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Unreported News: Tacoma Police Aggressively Attack Peace Demonstrators

An Interview with Caitlin Esworthy of the Port Militarization Resistance of Olympia

Kevin Zeese

Recently, a friend moved to the U.S. from China . She had never seen the Tiananmen Sq. demonstrations including that famous scene of the lone demonstrator standing in front of the Chinese tank. I thought how amazing that a billion people can be kept ignorant of something so important. Then, a week after the events described below I saw an amazing video about a peaceful demonstration in Tacoma, WA that turned violent when police opened fire with tear gas and firing rubber bullets at close range on the demonstrators.

You can see the video of the demonstrations and the police violence at:
http://youtube.com/watch?v=q1_lmvhkv3c

The video, one of many, showed how extreme the militarism of the United States had become. It has also shown how the establishment media does not cover all the news; indeed, sometimes the most important news is not covered. As far as I know the video was never shown on CNN, MSNBC or any of the major networks – hundreds of millions of Americans were kept ignorant of what occurred. Would seeing the videos of the aggressive police action had enlightened Americans of the militarization of our country?

In an effort to expand knowledge about this event I interviewed, Caitlin Esworthy of resident of Olympia , WA , who participated in the demonstrations. She is a student at The Evergreen State College, a member of Port Militarization Resistance of Olympia and the Olympia Movement for Justice and Peace. These are two of the four organizations involved in this project. The others were Students for a Democratic Society and United for Peace, Pierce County . Descriptions of the organizations and their contact information are at the end of the interview with Ms. Esworthy.

Kevin Zeese: *"What was the purpose of the demonstrations at the Tacoma port?"*

Caitlin Esworthy: I think there were a number of goals set out during the two weeks of protests, some articulated and some unspoken. Most attainably, we aimed to show our support by voicing our desire to see that the 4 th Stryker Brigade 2 nd Division remains home and to demonstrate non-violently our opposition to the war in Iraq . Ultimately though, we would like to end the occupation and bring our troops home, and we hope that our actions contribute to the success of the anti-war movement.



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KZ: "Describe the protests? What were the protesters doing?"

CE: The protest spanned about two weeks and the community activists as well as the police chose numerous tactics and methods of organizing. Visibility vigils in the downtown area as well as at the port, marches, chants, holding signs, assembling nearest we were able to the Stryker convoys and the ship being loaded to get our message to the troops and longshore workers that we want the 4 th brigade to stay safe at home, street theater with the Tacoma Puppets, etc. We were using nonviolent direct action and expressing our democratic right to assemble and show dissent with the government's policies.

KZ: "What was the police reaction?"

CE: In sum: force, intimidation and erasure of numerous constitutionally protected rights. Over the course of the two weeks (from March 2 nd to the 17 th) the police chose to daily escalate their tactics in response to the large groups of people voicing their opposition to the occupation of Iraq and in favor of keeping the 4 th Brigade home. There were consistent, daily attacks on our civil liberties and safety as citizens including: harassment, use of nighttime spotlights on pedestrians and drivers that resulted in disorientation and intimidation, use of "less-than-lethal" (read: sometimes lethal) weapons on non-violent protestors, RAMPANT violation of citizen's right to not be videotaped by public officials without probable cause, officers refusing to identify themselves, restriction of the right to wear backpacks on a public street and the repeated restriction of citizen's right to assemble within reasonable proximity to that which they are protesting so that the nature of their protest is not fundamentally altered (both of which are supported by Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decisions), vehicles being searched without cause or warrant, the list goes on.

KZ: "What kinds of injuries were there? Was any emergency medical care provided on the scene? How about private medical assistance?"

CE: I was the first person the police decided to arrest and I sustained scrapes, numerous bruises, and am still dealing with a costly and painful neck injury. On that same night following my arrest, Wally Cuddeford was tased three times WHILE he was passively lying on the ground with a number of police officers restraining him. Shortly after, Jeff Berryhill was shot with a rubber bullet while lifting a cloth "Courage to Resist" sign with both hands above his head to render it visible to the bus of military personnel driving past. During the week pepper spray and tear gas were deployed numerous times on nonviolent protestors resulting in varying reactions, those with contacts or asthma having a more painful and traumatic experience.

The medical care that was provided was primarily by our trained medics who were present at the protests. I would add that because we were not allowed to bring backpack into designated areas (what I call our "free speech zones") many of the medics were left without necessary equipment. After Jeff, Wally, and my arrest, we were given access to police provided medical attention. I would also add that I personally did not feel comfortable getting treatment from the same unit that had just brutalized me. This would contrast with the Olympia medical attention provided in May 2006 when the fire department and emergency response team established a fire truck, water, and medical treatment behind protest lines to render attention more accessible and safe for those not willing to risk arrest because of an injury.

**You can see a video of medics not being allowed to assist people at:
<http://youtube.com/watch?v=KXO7t0GGVPI>**

More reports of injury are likely to surface in any further civil suits. Many have filled out claim of damage forms already.

KZ: "How do the police defend their actions? And, what is your rebuttal?"

CE: To be honest, I have no idea how they justify much of their actions; it is beyond my comprehension. I think that in the post-1999 Seattle WTO protest world police repression is approached with confidence in a reduced level of accountability as well as media complicity (evidenced with the Republican National Convention and the Miami FTAA trade round).

