

What We Did When They Voted for War

-- By Starhawk

On Sunday, October 6, we had a big Not In Our Name rally in San Francisco, with something like 10,000 people in Union Square. When I spoke, I asked how many people had called, written or emailed their elected representatives about the war. I think every person in the crowd raised their hands. I asked how many would consider civil disobedience, and at least three quarters raised their hands. That gave me ideas...

On Monday night, October 7, we had a meeting at UC Berkeley and came up with an ambitious plan to respond to a war vote. We would meet at the BART (our rapid transit) station at Market and Montgomery, near Feinstein's office (our one Senator who was possibly going to vote for the war.) We'd march to the Federal Building, encamp there for the night (it was an unusually warm night when we planned this action) and blockade it in the morning.

After three days of frantic organizing, we met on the day the House voted for war, Thursday, October 10. We gathered for the march, and after a slow beginning, more and more people began to arrive. Art and Revolution brought signs and beautiful banners, and close to a thousand of us marched down Market Street, chanting,

"We don't want to bomb Iraq,
We want to take this country back!" and
"We don't want your oil war,
Peace is what we're calling for!"
and other favorites, like the perennial
"Hey hey, ho ho, Bush's war has got to go!"

We came to the Federal Building, took over the plaza in front, which has recently been remodeled into a strangely inhuman concrete wasteland that looks as if it were designed for alien mating rites. Actually I believe it is planned to thwart terrorists from driving trucks full of fertilizer into the building, and luckily none of us were trying to do that. Instead we had a number of speeches, then songs, poems, and spoken word performances. The Brass Liberation Orchestra arrived and played dance music. We sent out for pizza for a couple of hundred people. Food Not Bombs arrived before the pizza, but after the meal we held a nonviolent direct action training for close to a hundred people. By then it was dark, and the line of police in front of the doors was so close I was tempted to recruit them for a role play.

A delegation from the Longshore Workers Union arrived, and spoke to us about their strike and their struggle. A group of us went aside and began organizing the next day's blockade, forming affinity groups, recruiting runners and scouts and communications people. Others went back to playing music and holding discussions. People set up tents

on the concrete or threw down sleeping bags. The warm weather was gone, and the night was cold, but dry. Around three in the morning, I snuggled up to some of the Not In Our Name activists and tried to sleep. Around four A.M, the big bass drum mercifully took a rest and was replaced by a sitar player offering us a soothing raga.

We woke up early, around five thirty, and began assembling the blockade. The Federal Building has two main entrances and two driveways into the parking area below, distributed among the four sides of the building. As more and more people arrived, it became clear that we actually had enough affinity groups to effectively blockade all the entrances. A group duct-taped themselves together in front of the main driveway. A Buddhist group arrived and began sitting in silent meditation in the front entranceway. Around the back, the police began arresting protestors who were sitting in front of the barricades. Some workers were angry, accosting the lines and attempting to bash protestors with briefcases. More were supportive, or at least philosophical about not getting to work on time. The brass band circled the building, providing a lively soundtrack.

Some of the arrests looked rough, but no one was seriously hurt. As Federal Workers attempted to climb over the barricades, protestors moved in to block them, and some of the workers tried to climb over the protestors. We kept the building effectively closed for around three hours. Then, just before 10 AM, arrests had thinned our numbers, and more and more workers were getting in. We decided to declare victory, rallied in the plaza, and a group of us marched back along Market Street to Feinstein's office. By then, the Senate had also voted for war, and we knew that she had voted 'yes', in spite of major opposition by her constituents. The day before, her aide had informed us that she was getting six hundred calls a day, running sixty to one against the war.

At the building that houses Feinstein's office, a group of protestors made a quick, successful end run around the police who were frantically holding the doors shut, got into the lobby, and took it over. They were eventually persuaded to leave by a promise that Feinstein's aide would come down and talk to us. This proved to be a blatant lie, but a small delegation was allowed up to talk to the aide, a somewhat fruitless effort. One older man was arrested for no reason anyone could discern—presumably for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Almost all the Federal Building protestors were cited and released. Two were charged with misdemeanor assault—one because she was pushed by a plainclothes cop into a line of police, and one, again, for no reason anyone can quite fathom because she was arrested before any Federal workers attempted to cross her line. Nevertheless, some employee from the Federal prosecutor's office had her charged with assault. A number of us managed to arm twist the Federal Marshalls into allowing us into the arraignment—which we as the public had a right to attend. Then I went home for a much deserved nap.

All in all, it was an amazing, empowering action, especially given the short time we had to organize it. Most of the people who blockaded had never done civil disobedience before. Now the challenge is to build on this, and channel the discontent and urgency so many people feel into effective action.

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