

52 arrested protesting nuclear weapons plant

Joshua J. McElwee | May. 3, 2011
Kansas City, Mo.

Fifty-two peace activists, most connected to Catholic Worker houses throughout the nation, were arrested here May 2 after blocking the gate to the construction site of what will be the nation's first nuclear weapons production facility to be built in 33 years.

The acts of civil disobedience came 78 years and one day from the founding of the first Catholic Worker community by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, and were the culmination of a three-day "faith and resistance" retreat hosted by two Catholic Worker communities, which drew some 150 to this city.

The new facility, expected to cost \$1.2 billion over the next two decades, is to replace an existing plant here. Health concerns at the current complex were stoked last month when the administrator of the General Services Administration confirmed that detectable levels of an unidentified carcinogen were found at that site.

Before their arrests, protestors walked onto the main road leading onto the construction site. Holding hands, they sang the traditional hymn "Down by the Riverside" before forming a circle around the truck.

After about 10 minutes, police officers warned the activists to leave the area before they began making arrests. Officers tapped those being taken into custody on the shoulder one-by-one and placed plastic zip-ties around their hands.

Moments before joining hands with those being taken into custody, Diane Leutgeb Munson, a member of the Winona, Minn., Catholic Worker said she thought of her action as "one more way to add to the public outcry" against the nuclear weapons facility.

Kansas City police sergeant Craig Hope, the officer in charge of the presence at the facility, said after the arrests that police wanted to be sure the protestors could "exercise their rights."

Over a period of three hours after the action activists were moved from the facility to the downtown headquarters of the Kansas City Police Department in a yellow police bus. They are charged with trespassing and were originally held on between \$100 and \$400 bond. Organizers say as few as five agreed to pay the bond.

Most of the remaining protestors were released periodically over the night, with the last being released around dawn. Trial date is set for July 19.

Those arrested came from places as far away as South Dakota and Colorado. In the group are several vowed religious, including DeLaSalle Christian Brothers Louis Rodemann and Dennis Murphy; Charity Sr. Mary Cele Breen; and Notre Dame Sr. Theresa Maly.

Yesterday's action is the latest in a sustained campaign by local activists aimed at building awareness of and resistance to the construction of the weapons complex. Last August, 14 peace activists were arrested at the

construction site after they halted work for over an hour by surrounding earth moving equipment.

The number of the arrests outside the gates of the facility represents a step forward in progress for those opposed to the plant, said Jane Stoeber, one of the event's organizers.

"This is the largest number we've ever had. ... [People] left their work, they left their schools. They came out here to place their bodies in support and some to step across the line," said Stoeber.

"It's another step in our long struggle. It signifies hope that the word is spreading."

Five of those arrested may face prolonged jail time because of their witness. As participants in the August action, they refused to pay the fine levied on them by the local judge then and have warrants out for their arrest.

Frank Cordaro, one of those possibly facing a longer sentence, said he saw whatever jail time he receives as a way to "change people's hearts."

"The way you do that in this country, in the long, long line of civil disobedience is to protest and go to jail," said the member of the Des Moines, Iowa, Catholic Worker community.

"Only when people do that do people start catching on that's something's really wrong?"

The five were given between 60 and 90 days to pay the fines from their previous arrest or face additional jail time.

Mixing serious discussions of nuclear deterrence with games of Frisbee and football, anti-nuclear activists spent the weekend here to attend the conference in a local high school leading up to the act of civil disobedience.

On Saturday, activists heard from Art Laffin, a member of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker in Washington, D.C, on the conference's theme: "The hope of Easter and a disarmed world."

Summing up a life of what he calls "Gospel obedience" -- ranging from involvement in two Plowshares actions and weekly vigils outside the White House and Pentagon -- Laffin explained how he thinks nonviolent actions against nuclear weapons facilities "keep telling the story" of Jesus resurrection.

Laffin told the activists their peace witness shows "the reign of God is at hand. Right here. Right now."

On Friday, people gathered for a standing-room-only showing of "The Forgotten Bomb," a new film portraying the dangers of the nation's nuclear weapons arsenal.

Part documentary, part diary, the film follows the personal journey of director Bud Ryan as he visits survivors of the nuclear weapons blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and talks to nuclear weapons analysts, including former Secretary of State George Shultz.

Local people opposed to the nuclear weapons plant are gathering signatures for a local ballot measure that, if enacted, would require Honeywell, the operate of the complex, to cease nuclear weapons operation at the site in favor of green energy work. As of Friday afternoon organizers estimated they had over 4,000 of a needed 3,573 signatures to have the measure included in the local fall ballot.

The Kansas City Plant is responsible for the production and assembly of approximately 85 percent of the non-nuclear components for the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The plant is due to be relocated starting in 2012.

The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), a division of the U.S. Department of Energy, has said

the new facility will carry an estimated price tag of \$673 million for construction. The city government has subsidized the facility's construction with \$815 million in municipal bonds.

Once completed, it is thought the new Kansas City Plant will be the first nuclear weapons complex in the world to be owned by a city government. Through a myriad of lease agreements, Kansas City will hold title for the facility until the bond measures the city approved are paid off by private developers in a lease-to-purchase scheme.

The new Kansas City facility is one of several where new nuclear weapons projects are underway. The new Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project at Los Alamos, N.M., is also under construction, and a new uranium processing facility in Oak Ridge, Tenn. is in the final stages before approval.

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Editor's Note: For more photos of yesterday's action, take a look at Joshua McElwee's photos in the slideshow below.

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