Ronnie Lee is widely-respected among activists as one of the founding members of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) in the 1970s and for creating the now-discontinued magazine Arkangel in 1989. Lee joined the Hunt Saboteurs Association in the 1970s and in 1973 created another organization, the Band of Mercy (taking its name from the nineteenth-century anti-hunting youth groups organized by the RSPCA). The Band of Mercy was based on the idea of direct action, including the destruction of property used to harm animals, but its principles emphasized that no violence should be directed against humans. In 1974 Lee was sentenced to prison for rescuing animals from gruesome vivisection practices at the Oxford Animal Laboratory in Bicester; while in prison he was forced to go on a hunger strike to obtain vegan food. After being released from prison, Lee started the ALF, which operates under the following guidelines:

• To liberate animals from places of abuse, i.e., laboratories, factory farms, fur farms, etc., and place them in good homes where they may live out their natural lives, free from suffering.
• To inflict economic damage to those who profit from the misery and exploitation of animals.
• To reveal the horror and atrocities committed against animals behind locked doors, by performing direct actions and liberations.
• To take all necessary precautions against harming any animal, human and non-human.
• Any group of people who are vegetarians or vegans and who carry out actions according to these guidelines have the right to regard themselves as part of the Animal Liberation Front.

For his animal rescue activities, Lee was sentenced to more time in prison and was released in 1992. While in prison he founded the animal liberation magazine Arkangel. Following his release, Lee has continued his animal advocacy work in a variety of ways.

John Sorenson: Thanks very much for agreeing to this interview. It’s an honour to speak with you and I’d like to also thank you for your commitment to animals and for starting the Animal Liberation Front. Could you tell us about how you came to your ideas about animal liberation?

Ronnie Lee: It all started when I became a vegetarian at the age of 19. My sister's boyfriend was a vegetarian and also a very good athlete. I was a big meat eater at the time, but the fact that he was
able to keep so healthy on a vegetarian diet played on my conscience and I very soon became vegetarian myself.

A couple of years later I picked up a copy of the Vegetarian Society's magazine in a local health store and found adverts and articles in there from societies campaigning against vivisection, hunting etc. and also info about veganism. This educated me about the extent of animal persecution and I very quickly became vegan and joined many of the societies. One of these was the Hunt Saboteurs Association and it was with them that I first became involved in direct action.

It soon became apparent to me that, despite the existence of the various societies, animal persecution was actually getting worse, so I came to the conclusion that something more hard-hitting needed to be done to try to turn the tide. Some other animal protection campaigners I knew felt the same way, so we got together to form the Band of Mercy, which later became the Animal Liberation Front.

**JS:** What were your own intellectual and political influences?

**RL:** Intellectually, it was several writings that were being published at the time putting forward philosophical arguments against speciesism, in particular a book called *Victims of Science* by Richard Ryder, where I first heard of the concept of speciesism and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, although I don't agree with all of his views.

Politically, it was a group called the Situationists, who were active in France around that time and who were the influence for the Angry Brigade, who carried out direct action against various forms of oppression in Britain.

The Situationists were anti-capitalists who thought that things like mass media and advertising create a fake reality in order to mask the real capitalist degradation of human life. They referred to this fake reality as "The Spectacle" and one of their most influential writings was a book called *Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord. They believed in the use of direct action to wake people up and bring about change, which I felt could be applied to the struggle to liberate animals from oppression.

My favourite book was *Revolution of Everyday Life* by the Situationist author Raul Vaneigem. Vaneigem's ideas were somewhat similar to Debord's, but I found his book much easier to understand, so it had more of an influence on me.

**JS:** How have your ideas about animal liberation developed since the 1970s?

**RL:** Philosophically, they have hardened, in that I feel a much greater curtailment of human activities is needed, in order for the persecution of animals to be ended. At one time I felt the problem was just things like the consumption of animal products, the fur trade, vivisection, hunting etc., but now I feel it's also human overpopulation, the destruction of the environment and various harmful technologies.

