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Peace activists make 'strategic withdrawal'

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 14, 2011
Kansas City, Mo.

Don?t call it surrender. It?s a ?strategic withdrawal,? longtime peace activist Rachel MacNair told supporters Sept. 1.

Following a decision to end what appeared to be a lengthy and costly legal battle to push for a citywide vote on construction of a major new nuclear weapons facility, MacNair told fellow activists: ?Let us do be clear on this. We are now in better shape than we?ve ever been before.?

With the tone of someone who wanted to preempt discouragement in the ranks, she cited a growth in general public awareness as one of the most important gains that has come from the legal initiative.

For more than three years, peace activists here have had one primary goal: stopping construction on what is to be the first new nuclear weapons plant in 33 years. With the decision to admit short-term defeat on what a cadre of overlapping peace groups here had hoped to be their most successful shot yet at thwarting completion of the new plant, they say they have entered into a new time of discernment.

It?s a period in which the activists are being called to digest the fact that the hope they had placed in a legal initiative, a people?s referendum of sorts, had been overwhelmed by powerful political, business and national security interests.

Yet, MacNair?s tone was defiant.

?Our ability to make clear that this plant is controversial has shot up not only with public and press, but with the powers that be that are instrumental in building and financing it,? she wrote. ?They?ve had to expend huge amounts of money and energy into defending something they thought was settled. They?ll know we mean business when we keep at it, too.?

For the past 69 years, Kansas City has been the home of a sprawling facility that makes nonnuclear parts for the nation?s nuclear arsenal. The aging facility is set to be replaced beginning next year with a new plant, located 19 miles south of downtown Kansas City and estimated to cost a total of $1.2 billion over 20 years. Construction is being subsidized by the city with $815 million in municipal bonds.

Two years ago, when a lawsuit questioning the environmental impact of the new facility failed, activists began to take their protest to the street. After more than a year of vigils near an old soybean field -- the site of the future plant, now bustling with construction activities -- they decided to push forward with acts of nonviolent resistance.

When the bulldozers appeared a year ago to plow down the soybean plants to make way for a sprawling, 1.5-million-square-foot complex, some 100 activists blocked one of the machines. Fourteen were arrested.

Last May another group followed suit, with members of Catholic Worker communities from across the nation gathering for the occasion. Fifty-three more joined the number taken into custody after acts of civil disobedience.

Those acts were soon followed by a decision to gather signatures locally to get an initiative on the fall municipal ballot that would have forced the operator of the site to suspend nuclear work in favor of green energy production.

The Kansas City Peace Planters, a coalition of some 150 local organizers, over several weeks obtained more than 4,000 signatures; 3,572 were required for placement on the ballot.

The success of the signature campaign seemed to catch city officials by surprise and quickly led to city legal maneuverings aimed at stopping the initiative from getting to the ballot, including delaying action on the proposed referendum to the last possible moment.

The city council denied placement of the initiative on the ballot Aug. 26, saying that while the activists? petition may have enough signatures to merit placement on the ballot, it ?conflicts with the constitutional power of the federal government to provide for the national defense.?

Following the council?s refusal, activists said they would fight the decision in court. Business and political interests then mounted a counteroffensive. A team of lawyers representing the nuclear plant?s operating and construction companies joined the city?s attorney and were expected to argue together that the peace group?s initiative would have to be taken to federal court.

On Aug. 30, facing the prospects of a series of costly court cases, the peace activists officially decided they would drop their initiative.

MacNair, one of the local peace groups? main organizers and the person who headed up the ballot campaign, told *NCR* that the decision is actually part of a ?growing enthusiasm? for their struggle.

?Attention to the construction of this nuclear facility has been growing,? said MacNair, who holds a doctorate in psychology and focuses her work on the study of the psychology of peace. ?Why would we want to let them keep us in the courtroom? We have better things to do than that. We want to get things in shape so we can really stop this plant, and focus on converting it to green energy use.?

Long-term struggle

For many, the fight between the protestors and the city raises old questions as to what social movements can accomplish when they?re opposed by powerful government and private industry forces.

