

Reaction to the Calgary Oil Congress Protests

They evacuated the Cows

Kerry Mogg

2000

Environmental activists, anarchists, and other concerned individuals began organizing against the June 2000 meeting of the World Petroleum Congress in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, six months in advance of the event.

The Congress, founded in 1933, is composed of such oil producing nations as the U.S., Canada, Croatia, Indonesia, Kuwait, Nigeria, and Libya. Its focus is industry issues, such as down-playing global warming.

In a cynical effort to pander to media exposure generated by news of the protests, the Congress made “environmental issues” the unofficial theme of their 2000 meeting.

Unfortunately, as soon as protest planning began in earnest, it became evident that activists weren’t the only ones organizing. The city of Calgary, spearheaded by the police, began a terror campaign of misinformation around the same time.

Warnings in the Calgary Sun about the “violent anarchy” that was sure to occur as a result of protests against oil industry executives managed to shroud environmental concerns in a thick layer of right wing fog. The powers that control this conservative prairie city have a long and distinguished record of intolerance towards anyone disagreeing with their views.

This time Calgary’s conservatives outdid themselves by indulging in a four month long paranoia binge. While activists prepared for nonviolent, creative protest, the Calgary city council, its police force and lap-dog media pundits went into a frenzy as they “braced” for the impending arrival of the “anarchistic forces of darkness.”

The weekend prior to the conference, concerned citizens organized a large counter conference “teach-in” composed of environmental activists, human rights advocates and others affected directly by international oil. Those in the latter category included speakers such as Owens Wiwa, brother of Ken Saro Wiwa, the poet and anti-oil development protester, executed by the Nigerian military at the behest of Shell Oil in 1995.

Ceramic Cows Evacuated

While the list of Shell’s crimes against Nigeria’s populace were being detailed to an audience of several hundred at the counter conference, the governments of Canada and the city of Calgary began their preparations. U.S. environmental advocates were turned back at Calgary International airport; metal grid barricades were installed throughout half the downtown area; even ceramic cows—part of a public art project—were evacuated to prevent anarchists from hurling them at cops. Hundreds of officers were imported from surrounding cities and towns across Alberta. They were armed with the riot gear and war toys that are now staples of democratic protests: 42-inch wooden truncheons, pepper spray, and tear gas.

Shameless Provocations

Rounding out this experience in mind-numbing totalitarianism, the corporate media exercised its weight with an ongoing campaign against democracy. The *Calgary Sun* in particular was shameless in its provocations against demonstrators. The horrors that “family destroying feminists” (aka activists) would wage on the god-fearing metropolis were its mantra.

The *Sun* ran a full-page article on police chaplain, Constable Kevin McInnes, who contacted every church in Calgary to ask their parishioners to pray for the police who would be dealing with the violent hordes “coming simply to agitate and disrupt.” This fear mongering led a large number of Calgarians to avoid the impending demonstration and limited numbers at the march and rally to around one thousand.

During the Counter Conference, local activist/University of Calgary professor Anne McGrath recounted her son’s experience when police began making the rounds of elementary schools, detailing the alleged recruitment tactics of the protesters. The police invented descriptions of how protesters target kids for their front lines so they wouldn’t be hit by “riot-control” weapons used by the police.

At this point in their talk, the cops would bring out their riot gear to give the kids a “feel” for what to expect. Still want to get involved with democracy in action, kids?

Amazingly, despite the fear mongering and illegal searches on the day of the demonstration, the anti-oil protests in Calgary were a success story. People came from all corners of Alberta, and at the big march, even bystanders joined in.

We carried banners and paraded giant puppets, while a large contingent of drummers helped to create a festive atmosphere that even the heavily-armed cops zipping back and forth on their motorcycles were unable to destroy. The Edmonton contingent of boisterous Radical Cheerleaders raised everyone’s spirits both en route and at a rally held after the initial march.

The following Monday, smaller crowds of anti-oil protesters carried out the event’s most creative acts. A soccer game played by Team Shell and Team Earth provided a clear demonstration of the power plays of global capitalism against the natural world, with the Radical Cheerleaders on the sidelines (cheering for Earth).

Best of all, some Calgarians scared off by the anticipated riot the day before showed up to give support. Among the demonstrators that day were a mother with two little kids, carrying their own “People before Profits” signs.

It never seemed likely that we were going to stop the Oil Congress from meeting, but, as in Seattle, as in Washington, as in Windsor, we succeeded in putting a spotlight on another international capitalist cabal, with many of our concerns making it out to the general public.

The devastation wrought upon the planet is now up for household debate—and people are increasingly protesting against it.

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