

Nevada Test Site

Mass Action at Gates of War Machine

Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)

1989

Throughout the Pentagon’s preparations for nuclear war, it has waged genocide on the Earth and native people. As of 1987, the U.S. and Great Britain had exploded 670 nuclear bombs on Newe Segobia, the Western Shoshone Nation. All the nuclear “tests” in the world are conducted on the territory of native peoples. The Nevada Test Site (NTS) was created in 1951 by an executive order of President Truman, violating Shoshone land rights and the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley.

This past April 7–16, 5,000 people gathered in a desert peace camp across the highway from the NTS for a week of demonstrations which resulted in 1,551 arrests. The action was Reclaim the Test Site II, called by the American Peace Test (APT) with the demands Stop Nuclear Testing and Reclaim Shoshone Land. I went with a commitment to those demands, but also a sense of ambivalence that many anarchists feel when working with organizations which have a liberal reformist basis to their political goals. I knew I must act on behalf of Creatures and the Earth, that She may no longer have Her body blasted full of hot radioactive gasses so the war makers can ensure that their “devices” work.

I had positive experiences with APT in 1986 in an effective shutdown of the Department of Energy building in Washington and at the first Reclaim the Test Site action in 1987. Their emphasis on consensus decision making and autonomous affinity groups is exemplary and shows their strengths.

Unfortunately, I got a rash of mental nausea when I seriously examined APT’s statements and philosophy. Just by looking at the flag waving on their logo, I know I should not have been so shocked.

At last summer’s Hiroshima Day remembrance in Detroit, the APT speaker used his position to urge peace activists to volunteer time for the Michael Dukakis campaign. We all know how much politicians like Dukakis, who supported the Trident II D-5 missile and campaigned from a General Dynamics tank, have to do with supporting the status quo. Such demagogues actually work against people’s movements for peace.

At the forefront of APT’s official agenda is working for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Whether we demonstrate for it or “write letters to our congressperson,” the goal relies on the politicians to make decisions for us. Direct action becomes lobbying for the treaty. We know the government’s track record regarding treaties that deal with the land that is the NTS. Next up is cooperating with the state for the “conversion” of the test site for “peaceful” business.

The APT publishes “Nonviolence Guidelines” and the nonviolent Trainers’ Manual. “Guidelines” is just a nice way of saying “rules”—rules that ask people who cannot abide by them not to attend the action.

The training manual includes a “Code of Discipline” (taken from Gandhi’s campaigns) with such statements as “Obey the orders of chosen leaders.” Such a statement directly contradicts the non-hierarchical decision-making emphasized at other times by APT.

Activists are urged not to be “seduced by the lures of quick victory and easy success.” I have been seduced by the desire for total disarmament and do not want to wait around for total annihilation before we achieve it.

“No property will be damaged” expressly prohibits a myriad of possible actions which were lingering in several people’s minds many weeks before the action. Guidelines are used to exclude tactics which could concretely challenge and interfere with the testing machine.

My problem is with the rules which impose conformity and bring out the bosses and cops internalized in all of us.

In the Desert

Once in the desert, I was pleased and amazed at the numbers of people from the anarchist community who have refused to abandon the peace movement; instead, we have taken responsibility for many projects within it.

On Sunday, April 9, a meeting where young people shared their experiences in the peace movement resulted in the call for the formation of a youth affinity group. That evening, about a dozen people ranging in age from mid-teens to mid-twenties (including seven from the Detroit area), gathered in a communal tent on a desert slope. As we began to air our feelings, we realized that we had many shared experiences as a basis for our solidarity. We had been excluded from actions for the sole reason that we were “minors.” We came from punk, hippie and anarchist scenes where our political expression was a synthesis with countercultural art and lifestyle. We found focus in the shared affirmation of our playfulness, spontaneity and love.

The Youth Collective Takes Action

As we began to discuss potential actions, we immediately became aware of our differences with the agenda being pursued by APT. With no one around to scold us for our lack of Gandhian principles, we began to fantasize freely about collective rebellion without repression.