Strategically and tactically, they have become more practical, in that I now accept that direct action can only realistically form a very small part of our struggle and that the emphasis must be on public education and achieving political change.
JS: in your interview with Claudette Vaughan for *The Abolitionist Online* you said that you were an anarchist when you were younger but you don’t take that position any more. Given the fact that there is a lot of overlap between anarchist and animal rights ideas, can you say why you’ve moved away from anarchism?

RL: My experience of people over the years has taught me that most have a very strong urge to follow leaders and this seems to be something that is inbuilt in humans in the same way as it is with other social animals. It is therefore vital that people with animal liberationist ideas attempt to gain positions of power and leadership within society, because if there is no good guy to follow, people will inevitably follow the bad guy. There is a sense therefore in which anarchists’ rejection of any concept of gaining power is actually harmful to efforts to protect animals.

JS: Could you please talk about how you see the ALF historically? In the 1970s you worked with the Hunt Saboteurs Association and then created a group called the Band of Mercy, a direct reference to the work of the nineteenth-century anti-slavery activist and hunt-opponent Catherine Smithies. How does the ALF fit with the tradition of other progressive social movements?

RL: I think most, if not all, of those movements have used direct action in one form or another and the ALF fits with that tradition. Direct action to me means physical intervention by an individual or group of people (as opposed to intervention by the state). In more recent times direct action has been most effective where it has been used as an adjunct to already strong campaigns that use non-direct action methods.

It's not accurate to always equate direct action with violence. Gandhi and Martin Luther King used direct action that was nonviolent, for instance, and direct action for animal liberation has been almost entirely nonviolent in the sense that hardly any physical injury to human beings has occurred as a result.

For me the ALF was a continuation of a tradition of struggle against various forms of oppressive supremacist attitudes, white supremacism and male supremacism, for example, so there was a continuity of ideas with other progressive movements, such as those for black and women's liberation.

JS: In a recent interview with Gary Francione and Roger Yates (http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/commentary-discussion-with-ronnie-lee-and-roger-yates/), the three of you discussed some of the controversies about direct action. Do you have some further reflections on that? Is vegan education sufficient? Is direct action counter-productive?

RL: Vegan education is vitally important, but it's not sufficient because there'll always be the problem of what to do about the people who refuse to be educated. That's why I advocate political campaigning (and, in the UK, support for the Green Party) so we can eventually gain the political power to be able to coerce those we cannot educate. There are situations where the use of direct action could be counter-productive, but I believe that, by and large, it hasn't been and that it has done much more good than harm for the cause of animal liberation. It will always be only a small part of the struggle against human tyranny though, so overemphasis on direct action in discussion/debate can divert us from discussing the things that will play a big part, i.e. education and political action.
JS: Given the long historical association of animal activists with other progressive ideas, why is the political Left so uninterested in animal rights? It would seem that those who are motivated to create a more equitable society ought to be concerned with all of those who are exploited. Yet many people who may be otherwise progressive are dismissive and contemptuous of animal rights, not just inconsistent in their own personal behaviour but often adamantly opposed to extending compassion and commitment beyond the species boundary. How do you understand these contradictions?

RL: I think it's because the idea of human supremacism is so deeply rooted within our society that it even afflicts many on the Left.

However, in Britain, in terms of progressive ideas in relation to social justice, the Greens are really the most left wing party around and their policies, although not perfect, are very much in favour of animal protection.

JS: Could you expand on the idea of “human supremacism” and what that means? I just finished an anti-animal rights book by Wesley J. Smith, (who regards the Center for Consumer Freedom as a reliable source of information, etc.) Smith argues for “human exceptionalism” and basically says because we’re moral beings, with unique capacities for self-awareness, duties, etc. we have the right to do what we want with animals, although, of course, we should not be “needlessly cruel.” Nothing in his book is new but he is arguing that animals should not be given rights (or, seemingly, even better treatment in most cases), because we would lose the benefits of medical treatment, steaks, leather shoes, etc. Could you talk about these ideas of human supremacy and exceptionalism?

