

Water Activists Face Repression

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During the past few months, Michigan activists fighting the global economy's developing market for water extraction have fought a multi-national corporation, the legal system, and the state's liberal governor.

Also, over a thousand people gathered at a local community college to protest water and utility shut-offs in 80,000 Detroit homes alone. But neither Gov. Jennifer Granholm nor any other public official will declare a health emergency or bill amnesty.

The Sweetwater Alliance has an ongoing boycott campaign of Ice Mountain, a Nestle brand, which steals its plastic bottled liquid from Michigan's natural water systems. The Meijer grocery chain refuses to drop this brand despite demands by a coalition of groups.

At one Meijer store protest, activist Marie Mason was arrested for wearing a t-shirt that read "Ask Me About Ice Mountain" as she entered the store.

Although Sweetwater is a non-violent organization, the authorities may have lumped them in with the Earth Liberation Front (ELF). Elves attempted to burn down an Ice Mountain pumping station last September. After the Detroit-based Massasauga Earth First! issued a statement supporting the action, the FBI arrived on the scene and began harassing activists on the frontlines in the aboveground, water protection movement.

The feds also visited people listed as Sweetwater Alliance regional contacts on the organization's website, www.waterissweet.org. Federal prosecutors then issued subpoenas to Mason and her husband Frank Ambrose, ordering them to submit palm prints and DNA samples to a federal grand jury in late October. The two initially refused and fought the order in court. Mason and Ambrose have a history of fighting FBI harassment.

Two years ago, a joint terrorism task force in Indiana raided their home, and initiated a campaign of harassment and surveillance against the two and others in the forest activist community. The government brought tree-spiking charges against Frank, but ultimately, these bogus charges were dropped.

People responded to an action alert from the quickly-established Water Defense Committee asking for calls to the US Attorney's office, demanding that the subpoenas be quashed. When the couple's attorney telephoned the federal prosecutor's office about a legal matter, the US Attorney complained that the office couldn't get any work done because of "receiving scores of impolite and harassing" phone calls.

The activists eventually complied with the government demand for their hand prints and DNA rather than face indefinite imprisonment on contempt charges. Even though they surrendered their samples, they continue to oppose the sweep of grand juries across the country intimidating activists. Their experience reinforces the charge that grand juries do not need any basis of evidence to issue a subpoena. When dealing with a grand jury, you are guilty until proven innocent.

In light of a recently leaked FBI memo detailing efforts to marginalize more radical members of the anti-war movement, the Sweetwater situation makes more sense. If you substitute "anti-water privatization" for "anti-war," then the actions of the local police and FBI seem familiar. They are trying to characterize the Sweetwater Alliance and Massasauga EF! as violent and extreme in the eyes of more moderate groups involved in the fight to protect the water.

Through illegal arrests and subpoenas, the government is attempting to justify the use of repressive tactics to shut down the organizing for which EF! and Sweetwater are known. The FBI stepped in at this particular time because of an anticipated court decision in a case brought against Nestle and the State by the Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation. No matter what the decision, the FBI knew conservative, moderate, and radical groups would work together against a giant like Nestle. In the eyes of the government, a classic divide and conquer strategy was in order.

The early December court decision was a stunning victory for the environmentalists. The judge ordered Nestle to completely cease pumping water and effectively closed the \$150 million plant the multinational built with the hopes of establishing themselves in Michigan.

But no sooner had the victory celebration begun when the governor stepped in on Nestle's behalf. Her legal brief helped convince the appeals court to grant a stay to the order, allowing Nestle to continue raping Michigan. This was a big shock, as Grapholm had repeatedly stated her opposition to water diversion and Nestle's operation. Even as she defended the water theft, she continued to talk about her devotion to protecting Michigan's water through legislative initiatives at the beginning of the year.

In response to the Governor, the more moderate water groups quickly released a joint statement complimenting her and compromising their original demands. They offered to help work on the new water legislation. The Sweetwater Alliance was left alone criticizing the Governor for her duplicity.

It seemed obvious the other groups wanted to distinguish themselves from Sweetwater and backed down from their original demands which previously had been jointly agreed upon. It also seemed obvious that they wanted to make this distinction because of the adverse attention Sweetwater received because of FBI harassment.

Did the divide and conquer strategy work? Movements remain fluid and the groups which were afraid to criticize the governor have reconsidered their stance. Environmental and social justice activists are coming together again to present a united demand for environmental justice.



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