Later that night, a handful of youth took bolt cutters to the barbed wire fence marking the border of test site land. Several hundred feet of fence were removed and the activists escaped free. At least temporarily, one of the borders protecting the encroachment on Shoshone land was gone.

All across the planet, barbed wire expresses the brutality of borders and the power civilization has to protect lifeless property. It keeps protesters out and prisoners in. The test site fence constantly reminds demonstrators of the territorial domain claimed by the Department of Energy (DOE). “No Trespassing,” commands the sign. On that night, angry and inspired youth refused to obey the command.

Unfortunately, it is not only the warmakers who give orders about the test site fence. The peacemakers give orders as well. When one of the property damagers could not contain his enthusiasm about the action, word of the fence cutting spread through the peace camp like wildfire.

Early Monday morning, the youth group met and agreed to support the fence cutting. We would not abandon our comrades to face the ensuing wrath alone. We received threats of “getting the boot” all day and finally heard criticisms from the entire camp at a community meeting that night.

What we saw as a tremendous act of spontaneity and rage became, in the words of some adults in camp, irresponsibility, vandalism and cowardice.

We learned that the fence “belongs” to the Department of Transportation and not the DOE. The person whose job it became to repair the fence was an employee who had been a friend to the peace camp, helping dig a food cooler in the scorching desert heat. He cut his hand fixing the fence that day.

Since many people chose to attack the spirit of the fence cutting, it is the very spirit of the act which I chose to defend. Many others joined in denying the sanctity of property which in itself denies life.

Those who refrain from destroying property (because it is violent, because it is on the “same level” as nuclear testing, because it will injure our friendship with the state), will be forever limited to symbolic gestures and moral appeals. “Peace” activists were angry because youth took control of their political lives, made their own decisions and acted on them. Our youth group stood together in refusing to accept a slap on the wrists and to offer an apology. We were not sorry. We did not back down.

Can anyone truly resist the war machine while simultaneously refusing to tear down the walls that the war machine methodically builds and defends? We must go back and not stop at tearing down fences. We must deconstruct the entire machine. At a community meeting one person expressed sadness seeing the movement “descend to monkeywrenching.” An Earth First! activist responded that monkeywrenching is something a movement serious about stopping nuclear weapons should ascend to.

A Morning Blockade

We left our tents at dawn on Wednesday to greet the morning shift of test site workers proceeding down the highway in their fancy touring busses. Over a hundred of us, from half a dozen affinity groups, were awake for the heaviest traffic of busses between 6:30 and 7:00 a.m. Members of San Francisco’s Circle A cluster entered the road near the bottom of the exit ramp, sat down and tightly linked arms. It became more of a dogpile as frantic cops and Wackenhut security guards finally managed to separate protesters and drag them to the side of the road.

Another blockade immediately entered the road. The cops had to leave arrested blockaders singing in the rocks and brush. As the officers looked away, arrested brothers and sisters scampered back into the road and sat in front of other vehicles. Police began cuffing such people together at the ankles.

We continued singing: “We are gnawing at the ropes/they’re not ours/we did not choose them...“This is not a game/those are not toys/we are not sheep/you are not boys...”

We were first taken by bus from the site of our blockade to temporary detention in the well-used protest-cage. We were then taken 60 miles north to Beatty where we were processed in the town’s community center. We were released if we gave a plausible name and signed a citation; if we did not, we were taken to the Beatty jail. Thirty of us went to jail, including three youth collective members.

The “Jump Camp” Action

I was barely out of jail before I joined the members of the youth collective in an action we were calling “Jump Camp.” Jump Camp was intended to challenge the DOE on a piece of land which, according to the map, is just outside the border of NTS.

We were shuttled into this land with gear to set up camp and reclaim the land. The Wackenhut storm troopers were waiting for us, providing sobering evidence that they had sufficient warning of our plans. Affinity groups must maintain small numbers, closeness and trust to prevent action plans from being discovered by the state’s infiltrators and spies.

The first group of jump campers was met with incredible brutality: shoving protesters to the ground, holding faces in the sand, handcuffing wrists and ankles and threatening the use of firearms.