RL: With regard to Smith’s ideas, I would say the fact that we’re moral beings gives us a duty to treat animals properly rather than to persecute them for our own ends. In my view people like Smith are basically animal haters attempting to intellectualise their repressive attitudes towards animals and should be dealt with, with long sentences of imprisonment and perhaps even capital punishment. Their writings should be banned, in the same way that writings that encourage race hatred and paedophilia are banned. The human species is only exceptional in its arrogance and totally unjustifiable sense of self-importance with regard to animals who have just as much value (or in the case of many people, more value) than human beings. Human supremacism towards animals is a similar mindset to the Aryan supremacism that the Nazis showed towards other races and it should be condemned just as loudly and fought against just as determinedly.

JS: What have animal rights activists achieved since you began working on these issues? Do you see positive changes underway?

RL: In the UK there has been progress in lots of areas. (1) The number of vegetarians and vegans has increased enormously. (2) The annual figures for animal experiments are about half of what they were in the mid seventies, although there has been a slight rise in recent years. (3) Fur farming has been banned and the fur trade massively reduced. (4) There is now a ban on hunting with dogs. (5) There has been a big reduction in the number of circuses that have performing animals. (6) Attendances at horse and greyhound racing has fallen and many dog tracks have closed. (7) Support for the Green Party, which has animal protection as a major part of its agenda, has increased considerably. (8) Concern for the protection of the environment is much greater, which is obviously
a good thing for animals, as it’s their environment too.

I feel pretty confident there'll be more positive changes in years to come, because campaigners are now adopting a more sophisticated approach than was once the case.

**JS**: In North America, there’s a lot of support for campaigns that endorse “cruelty-free” or “humane” animal products. Many mainstream welfare groups support these campaigns. Do you see any value in this approach? Or do these campaigns actually undermine animal rights and make people feel more comfortable about exploitation?

**RL**: It can be argued that better welfare for animals is a good thing, i.e. it’s better for animals in vivisection labs to be kept in bigger cages or for animals bred for slaughter to be reared in better conditions. There are problems with this approach, however.

Firstly, it does not challenge the immorality of vivisection, meat eating etc. and allows people to feel that somehow these things can be acceptable, if the animals are treated “more humanely”. This can make the struggle for animal liberation even more difficult to win.

What would people think about campaigns for human slaves to be given more comfortable shackles or to be only beaten twice a day instead of three times? Not a great deal, I’m sure. Campaigns for animal welfare (as opposed to liberation) are on a similar level.

Also, the resources that are put into campaigns for bigger cages, “more humane” meat etc. could be more effectively used if put into campaigns to abolish vivisection, persuade people to be vegan and so on.

What do we do about welfare campaigns and how do we get those involved to campaign for animal liberation instead?

First of all, we need to recognize that there are two types of animal welfarist.

The first type are convinced human supremacists who reject animal liberation and believe that it’s somehow OK to exploit animals, provided that’s kept within certain limits.

The human speciesist ideas of such people need to be challenged, with the hope that they will realize the wrongfulness of their attitude towards animals.

The second type are people who genuinely would like to see animal liberation, but fall into the category of “Oh ye of little faith” in that they believe the enemy is too powerful and an end to animal exploitation is impossible to achieve.

Therefore they go for a welfarist alternative, which they believe is realistically achievable and which will, at least, do something, albeit often small, to alleviate animal suffering.

Unlike the first type, these are not bad people, they merely lack belief and confidence that animal persecution can be ended.
To win them over, we need to convince them that liberationist goals are possible to achieve, by showing them how our tactics and strategy can succeed.

We also need to show them how their advocacy of welfarism is actually making it more difficult for animal liberation to be attained.)

**JS:** Can you tell us about the current status of animal rights activity in the UK? What are the key issues there and which groups are most effective?

**RL:** I think it can be said that there are less people actively involved in the animal rights movement than was once the case. This isn't particularly to do with animal rights though, but is a reflection of our society in general, where fewer people are prepared to get involved in protests, whatever the issue.

