floats had racial themes and were well received."

One of the men went so far as to apologize—sort of—for this year's not-so-well received entry. "We are all appalled that anyone was offended," 28-year-old Kenneth Miller told the

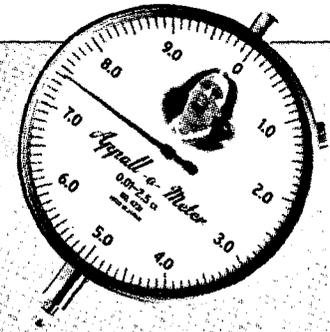
press. "We meant for it to be funny as if it was on *Saturday Night Live*."

When Animals Attack: Live (5.3)

In his own way, Chinese zoologist Liu Xinchun has helped to revive the population of the endangered Siberian tiger: Starting 12 years ago



with a brood of eight bedraggled tigers rescued from miserable Chinese zoos, he has managed to fill the Siberian Tiger Park in Harbin with a population of 110 big cats. Like many institutions in China, the Siberian Tiger Park is short on funds. So Liu has come up with an ingenious way to fill the tigers' bellies and the park's coffers: He charges visitors to watch his tigers kill and eat their prey—chickens, cows, whatever the audience desires. The price for



admission depends on what kind of animal you want to see: \$120 for a pig, only \$12 for a rabbit. The biggest problem the cats have now, a recent report in the *Wall Street Journal* suggests, is choking to death on too much food. The *Journal* notes, "Tourists occasionally complain that the sated tigers"—already stuffed with chickens and cows and who knows what else—"ignore the frightened animals released for them to kill."

Zhirinovsky Family Values (6.7)

Like everyone else in the world, noted Russian xenophobe Vladimir Zhirinovsky has an opinion on the Monica Lewinsky matter. He thinks Bill Clinton should be a man and marry the girl. "We, as individuals with high moral character, would prefer not to meet a person who still can't sort out his relationship with his secretary," Zhirinovsky recently told the Russian parliament. "In such situations, one divorces the old wife and marries the secretary to close the shameful page." As Reuters points out, Zhirinovsky previously has displayed his moral character by "beating a female deputy on the floor of parliament" and appearing in a film "in which he cavorts with naked women."

Continued from page 5

mental engineer in St. Louis who analyzed the impact statement for the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, says the report mistakenly concludes that if a chemical is not immediately toxic, then it is safe.

The Army also has faced an expensive cleanup at Fort Mead McClellan because of widespread contamination by hazardous chemicals. In order to skirt the high cost of decommissioning and decontaminating McClellan, the Army has turned it over to the Justice Department for further use.

Roger Pryor, executive director of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, says the Army has turned over contaminated nuclear facilities to different government organizations in the past. Many contaminated sites are "grandfathered" under law, meaning no one has to clean them up if they keep operating.

The Army still is not satisfied with the oil fog restrictions in its permit. In the environmental impact statement, the Army contends that the chemical school must burn 84,500 gallons of fuel oil per year—33 percent more than the permit

allows—to train soldiers adequately. But, if necessary, the chemical school would accept the permit's current restrictions.

The question is, for how long? Kay Drey of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment says if the school isn't closed, the Army will keep coming back to the state to raise its pollution limits. Meanwhile, the disruption and destruction of the Mark Twain National Forest will get worse. ■

Peter Downs is a freelance writer based in St. Louis.