

The Siege of the Arsenal

Direct Action at Rock Island

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This account of the blockade of the Rock Island Army Arsenal on June 4th was written by Mike Haywood of the Disarm Now Action Group, 407 South Dearborn No. 307, Chicago IL 60605. This is neither an endorsement of the anti-war group nor of its politics, although we do not necessarily disagree with either. What interests us is Disarm Now's creative use of civil disobedience and their call for an autonomous anti-war movement.

DAVENPORT, IOWA—On Friday the 13th in April, the Quad City Times headline story announced that “Peace Activists Vow to Shut Down Rock Island Arsenal.” On Tuesday, June 5th, a Chicago Tribune front-page story declared, “All Sides Claim Victory in Arsenal War.”

It became clear to many people in the Midwest as well as to military and police officials at some point between April and June 4th that Project Disarm was not organizing just another peace rally or blockade. The media portrayed it as a “showdown” between Project Disarm, an umbrella group of peace activists from several states, versus Project Rearm, a multimillion dollar renovation of the Army's century old Rock Island Arsenal.

The confrontation appeared one-sided. The U.S. Arsenal took on the appearance of an armed camp in the last two weeks before the 4th, revealing its true nature. The Quad-Cities, which sit on the Mississippi River surrounding the Arsenal, were in a state of siege.

Barbed wire fences and gates went up at all three auto bridge approaches, guards were stationed 24-hours-a-day at a railroad bridge, and NATO wire was strung around the site. 300 elite, specially trained military police were flown in from Ft. Riley, Kansas and Ft. Benning, Georgia to guard the inner perimeter, the Coast Guard patrolled river approaches, helicopters surveilled the houses of local organizers, and electric “stun guns” were purchased by the local police.

Mass Direct Action: The Autonomous Approach

Project Disarm relied on elusiveness, mobility and the outrage felt by many at the U.S. military escalation currently underway. As opposed to most current antiwar civil disobedience actions, Project Disarm's approach was not to tell the Arsenal or police anything about our plans or numbers of blockaders beyond the date of the demonstration and our intention to prevent war production and planning for as long as possible through effective, nonviolent actions.



Police arrest mobile blockader and remove a death squad victim dummy at Rock Island Army Arsenal June 4th. Over 100 were arrested in the protest. —photo Steve Dalber.

No negotiations were held with anyone for a legal rally site or anything else. The military and police responded by preparing for the worst.

After long discussions by Project Disarm's regional organizing committee, it was agreed that blockaders were not required to submit to arrest. This was significant given the prevailing norms of civil disobedience which hold that the main impact is symbolic, and that the act of being arrested in itself is the most important act.

In a typical civil disobedience (CD) action, the totally cooperative attitude and predictable activity of those who are arrested is the logical outcome of full cooperation by the organizers with the authorities in planning for the action.

There were over 100 people arrested at Rock Island, mainly in standard road sit-downs. But about 100 more blockaders were never arrested. They used mobile disruptive tactics, moving on when the police neared, and pulled objects into the roads leading up to the bridges including highway sawhorses, trash dumpsters, tires, sewer piping, metal shavings, glass and life-size dummies, bloodied like death squad victims in Central America.

These tactics failed in preventing Arsenal workers from getting to their jobs despite the fact that Moline city work crews were reported to have removed four truckloads of debris from the streets. As an expression of noncooperation, as an alternative to voluntary submission to arrest and in terms of the experience gained by those who participated, the mobile street tactics were a highlight of the action.

It is doubtful the action could have been substantially more effective without making major sacrifices politically. The contradiction in organizing was that to draw larger numbers, to have several waves of "sitters" and prolong the length of the blockade, the mobile tactics would have had to been toned down and, compromise made with the advocates of strictly symbolic CD.

If even more audacious mobile tactics had been planned that could have more severely disrupted traffic, even more people would have stayed away from what was already seen by some as a threatening action because of its confrontation approach and unpredictability. The invaluable aspect of this action that would have been lost by compromise in either direction was the exposure of a large number of participants to autonomous direct action.