I don't feel downhearted about the situation though, because the reduction in numbers has been accompanied by better thought out and more sophisticated campaigning methods, so, in many ways, the effectiveness of our movement has actually increased.

Key issues/effective groups are as follows:-

1. Vegetarianism/veganism. Several national organisations are working wholly or partly in this field. The most high-profile is Viva! (Vegetarians International Voice for Animals), who have a good network of local activists to help spread their mostly vegan message. The Vegetarian Society is nowhere near as active at grassroots level, but the Vegan Society is much improved in recent years and has better contact with grassroots activists now. Animal Aid and PeTA (UK) devote a lot of their resources to vegan/vegetarian education, while campaigning on a whole range of animal protection issues.

2. Vivisection. The big national anti-vivisection organisations, such as the British Union for the Abolition and the National Anti-Vivisection Society, don't have much contact these days with grassroots activists and tend to concentrate on investigations and political lobbying. Campaigns that are supported by the grassroots are SPEAK, who focus on cruel experiments being carried out at Oxford University, and Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) who are campaigning against vivisection at Huntingdon Life Sciences. Although SPEAK and SHAC are focused on particular laboratories, their hard-hitting campaigns have had an effect on the vivisection industry as a whole, and SHAC itself arose out of several other successful campaigns, which forced the closure of a number of vivisection establishments. Animal Aid also devotes a lot of its resources to campaigning against vivisection.

3. The fur trade. The Coalition to Abolish the Fur Trade is the main organisation here. After successful campaigns by the ALF and other groups in the 80s, the fur trade is virtually non-existent outside of London, where most campaigning is concentrated against the few fur shops remaining there and Harrods, which is the only big store to still be selling fur coats.

4. Hunting and other bloodsports. The big national organisation in this field is the League Against Cruel Sports, who played a major part in getting the law against hunting with dogs pushed through parliament and who also campaign against shooting and snaring. The Hunt Saboteurs Association takes direct action against hunting by laying false trails, trying to cover the scent of the hunted animal
They are still active, as the anti-hunting law isn't very strong and not properly enforced by the police in many areas. The Campaign for the Abolition of Angling exists to oppose "sport" fishing and although they have carried out direct action, much of their work is educational.

(5) Zoos and circuses. The main group here is the Captive Animals' Protection Society, who are very in touch with local campaigners and who organise demos outside zoos and animal circuses. Their campaign has been particularly successful against the latter and the number of circuses with menageries and performing animals has gone down considerably in recent years.

(6) Horse and greyhound racing. Animal Aid has a campaign against horse racing and organises some demos in connection with this, but it only forms a relatively small part of their overall work, as their main concentration, perhaps understandably, is on veganism and anti-vivisection. There are several anti greyhound racing groups, the most active of which is Greyhound Action, whose public education campaign and demonstrations outside dog tracks have played a major part in forcing many of these to close.

(7) Politics. The Animal Protection Party (APP) and Animals Count (AC) campaign specifically on animal protection issues and are very helpful in raising public awareness. However, the main hope for widespread and effective animal protection legislation is the Green Party, who, unlike the APP and AC, is a fully-fledged political party that actually has some chance of one day coming to power.

JS: What issues are you working on now?

RL: I deal with email correspondence for the ALF Supporters Group, which is a welfare organisation for animal rights prisoners and I also do a lot of admin and organisational work for certain animal protection organisations, which I would rather not name, as I want the focus, particularly from the point of view of the media, to be on the message these groups are trying to spread, rather than on my involvement with them. Since coming out of prison in 1992, I have done hundreds of street information stalls, aimed at educating the public not to support animal persecution.

JS: Animal-exploitation industries have extensive support from corporate media and police and animal activists are depicted as extremists and branded as “terrorists” while the violence inflicted on animals is normalized. Can you describe how these propaganda and repression campaigns operate in the UK?

