

Charges Dropped For Peace Activists

Charges against thirty-one peace activists involved in a nonviolent blockade of the Commonwealth Defence Centre, have been dropped by the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions.

The blockade took place on February 25 this year. It was organised by the Gulf Peace Team Support Group in an attempt to intervene in Australia's role in the Gulf War. Approximately fifty activists successfully blockaded the Defence Centre Tower Building for thirty minutes by linking arms across doors and carpark entrances. The thirty-one people were arrested after refusing to move from the

blockade and were charged with obstruction of Commonwealth property.

Two of those arrested, Steve Blair and Robert Burrowes, were part of the International Gulf Peace Team, who were camped on the Iraq-Saudi Arabian border for approximately twenty days during the Gulf War.

The nonviolent blockade was an example of the growing resistance within Australia to this country's involvement in the devastating Gulf War, the effects of which are still being suffered by people in the Middle East and the 'Third World'.

Activists have recently been informed by mail that the charges against them will be struck out. No reasons were given.

We feel that although the fighting in the Gulf has stopped, the root causes of war are yet to be addressed. Australia continues to participate in a regional Asia-Pacific arms race, similar to the one that precipitated the war in the Middle East. An example is the arms bazaar, AIDEX 91, to be held in Canberra in November.

Anthony Kelly

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Assessing the Gulf Peace Team

Was the Gulf Peace Team a good idea? Was it productive or counterproductive to set up a camp of nonviolent activists between Iraq and Saudi Arabia as a way to reduce the chance of war?

The incredible bravery of those who joined the Gulf Peace Camp made me a bystander reluctant to be openly critical of any aspects of the initiative. Robert Burrowes and Jerry Smith, Australian members of the Team, encouraged me to proceed.

So here are a few brief comments. Many of these points are covered, and in more detail, by Robert Burrowes in his excellent article, "The Gulf War and the Gulf Peace Team" (Social Alternatives, Vol. 10, No. 2, July 1991, pp. 35-39), but I list them here for completeness.

Positives

There was great symbolic value in taking direct action against an impending war. This is in contrast to the usual activities of peace movements in appealing to public opinion and to governments, all at a considerable physical and conceptual distance from the front lines.



There was great symbolic value in providing an example of nonviolent heroism. Usually it is soldiers who are presented as heroic. The camp was a superb opportunity to demonstrate bravery in nonviolent struggle. The Gulf Peace Team provided inspiration for greater activism.

Difficulties

The remote location of the camp was a big disadvantage. It limited participation because of its distance and the required time commitment. The distance espe-

cially from Australia meant that there were large financial costs involved, carried by individuals, supporters or groups.

The isolation of the camp from the soldiers and population of either side virtually eliminated possibilities for fraternisation.

Although the Gulf Peace Camp could be considered a direct intervention against aggression, in practical terms its main value was symbolic. There was a severe

dependence on publicity, further aggravated by the remote location. The camp provided no means for intervening against the high-technology warfare of smart (and not-so-smart) missiles and the like. The camp, in spite of some communications equipment, was low technology. This is not automatically a problem. But, it might be asked, does a camp on the front lines lose its impact if technology can make the idea of a front line obsolete? The Gulf Peace Team was not part of a wider strategy against war or even against war in the Gulf. It was an inspiration, an ad hoc effort. Hans Sinn, a leading proponent of social defence, told me that he found the Canadian peace movement preoccupation with the Gulf crisis (of which the Gulf Peace Team was only a small part) to be a major disruption of ongoing programs. Everything else was dropped in the rush to oppose Western military intervention. In other words, the agenda for the peace movement was set by George Bush, not by activists sitting down themselves and deciding goals, priorities, long-term strategies and campaigns.

Non-neutralities

All the participants (to my knowledge) came from countries on one side of the conflict. When Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait, there was no peace camp. The camp was set up between Iraq and Saudi Arabia after the US government had proclaimed that Saddam Hussein was the world's greatest threat to peace. So there was an asymmetry or selectivity in setting up the camp to, in effect, stop US-led troops invading Iraq.

Only some wars have front lines. It is hard to imagine similar peace camps in Afghanistan, Cambodia or El Salvador. Does this mean that this form of intervention can be used only against aggression by traditional massed armies, while equally horrific guerrilla wars are ignored?

Brian Martin

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Connect and the WRI Women's Congress 1992

Networks of women are working together to create a special event. The War Resisters International women's congress in Thailand: *"Women Overcoming Violence: Women Redefining Development and Changing Society through Nonviolence"*. It asks how women are affected by militarism and poverty, and what initiatives women have started in order to create a better life. The congress will give a place for women to exchange experiences; a place where we can work on a global sense of women's liberation; and a place where we can give encouragement and power to each other to enrich our further work. The congress will be held in Thailand because we want to hear the voices of Asian and Pacific women. Both forms of violence are focal points of the congress: violence from the military and militarization, and violence due to poverty. The congress will attempt to make linkages and will look for structural connections among these different forms of women's oppression.

When women do not resign themselves to violence then resistance grows out of it. What forms have women developed to fight the military violence and to decrease hunger and poverty? On what kinds of projects for a better world do women work? Women and women's groups from as many parts of the world as possible will be given the opportunity to describe their situation and to tell about their experience.

Groups who want to feed into the conference can contact CONNECT in Australia. Apart from finding women who wish to attend the congress and raising funds for their expenses, CONNECT also wants to strengthen the links between women in this region, building on existing networks and initiating discussion and sharing of experiences about these important issues as an end in itself. We hope to create

opportunities for women who are unable to attend the congress to feed into it (with videos, poster presentations, tapes etc.) and create ways for them to get feedback afterwards.

For example, in Australia, we would also like to organise discussions (mini-conferences) with the same title of the conference. We also intend to do some nonviolent actions around the forthcoming military trade fair, AIDEX, which is to be held in November in Canberra.

CONNECT is:

- looking for women (especially those from less developed countries) who would like to attend the conference;
- inviting groups or networks to feed into the conference by sending us a description or summary of your work through a poster presentation, a booklet or whatever way you think is appropriate;
- asking individuals and groups of women, *"How would you redefine 'development' so that it means something positive for you and your community?"*;
- asking women to put a message on cloth so that we can sew the patchwork together and use it in our action here in Australia against militarism;
- seeking speeches from or by Asian women that we could use for our mini-conferences in the form of a video or written.

We would love to hear from you if you are interested in any part of what we are doing. We need your ideas, experience and energy to make it all happen.

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Mon to Fri attention to Lee Tan,

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public holidays; but not at night, please.

NVT