

Timberlands revs the chainsaw

by GRANT BROOKES

AT THE beginning of October, Timberlands released its scheme to triple native forest logging on the West Coast of the South Island.

The government is behind them. They gave the go-ahead for the state-owned enterprise to begin logging in April.

They announced a "public consultation" on the scheme on October 6, but logging had already started.

The "beech scheme" is being driven by two inescapable features of the market – economic crisis and the rule of profit.

Last year's collapse of the Asian economies, major export markets for timber and wood products, has hit Timberlands in the pocket.

Its 1998 Annual Report says that the company faces declining sales, margins and profitability. Its solution is to cut down and sell more trees.

Waste

Timberlands pays next to nothing for the right to log. In 1997/8, the royalties it paid to the government for native forest logging totalled \$165,000.

Beech has a high waste factor. On average, half the wood is rotten and cannot be used. And for every log taken to the mill, another two may be left to rot in the forest.

Timberlands says that 1,700 jobs will go if native forest logging is stopped. But the high unemployment on the West Coast is not due to native forest conservation.

5% of the region's full-time workforce lost their jobs in 1987 through Labour's public sector restructuring.

The number employed fell by 7.6% between 1991



THE GOVERNMENT wants to let Timberlands cut roads through 98,500 hectares of lowland native beech forest like this to fell 300,000 trees a year

and 1996, as PDL electronics closed its Westport factory and Lane Walker Rudkin shut its clothing plants in Greymouth, Westport and Reefton. Bank closures on the Coast continue.

Timberlands' concern for jobs and ordinary West Coasters' welfare is fake. Timberlands chief executive Dave Hilliard is also on the board of Coast Health Care, where he's helping push through health cuts at Greymouth Hospital.

Native Forest Action (NFA) spokesperson Sean Weaver told *Socialist Worker* that by pitting forestry workers against environmentalists, "the collective enemy is using strategies to divide communities against themselves".

But the environmental devastation the beech scheme threatens for the Maruia, Paparoa and Grey Valley Forests is real.

Less than 15% of New Zealand's lowland forest

remains.

A 1997 Department of Conservation report concluded that Timberlands' beech scheme would destroy or seriously degrade the conservation values of these forests.

Leaked scientific reports state that endangered kakariki, long-tailed bats and kaka would almost certainly be affected.

NFA has launched a campaign to save the beech forests.

They are also supporting the campaign to keep Greymouth Hospital open and calling on the government to provide regional development assistance to relieve the hardships that have been suffered by many people on the West Coast.

"We need to change things, for the better, for the general", says Weaver.

The campaign to stop Timberlands "puts people and nature first equal above profits".

'Summer of action on the Coast'

NATIVE FOREST Action are planning a "summer of action on the Coast".

Auckland NFA spokesperson Steve Abel says: "We're going to get as many people as we can to stop the logging for good."

A big campaign of direct action is the best way to save native forests from the chainsaw. Leaving them in the hands of politicians is a big risk.

At the moment, Labour is split over Timberlands' beech scheme. Conservation spokesperson Jill Pettis says it is "environmentally disastrous and makes no economic sense".

But Labour MP for West Coast Tasman, Damien O'Connor, said: "I may have been unable to convince my colleagues", but he supports it.

And the economic grounds Pettis gave for opposing were the "lack of market opportunities for beech timber" at present and concern for "smaller scale private operators".

Labour is committed to working within the market. What happens when the market for timber changes? What happens if industry restructuring sees private operators working alongside Timberlands?

In 1993, 100 activists from the Rainforests Coalition and the Student Environmental Action Network took the future of forests into their own hands.

They stopped logging trucks from entering the

Ianthe Forest in south Westland in protest at Timberlands' continued clear-felling of rimu. Solidarity protests were held in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

Today, the prospects are bright for a big campaign of direct action linking native forest logging with the other destruction wreaked by the market.

Coasters are deeply disaffected with the market, which has brought a wave of closures of post offices and banks, and is now threatening their hospital.

The more-market government has been rocked by the growing economic crisis. Internal divisions scuppered the deregulation of producer boards and put back tariff cuts. Mass protests dealt it a defeat over plans to sack the firefighters.

And the environmental movement is increasingly lining up against them. The World Wide Fund for Nature, which in September said the beech scheme should receive serious consideration, has now pulled its support.

Only the tiny, pro-market Maruia society, which has suffered a big outflow of members and activists in the last decade, continues to support Timberlands' native logging.

Get involved with the campaign!

For more information contact Sean Weaver, (03) 332 8671, or Jen at the national office in Nelson, (03) 545 6040.