Punks and the Unemployed

Organizing for the action was not restricted to anti-nuke, anti-intervention or left groups. Several leaflets were written to appeal to distinct groups in the Quad-City area. They included one titled, "Hungry? Eat Your 105MM Howitzer" for the unemployed and workers in the agricultural implement plants in the area, one for churchgoers, one for "the people of the Quad Cities" handed out on the street and at shopping malls, and one for punks and youth.

This last leaflet contained a call to "Do the Disruption, a new street dance" and was distributed at several hardcore rock shows and at the Clash concerts in Chicago and Davenport. The Clash, while playing in Davenport, invited everyone to "a party on June 4th to push all the tanks into the river."

One of the most critical activities for anti-war activists to engage in now, in addition to direct action, is to begin encouraging resistance within the military, among youth about to go into the military, and in the military's corporate production facilities. In the weeks leading up to the action at Rock Island, area ministers began to get calls and visits from troubled Arsenal workers seeking moral advice.

A woman called one of the local organizers on the evening of June 4th to say, "Keep doing what you're doing; I'll be out there with you next time." She was an Arsenal worker planning to quit soon. One of the lesser known aspects of the movement against U.S. war in Vietnam was the rebellion of American troops from 1968 on. One military worker, one soldier, one sailor who becomes committed to resistance is more important than any single "anti-intervention" or "anti-weapons" bill passed by Congress.

Victory in Defeat: The Siege Continues

Ultimately, Project Disarm was a victory in defeat. Although production was not stopped on the day of the action, many hours of the Arsenal's planning were diverted for months from offensive war to the defense of their perimeter right in the "patriotic heartland." A state of siege was created at the Arsenal and in the Quad Cities by our organizing for a Shutdown. On June 12, Col. Gamino, commander of the Arsenal, said that the specially erected defenses cost \$500,000 and that they would be permanent.

Because they knew we were coming, but didn't know how many or what we would do, the massive and visible reaction by the military and police became a major exposure in itself of the nature of the system the Arsenal defends.

We became, through our action and confrontations, a real alternative for the people we came in contact with. The newspapers picked up on this by describing the action as "Project Disarm vs. Project Rearm", just as we had intended. Ours is a minority view—to pit ourselves against everything these facilities stand for, rather than to try to reform them, cut their budget, stop weapons systems, do conversion studies, or make strictly moral appeals.

Our organizing approach was to involve as many people as possible, but to maintain autonomy of tactics and politics rather than impose strict limits such as demands for electoral change.

We need to take effective actions and hold discussions to counter the ongoing emphasis in the anti-war movement on opposing Reagan instead of the entire war system. We must look, not to the politicians but to ourselves, the workers and the men and women in uniform to disarm the military before they launch World War

The challenge is to deepen resistance, non-cooperation and effective action which embodies a vision of the alternative to the terminal system we live in.

Sidebar: What is the Rock Island Arsenal?

Rock Island Arsenal is the Army's largest manufacturing arsenal, producing arms ranging from machine guns, gun mounts and tank parts to 105 and 155 155MM nuclear-capable howitzers. These weapons are supplied to regimes which include El Salvador, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the Philippines. In all, 9,400 civilians work at the Arsenal.

It is also the headquarters for the Armament, Munitions and Chemical Command (AMCCOM), an administrative center in charge of a \$9 billion annual budget with 5,000 civilian employees at Rock Island. AMCCOM manages computer inventory, assembly and transport of the Army's conventional, nuclear and chemical stockpiles, and oversees three other Army arsenals, 29 munitions plants, and all Army arms depots in the U.S. and around the world.

AMCCOM is in charge of research, development, production, and distribution of all chemical warfare supplies for the Army. Project Rearm, the \$233 million expansion program, is part of a national plan to prepare for "production surge capacity" in event of all-out-war mobilization.



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