



Ken Firestone

By David Helvarg

SAN DIEGO

A little after 3:00 on the morning of February 15th, a man described as being of medium height, in his mid-20s, with long brown hair walked into a Winchell's donut shop on Garnet Avenue here, broke two bottles of gasoline on the floor and ignited them, sending two employees scurrying and causing \$15,000 dollars damage. A short while later the *San Diego Evening Tribune* received a call from somebody "with a German accent" demanding that Winchell's Donuts not expand their chain into Ocean Beach.

A month later a second firebombing caused an additional \$35,000 to a second Winchell's Donut shop.

These two firebombings focused city-wide attention on the struggle of several Ocean Beach organizations to keep the Denny's/Winchell's fast food conglomerate from moving into their community.

Ocean Beach, generally referred to as OB, is a low income working-class youth community of about 15,000 located on a peninsula opposite the North Island Naval Air Station at the foot of San Diego Bay. Over the last ten years OB has developed a reputation as a center of countercultural lifestyle and political protest.

Although sometimes dismissed as a cultural anachronism, an out-of-date Berkeley with bodysurf, ten years of community organizing has generated a sense of neighborhood cohesiveness and power in OB rarely found in Southern California.

This is reflected in the various alternative institutions that operate in the OB area: a Free school now teaching its second generation of students, a community school offering free courses in everything from macrame to marxism, a child care project, a widely used "People's Food Store" food co-op and a popularly elected Community Planning Board,

DONUT WAR!

Ocean Beach was a quiet haven of counterculture life. And then Winchell's donuts moved in. They offered a wood exterior and a whole-wheat donut, but the residents weren't buying.

the outgrowth of a seven-year struggle against apartment and condominium developers.

In the fall of '77 the Denny's/Winchell's Corporation approached the Community Planning Board about the possibility of opening one of their donut shops at the entrance to OB. In trying to keep with "the spirit of the community" they offered to construct their shop with an all-wood decor and add a wholewheat organic donut to their standard selection.

The board voted to recommend against a building permit for Winchell's, citing potential traffic, safety and litter problems as influencing their decision. Over 50,000 cars a day pass the site of the proposed donut shop, and Robb Field, a park where many community children play, is located directly across the street from the site. Several board members also questioned the nutritional value of fast-food and the potential effect a franchise might have on local bakeries and restaurants.

The planning board's argument failed to impress the state Coastal Commission, however, which voted to grant Winchell's the right to build despite the fact that twice before it had voted to deny the 7-11 chain a permit to build at the same locale.

The Coastal Commission decision upset a number of local residents who, falling back on a tradition of anti-war, anti-development organizing, soon established the People Against Winchell's (PAW). PAW began distributing leaflets, petitions, a children's book (*The Wizard of O.B. vs. the Donut Giant*) and bumper stickers reading "Boycott Winchell's - Save O.B."

Soon these yellow warnings began appearing on car bumpers, in windows and on stop signs and walls throughout the neighborhood.

In late April the leadership of PAW held a strategy meeting at the Little Chef Cafe on Newport Street, the palm-lined "Main Street" of OB. Over shakes and coffee they discussed what new steps to take in the wake of the announcement by the Orange County based Denny's that despite the bombings and protests the company would "take its stand" in Ocean Beach.

The leadership of PAW reflects the larger demographics of Ocean Beach. There is a cab driver who is also an elected member of the planning board, an optical engineer, a housewife, a teacher at the Free School, a student, a welfare mother and a carpenter.

They, along with 30 to 50 of their friends and supporters, have been holding weekend vigils at the proposed shop site since mid-February. The main attraction at these rallies, other than the guitars and bake-sale pastries, has been a large red and black banner reading: "Honk if you're against Winchell's."

About half the cars that pass the corner during these rallies lean on their horns, creating hours of cacophony and a new category of experience for the petro-chemical culture of Southern California: the drive-through demo. "I think it's really kind of hypocritical," confided a San Diego policewoman watching one of the demonstrations, "they claim to be for ecology but then create all this noise pollution."

Rolling in dough.

According to its annual report Denny's Inc. made over \$20 million dollars profit last year on close to half a billion dollars revenue. It has over 600 restaurants and over 750 donut shots operating throughout the U.S. and the "Free World" (Puerto Rico, Guam, Taiwan, etc.).

Although over 90 percent of the hamburger market and 80 percent of the pizza and ice cream are already controlled by chains, Denny's sees tremendous expansion potential in the full menu and donut sectors of the economy. Americans consume about \$1.5 billion donuts a year, yet the sales of the three leading chains add up to only \$400 million (including Winchell's at \$100 million a year).

Representatives from Winchell's recently met with leaders of PAW. They said that OB was the dirtiest beach town they had ever seen and that a Winchell's donut shop would be an improvement, if only in terms of sanitation. They implied that they knew that PAW was linked with the recent bombings, a charge repeatedly and vigorously denied by both the Planning Board and PAW. ("Charges like that are very much like Winchell's donuts," said a PAW member, "tasteless and without substance.")

PAW is planning to start picketing Denny's corporate headquarters in La Mirada, Calif., and is encouraging the Community Planning Board to put the question of the donut shop on the ballot for the upcoming June elections.

At this point Denny's is unlikely to be swayed one way or another by a community-wide referendum. "We've already made our decision. We've got the permits we need and we are going to proceed with our construction," George Hellick, the marketing director for Winchell's told IN THESE TIMES.

"They're fools if they try and build here," said one source close to the donut underground. "Their new surveillance cameras won't protect them. Look what happened to that airport in Japan when they tried to ignore the local populace. You know it's a lot harder to get to an airport control tower than it is to a set of deep-fat fryers."

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