RL: As the influence and success of the animal liberation/protection movement has grown, so these campaigns of repression have grown too. This is hardly surprising, because if you injure a monster, you have to expect it to strike back.

Most of the repression has been aimed at anti-vivisection campaigners. This has come about because the vivisection industry has put pressure on the government and, because the government is very pro big business, it has given in to this pressure and brought in repressive measures against those who effectively oppose vivisection.

It has all resulted in more repressive legislation, use of laws that were never intended to be used against animal protectionists, increased police action against militant anti-vivisectionists and draconian sentences being passed against those convicted in court.
JS: In the last decade, there’s been growing interest among academics in studying relations between humans and nonhuman animals. At least 50 universities offer courses in some area of animal-human relations. At Brock University, I’ve been teaching courses on animal-related issues for over a decade and we’ve organized several international conferences here and in the Department of Sociology we offer a Concentration in Critical Animals Studies, which places animal rights in the context of social justice. There are several journals such as Anthrozoos, Journal of Critical Animal Studies, Society and Animals, and newer ones such as Humanimalia and the Journal of Animal Ethics. Columbia University Press publishes a series of books on “Critical Perspectives on Animals: Theory, Culture, Science, and Law,” Johns Hopkins University Press has its “Animals, History, Culture” series and University of Minnesota Press has a “Posthumanities” series. Presumably, any academic work that begins to take animals more seriously could have a positive influence. Yet my concern with the field of “Animal Studies,” as opposed to the “Critical Animal Studies” that we do at Brock, is that the former is divorced from any real commitment to animal rights. Major figures in mainstream Animal Studies, such as Donna Haraway offer a postmodern critique of humanism but don’t take a stand against the institutionalized oppression of animals. Haraway herself eats meat, endorses hunting and killing, supports vivisection and is a proponent of dog breeding and training. Do you see this growing academic interest as something beneficial to animal activists and to animals? What kind of scholarship would be useful? For academics who are interested in animal issues, what sorts of tasks should they be undertaking?

RL: It's obviously beneficial where it educates students to live their lives in a way that avoids animal persecution and perhaps even to campaign for animal liberation. I don't know a great deal about what sort of subjects it would be possible to have scholarships in, but something that would encourage thinking about practical ways of protecting animals from human tyranny would be useful.

With academics, I think the same sort of thing should apply. Debate and discussion about animal liberation/protection issues between academics is all very well, but at the end of the day, unless the message is got through to the public, very little will be achieved.

The problem I mainly have with academics is that they often appear to operate in a world that's divorced from the ordinary person on the street, so that their ideas for how to bring about change are sometimes unrealistic and out of sync with how most of the public thinks. The language we need to use with the ordinary public is by and large not the same language we would use between ourselves in philosophical discussion, because that would be too complicated for most people to grasp - but some academics don't seem to understand this. Academics could often make their work more relevant to activists by expressing things in a way that is more understandable and which could be more easily applied to discussions with the public.

With regard to educational efforts, I think it's very important that we do more work on putting structures in place that can actually bring that education to the public. That's why I feel local animal protection groups have such an important role to play, because they are the people on the ground at grassroots level with direct contact with ordinary people. Therefore a strong network of local animal protection groups is vital to the educational effort and I feel we need to be pro-active in setting up such a network rather than expecting it to somehow evolve by itself.

JS: What sorts of information do you find useful? Are there people or groups working on animal issues whose writing is particularly useful or inspiring?
**RL:** With regard to the campaigns I'm working on, obviously information in relation to those particular issues is particularly useful, especially where that can be converted to a more simplified format that is more easily understood by the public.

There are people doing investigative and research work in relation to those campaigns whose efforts are a great help to what I am trying to do, as I am able to take what they come up with and then present it in a form that's more suitable for public consumption.

I find inspiration from lots of different sources, so it would be hard for me to be specific about where this comes from.

**JS:** One resource that seems to have disappeared is Arkangel. I believe you were involved with that publication. Will we ever see this archived online again?