I think that the Tacoma police, in conjunction with over four other regional policing forces, approached their being hired by the Port of Tacoma to ensure the safe shipment of deadly Stryker vehicles and support vehicles as a way to maintain order. The idea that repressing citizen's right to assemble, harassing and injuring nonviolent demonstrators, and illegally videotaping protestors are acceptable tactics to maintain order and even that they are strategic is beyond me. I don't think that any police force should ever be above the law and there is no excuse for these transgressions.

Additionally, they did not fulfill their duty to communicate properly, which became particularly consequential when a number of people sitting peacefully were tear-gassed. They would occasionally send a representative to dictate with whatever they deemed to be the appropriate spokesperson of the protestors "the ground rules." Sergeant Barrett claimed that he wanted to have a "nice event" yet he was one of the officers in charge the night Wally was tased.

One of the ways the police defend their actions is about deliberately lying, particularly to media. One example of this is documented on YouTube in which a detective told a local news program that protesters threw wooden barricades at the police which are what provoked the tear gassing on Friday the 9th. In an interview caught on independent media, two activists challenge him to substantiate those claims, which he was not able to. Another example is the fact that there was a verbal rumor in the police unit on duty the night after Wally, Jeff, and I were arrested that we had attacked, charged, grabbed at and threw gravel during our arrests. If that had actually happened perhaps our third degree assault felony charges would have some basis. Unfortunately, our charges were dropped immediately and as of yet no cause report has been filed to explain the Tacoma police's arrest and charging of us.

You can see a video of the police comments to the media and the very clear evidence that they were lying at: http://youtube.com/watch?v=z-w7g_8ZCYU

KZ: "Were there any prosecutions of demonstrators? What was the result?"

CE: The charging and prosecution of those arrested has been less than consistent. Peter Ryan, was arrested on the 9th with obstruction and failure to disperse. Of the 23 people arrested on March 11th I believe 11 are being charged. The eight who chose to risk arrest my wearing backpacks into the 'free speech zones' have been charged with disobeying a flag officer, which is a traffic violation.

In an interesting addendum, the trial that happened two weeks ago for the people arrested in Olympia during the May 2006 shipment resulted in an interesting conclusion. After four chaotic days in the courtroom (which included the defense catching a police officer lying while on the stand, the judge declaring a rarely granted recess after the prosecutor had an emotional breakdown, and the prosecutor tainting the jury by bringing up incriminating evidence on the defendants that they had decided to not include during the pretrial and flashing pictures of mug shots to the jury) the judge declared a mistrial. The circumstances were highly questionable. Throughout the week it had become clear that the jury appeared to favor acquitting the defendants. On the afternoon of Thursday, March 29th three men entered the courtroom and presented to the judge evidence that confidential jury information had been leaked. The evidence presented was e-mails sent out on a PRIVATE, moderated list serve populated only by the defendants and the legal team. It requires a moderator to sign anyone on and on this particular list there had been communication issues because there was such a delay between sending and posting

(because both the e-mails and entrants had to be "okayed" by the moderator and he wasn't always around to do so). The conclusion that the defendants seem to have made is that the list serve was hacked into and tampered with allowing for others to join without the knowledge of the moderator. The right of lawyer/client confidentiality clearly allows e-mail as a mode of communication.

KZ: "What actions are planned for the future?"

CE: We are looking at two more Stryker deployments out of Fort Lewis within 2007. We have been working to solidify organizational structure and a regional network to facilitate better and more effective communication as well as create more effective actions.

Further information:

Port Militarization Resistance (PMR):

The main group involved in organizing, two chapters exist, the first one in Olympia and the second in Tacoma .

PMR was formed in Olympia in May 2006 during the two-week protest period of the deployment of the 5 th Stryker Brigade. Formed at an OMJP meeting, it was a diverse group of people working on a campaign to end the use of Olympia 's municipal property for the occupation of Iraq . I have attached a campaign plan drafted in February 2007 by Olympians in preparation for the deployment of the 4 th Brigade 2 nd Division, which we believed was going through the Port of Olympia .

Olympia Movement for Justice and Peace (OMJP):

A broad, socio-economic justice group formed during the First Gulf War that works on issues from health care to homelessness. Serves as a main hub of peace and justice organizing in Olympia . Many individual members were involved in the March 2007 port actions but OMJP was not directly responsible for the organizing. www.omjp.org Offers the most complete compendium of documents, photos, articles, etc., of both the May 2006 and March 2007 port protests.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS):

Includes chapters in Olympia and Tacoma .

Tacoma SDS, a student group formed last year was the main group organizing out of Tacoma . Tacoma SDS was instrumental in securing meeting locations at the University of Puget Sound , outreach to the community, etc., during the March 2007 port protests. SDS Olympia and Tacoma are both multi-issue organization but have focused primarily on anti-war organizing with teach-ins and vigils. www.tacomasds.org

United For Peace Pierce County (UFPPC):

UFPPC is a local chapter of the United for Peace and Justice national organization. They are involved in various peace activities involving themselves in numerous campaigns and demonstrations. UFPPC was integral in producing commentary and independent accounts of what transpired during the demonstrations. The group accumulated all of this information, as well as photos, and posted them on their website providing a critical element in building and communicating the sentiments of the growing anti-war movement. www.ufppc.org

Kevin Zeese is director of DemocracyRising.US and co-founder of VotersForPeace.US.

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