We spent a cold night sleeping and singing to each other in the cage. Our captivity included being examined by the state with a geiger counter, bringing closer to home the radioactive reality of walking on land scarred by hundreds of nuclear tests. Morning finally arrived and we were taken to Beatty and released. This was the first of two consecutive days of compelling overnight actions.

Mask o’ Rage

Thursday at dusk several hundred people, colorfully dressed in costumes and masks gathered by the peace camp kitchen to begin a march to the test site gates. This was our Mask o’ Rage action. We were immersed in the torchlight and music of a festive tribal carnival, a profound ritual of our rage and resistance. When we reached the tunnel beneath Highway 95 between peace camp and the test site, our sound exploded with incredible acoustics as the torches lit up our faces, masks and the wild mural of political graffiti on the walls behind us.

At the gates of the site, our uninhibited dance took over the entire street. It was the APT peacekeepers, often friendly and sincere, who fell back into their role of peace police. They told us to take only one lane of the road.

The high level of energy and communal spirit of this action was stronger than the inhibitions of our buddies in the yellow caps with the walkie-talkies.

The music and dance continued as we began what would be an all-night occupation of the test site's main entrance. We saw busses, cars and trucks with gravel (to fill in the ground after a test) turned away from the top of the road. They would undoubtedly be redirected to another entrance, but they would not enter here. This action, called by Circle A, Art Against Armageddon and a womyn's group, The Princesses of Plutonium, was the longest-lasting blockade of the week.

At the back of the crowd, an undercover cop violently assaulted Stefan, an activist who identified him as a cop. Stefan and Lisa, a womyn who tried to intervene, were dragged from the crowd as Lisa was screaming. Another womyn began to yell as she saw the horror before her eyes. A peacekeeper tried to calm her.

I felt that at such times it is better to allow our anger and wailing to be heard. Both Stefan and Lisa were arrested. We also watched Norb, a retired farmer and resident of the permanent peace camp being dragged until his back was cut and raw. Many people shouted, "Shame!" at the police.

We all sat in the road and held a consensus meeting. When the Sheriff of Nye County wanted to speak, he had to wait to be called on by the facilitator of the meeting. We refused to give him a lane of traffic unless he first released all the demonstrators in the cage. That deal did not work, and we decided to sustain the blockade.

The remark from that meeting which moved me most came from an older womyn with brilliant white hair. She addressed the all too pervasive notion that the police are our friends. This womyn specifically denounced the Sheriff for all his and his department's lies, trickery, violence and deceit. Speaking for almost all of us, she concluded by addressing the Sheriff directly, "You are not my friend."

All-Night Blockade

Numbers of the people at the gate diminished slightly as runs were made for sleeping bags, warm clothes, coffee and food for the core of blockaders settling in for the entire night. Some people were protesting while they slept; others kept the upbeat percussion jam happening until dawn. The cops finally made their move ten hours into the blockade and arrested those sitting across the road. The arrestees refused to give any information and practiced total noncooperation.

They demanded that Stefan's charges be dropped and that he be immediately released. There was no room in the Beatty jail, so the blockaders were released after being driven there. Many people stayed until Stefan was released after his arraignment later that afternoon. He left the jail seriously shaken from the threats and beating he received.

Meanwhile, back at the main stage, an all-day marathon of words and music was taking place. "Slammin' in the Sand," the Youth Day concert, convinced me again: If I can't skank or slam, I don't want to be part of your revolution!

Throughout this joyous week, dedicated volunteers provided food, medical care, portapotties and water. They set up tarps, tents and tables, and provided peace camp orientation. A donation was requested, but everything was free for those who could not afford to give.

If we were to practice the cooperation and mutual aid of peace city in our daily lives, it would be an explicit and immediate revolutionary act. Although the committed acts of thousands have not stopped the testing, the way we lived together over these ten days made this action a success for me. Even our conflicts and debates were positive learning experiences.

In the days following the action, on one of my walks around the encampment's remains, I drew strength and connectedness from the Earth's vast beauty, and vowed to continue fighting the machine destroying it.

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