

Rock Island Arsenal Besieged

Mike Haywood

ROCK ISLAND, IL—For 3 hours beginning at 4 a.m. Monday morning, October 21, 1985, 400 or so activists attempted to shut down the Rock Island Arsenal by blockading workers trying to drive onto the island. The five-month—organizing campaign by Project Disarm culminated in an action with 127 arrests. Many of these people attempting to blockade Arsenal workers, and many others were arbitrarily arrested.

Several people were beaten by the police and pinned with outrageous, trumped-up charges, including one felony charge. Dozens more engaged in innovative mobile direct action and were not caught. The Arsenal wasn't shut down, but as one Quad-Cities TV news show put it, "...it was anything but business as usual for the Arsenal today."

Rock Island Arsenal, the U.S. Army's largest, employs 9,000 to 10,000 civilians. 2,500 work on the production lines for howitzers that are supplied to the U.S. and to regimes including El Salvador, South Africa and the Philippines. The rest work in administration and research for the U.S. Army's AMCCOM: Armaments, Munitions, and Chemical Command.

AMCCOM, headquartered at Rock Island, is a far-flung command that oversees research, production and deployment of all Army weapons, including chemical and nuclear, putting it on the front-lines of U.S. preparations to fight and win World War III. The production complex at Rock Island includes research and development of chemical and nuclear capable howitzers and shells.

Arsenal workers must cross one of three bridges spanning the Mississippi River every workday morning. Because of overwhelming security forces on the bridges themselves, Project Disarm focused its blockading on the city streets leading toward them.

At 6:00 a.m. in Davenport, a women's group from Chicago, No Pasaran, drove two cars up to within 2 blocks of the bridge, jumped out and promptly chained the cars together and to parking meters on either side of the street. They then chained themselves to the cars, and a crowd of supporters gathered around to make the arrests as difficult as possible. The blockade succeeded for up to 30 minutes as several other groups blockaded secondary routes and the crowd moved into and out of the street adding to the disruption.

Hit and Run Tactics

In Rock Island, several mobile action groups carried out simultaneous blockades at pre-designated times on key arteries leading to the bridgehead. One of these blockades stopped traffic on a main approach for up to 10 minutes using about 20 railroad ties. One police car was immobilized by paint on the windshield as it pursued a mobile group that was on foot.

Rock Island Police Sgt. Anderson said, "Before the police's efforts even began Monday, they had to repair 14 punctured tires...they (the demonstrators) would use guerrilla-warfare type tactics where they would hit and run."

The mobile groups kept moving and blockading for up to an hour and then coalesced into one large group which took over the street and marched toward the bridgehead, blocking traffic as they went. When met with a large police response, they dispersed. Only a few of the mobile blockaders were caught.

Tactical innovation pervaded the action. The timed mobile blockades demonstrated a level of coordination not often seen in the U.S. The women's action showed that a stationary blockade, with the participants submitting to arrest, can use materials and the element of surprise for maximum effectiveness. The DNA/Project Disarm guidelines included the use of "nonviolent bodily force" to free people from police; increasing the potential for resistance. And a principle in organizing is "no negotiations"—no legal permits and no giving information to the authorities about plans for the action.

Police Brutality Widespread

Police brutality was widespread on both sides of the river. In Davenport, the women were hit and kicked as they were arrested, and one arrested man was clubbed for refusing to leave a bus. Three women were charged with multiple misdemeanors, including assault. In Rock Island, a 4-car police tac squad attacked a group that was moving down a street. When people fled and freed one another, the police attacked people, and clubbed them repeatedly with nightsticks and flashlights.

Project Disarm, a Midwest regional effort which came together for the first Shut Down action on June 4th, 1984, is coordinated by Disarm Now Action Group of Chicago and members of the Quad-Cities War Resistance Community, a Catholic-based group. Participants came from anti-war and church groups, college campuses and high schools all over the Midwest.

Enthusiasm among participants ran high afterward. Legal defense is underway, particularly for those facing outrageous charges. Contributions can be sent to: Project Disarm, c/o 407 S. Dearborn No. 370, Chicago, IL 60605.

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