

West Point March and Rally Protests Obama's War Plan

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Global Research, December 03, 2009

[Hudson Valley Activist Newsletter 2](#)

December 2009

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Over 300 antiwar protesters took part in a demonstration at the gates to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point Dec. 1 as President Barack Obama sought to justify his decision to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan.

Facing police and soldiers at the Highland Falls gate to the Academy, demonstrators repeatedly chanted, "30,000 more! What the Hell for?, 30,000 more! <What the Hell for?" Drummers and a trumpet player accompanied the chanting.

Six protestors were arrested for sitting down to block the road into the military facility. They were charged with disorderly conduct, released and summoned to appear in court Dec. 15.

The protest was organized in less than a week, according to civil liberties attorney Michael Sussman, who leads the Orange County Democratic Alliance and was among the chief organizers. Another organizer, Nick Mottern of WESPAC and Consumers for Peace.org, first heard the announcement that Obama would speak locally, and sent out the message to a few local organizers. "They all got busy calling other people and groups and within 24 hours some 14 organizations signed up to protest Obama's speech," he said.

Hudson Valley peace groups sponsoring the demonstration were Rockland Coalition for Peace and Justice, WESPAC, Orange County Peace and Justice, Democratic Alliance, Hudson Valley Activist Newsletter, Peace & Social Progress Now, Consumers for Peace.org, Social Action Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation (Rock Tavern, N.Y.). National groups backing the protest included the ANSWER Coalition, International Action Center, Iraq Veterans Against the War, Military Families Speak Out, Peace Action of New York State, Troops Out Now, and World Can't Wait.

The protest began in the darkness of 6:30 p.m. at Veterans' Park in Orange County's Highland Falls, a town adjacent to the 16,000-acre military reservation on the banks of the Hudson River. Most of the demonstrators came from various peace groups in the counties of Orange, Rockland, Westchester, Ulster and Dutchess, but some attended from New York City, the Upper Hudson Valley, and even from Massachusetts.

Nine speakers representing different groups took the megaphone to denounce Obama's escalation of the war. They included Rev. Jim Bridges, Rock Tavern Unitarian Universalist Congregation; Elaine Brower, Military Families Speak Out; former Sgt. Matthis Chiroux, of Iraq Veterans Against the War; Don DeBar, Green Party activist and reporter; Larry McGovern, Westchester County Peace and Justice; Jack A. Smith, editor of Hudson Valley

Activist Newsletter; Michael Sussman, Democratic Alliance; Deborah Sweet, World Can't Wait; and Nancy Tsou, Rockland County Peace and Justice.

Following the 45-minute rally, MC Bennett Weiss instructed participants to line up single file for the nearly half-mile silent, candlelight peace walk to the Academy gates. A full moon illuminated the night.

At the gates, demonstrators spontaneously began singing peace songs in subdued and unsure voices, but as the crowds grew the voices became more strident and determined. Individuals, then groups, began chanting "End the War," "Bring them Home Now," "What do you want < Peace. When do you want it < Now!

About 30 protesters sat down on the pavement in front of the gates, and were not removed by police. But when six of them moved to the road, they were arrested and transported to night court.

The Hudson Valley peace movement, as in the rest of the nation, has suffered declines in number in recent years, and particularly after warmaking President George W. Bush left office. Many Democratic voters who opposed Bush's military adventurism have been reluctant to protest against any of Obama's policies, including his enthusiastic support for the Afghan war.

Movement observers believe that after nearly 11 months of Obama's presidency the tide is slowing turning, in good part since it became clear he was going to order a significant increase in U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan. The demonstration in West Point, as well as many protests throughout the country during and after the Dec. 1 speech, appears to be a harbinger of a movement in the process of rebuilding itself.

A test of this thesis will be on Saturday, March 20 < on the sixth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq < when a mass peace demonstration is set for Washington DC, and a number of large cities across America.

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