Ed Ford, the only member of the Kansas City Council to vote against blocking the activists? ballot measure, put it this way: ?What you have is the old ?How can we fight city hall, especially when it?s backed by the military-industrial complex?? ?

Facing an alignment of city and federal interests, the struggle of the activists to call attention to the new plant is like a ?David versus Goliath epic,? said Ford, who is Catholic and over the past few years has been the lone council vote against approving the arrangement for construction of the new facility.

?You had all the resources of City Hall, the federal government and private industry against what seem to be ?the meek who will eventually inherit the earth,? ? he said. ?It looks like that was just not going to happen yet.?

While that dynamic might cause some to wonder if the Kansas City activists have any realistic hope of success,

one expert who has written extensively on nuclear disarmament and nonviolent social movements said it just reflects the long-term nature of these kinds of campaigns.

?It?s obvious that things don?t turn around right away, and then you can just declare victory in the fight against nuclear weapons,? said David Cortright, director of policy studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

?These things have a cumulative effect,? he said. ?We don?t know when things might shift, but multiple factors enter into play, and it?s always possible for there to be a very gradual change.?

Cortright, who was involved in a successful campaign during the 1980s to halt the construction of launch sites for nuclear missiles in western Utah, said his own experience there shows that social movements similar to Kansas City?s build over time.

With plans to build a system of some 4,600 shelters for 200 MX missiles, a Utah government Web site estimates that at least some 12,000 construction workers would have been hired for the derailed project.

Despite the promise of that economic boost, Cortright said, their campaign was successful because it focused on the ecological dangers of the weapons systems.

?Eventually, people in Utah said, ?We just don?t need jobs that much,? ? Cortright said. ?But that was only after several years of long discussion and many education visits by lots of organizations.

?It takes a lot of organizing and a lot of education at the local level with these kinds of situations to begin to build a base where you can have some voice and some legitimacy.?

Continuing hope

The promise of jobs has also been key to local support for construction of the Kansas City site. The original proposal for its construction said it would employ a ?minimum of 2,100 workers,? including those working at the current plant.

But, activists say, that figure doesn?t take into account the number of jobs the new facility might be able to generate were it focused on sustainable technology production instead of nuclear work.

To support their claim, they published in July a study undertaken on their behalf by two economists at the University of Texas at Dallas on ?maximizing job creation? at the new site. In the report, Professors Teresa D. Nelson and Lloyd J. Dumas conclude that ?investing in the declining market for nuclear weapons through the new [plant] is by far a poorer generator of jobs? than other alternatives, such as wind or solar energy production.

The Peace Planters say that, despite their withdrawal of the current ballot measure, they plan to continue focusing on raising attention for possible alternative uses of the nuclear site.

They?ve announced plans for two more petition drives, these focused on ensuring the city does not approve any more bond measures for the new plant?s construction and on finding money for the cleanup of the old site, which the administrator of the General Services Administration admitted in April held detectable levels of an unidentified carcinogen.

While the failed ballot measure may have been seen as unconstitutional, activists say these new measures will be focused solely on the city?s involvement in the project, and will be much harder to block from the ballot. They have until late November to gather the required signatures for both petitions to be considered for an April 5 ballot.

Jane Stoever, another of the group?s organizers, pointed to the more than 4,000 signatures on the first ballot campaign and to the continued protest actions at the construction site. ?I am astonished at how quickly this has grown,? said Stoever, whose arrest in July 2010 outside the current nuclear facility was one of the first tied to construction of the new site. ?Awareness has already been spread through this process.?

For Cortright, that awareness reflects a decades-long effort to finally abolish nuclear weapons.

?There are gains and losses, ups and downs,? he said. ?But overall, at least over the last couple of decades ... there?s been growing skepticism toward the need for more nuclear weapons.?

?That?s the result of many seemingly small campaigns. It?s the cumulative impact of a worldwide concern.?

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. His e-mail address is **jmcelwee@ncronline.org**.]

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