**RL:** I was involved with the first couple of issues of Arkangel while I was still in prison. I wrote a great deal of the content, but then the prison authorities started making this a lot more difficult for me to do, so the work was taken up by other people on the outside.

I'd like to see Arkangel archived online again, but I don't know what the chances are of this happening, as the people who would be able to do it are so very busy with other animal protection projects.

**JS:** Finally, what advice do you give to young activists today?

**RL:** (1) Remember that our struggle is not a sprint, but a marathon, and persistence and staying power are amongst the most important qualities that a good activist can have.

Hardly any of the important victories that have been won in our struggle have been achieved overnight. Activists have been successful in closing a considerable number of animal abuse establishments, but in most cases this has only been after many years of persistent campaigning.

It's easy to get downhearted when things appear to move very slowly, but don't be. Keep going and you'll get there in the end. At times in the past I've felt despondent at the slowness of progress, but if I'd been told how things would be now when I first became an activist about 40 years ago, I would not have believed we could achieve so much.

(2) Never forget who the real enemy is. And that it's the animal abusers and not other people who care about animals. Those who campaign for animal liberation aren't going to agree on everything, but it's important to realise that we are all fundamentally on the same side and to discuss and debate our differences in a spirit of friendship and respect. Our hatred must be reserved for the persecutors of animals and not used against others who are also trying to protect our fellow creatures.

(3) Keep fit and healthy. The holocaust of animal abuse is so appalling that it's very easy to throw yourself into fighting it with no thought for your own personal wellbeing. What the animals really need though, are people who will devote the whole of their long lives to helping them, not those who shine for just a few years, or less, and then get ill or burnt out and are gone for ever. Therefore, always make sure that you eat healthily, don't smoke, get regular exercise and sufficient rest and
relaxation. The animals need you to be fit and healthy and fighting for them for as long as you possibly can.

(4) Try to remain calm at all times. When I was younger, I used to rare up if an animal abuser or other idiot insulted me on a demo or when I was doing a street stall. Now I just ignore them. I think this is by far the better policy, as these despicable characters definitely get a gee from seeing us angry or upset. We must not be diverted from calmly trying to educate those people who will allow themselves to be educated. The others we will deal with when we eventually gain the political power to do so.

(5) Learn self-defence and develop the mental attitude to use it, if necessary. Don't forget we are up against some very evil and nasty people. Although I advocate a remain calm approach when faced with verbal attacks, if that aggression becomes physical we need to have the ability to defend ourselves and our colleagues. Animal abusers and their friends need to know that if they physically attack us, they do so at their peril.

(6) Think before you act. Remember that our movement has limited resources in terms of people, money and energy. Therefore, it's necessary to campaign in the most efficient and effective way possible. So think careful about what is the best way to go about things before embarking on a protest or campaign, rather than just rushing into it.

(7) Make good use of the media. A good newspaper article or radio interview can be worth thousands of leaflets in its educational value. The letters page is the most read section of local newspapers, so getting a good letter published there can be immensely valuable.

(8) Remember you are special. Most animal protection campaigners used to contribute to animal persecution once upon a time: eating meat, not caring about very much etc., before something happened that turned them into battlers for the animals. For this reason, it's easy to get very frustrated when other people don't see the light when the horrors and wrongfulness of animal persecution is explained to them. Sadly, this is very much in the nature of most people, who are so driven by force of habit and urge to comply with the norm, that even the most overwhelming evidence may not make them change. You and I weren't like that. We had it in us to change our lives, despite the forces trying to pull us away from doing so. We have to try to educate as many people as we can, but we have to calmly accept that we aren't going to make everyone voluntarily adopt a vegan lifestyle. We just have to hope we can win over enough people to give us the political power to force the others to comply - and I firmly believe we can eventually do so.

(9) Try to be positive at all times. Always take the attitude that when the glass is half-empty it's actually half-full. A positive attitude encourages others to get involved and inspires them to fight harder, bringing the day of our eventual victory that much closer than it otherwise would be.