NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Opposing nuclear weapons plant, activists arrested at city meeting

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 8, 2010

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Activist Brian Terrell questions a witness at his Oct. 7 trial in Kansas City, Mo. in this court sketch. (Mark Bartholomew)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- Yelling that they were ?calling an alarm? in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah, two peace activists were arrested here Oct. 7 for interrupting a city council meeting as they called attention to the construction of a major new nuclear weapons facility on the outskirts of town.

Their acts of civil disobedience were the fourth in five months by protesters opposed to the building of the new weapons plant. They came just moments after the two had been found guilty, along with 12 others, for illegal trespassing last August at the construction site at which they stood in front of an earth moving vehicle and shut down work for more than hour.
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The new plant, which will make nonnuclear parts for nuclear weapons, is set to be the nation?s first new major nuclear weapons production facility in 32 years.

Bishop Robert W. Finn of the Kansas City-Saint Joseph diocese released a statement Sept. 2 asking officials to reconsider the facility?s construction.

Standing up as the council was discussing a street cleaning ordinance, Frank Cordaro and Eddie Bloomer -- both members of the Des Moines, Iowa Catholic Worker community -- unfurled a banner that read ?stop building for nuclear war.? As they stood they yelled that the council should ?start telling the truth? regarding its funding for the plant.

Police immediately removed the two from chamber and placed them under arrest.

As he was being led into an elevator, Cordaro told reporters they were acting in the tradition of Old Testament prophets and ?just doing what the holy men did.?

While Bloomer and Cordaro were moved out of the chamber, a third protester, Ann Suellentrop of Kansas City, Kan., stood inside and read a petition against the building of the plant.

After several minutes, she was led out of the chamber by city council staff. She told reporters her petition had 300 signatures from local community members and asked the council to immediately stop construction on the new facility.

Currently a part of the Bannister Federal Complex, located about 13 miles south of the city?s downtown area, the Kansas City Plant is currently responsible for the production and assembly of approximately 85 percent of the nonnuclear components for the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

The Bannister plant is set to be relocated beginning in 2012 to the new site.

The National Nuclear Security Administration, a division of the U.S. Department of Energy, has stated the new facility will carry an estimated price tag of $673 million for construction and $1.2 billion over the next 20 years.

Away from the action, other activists unfurled signs on three of the local highways leading to the land where the new facility is being constructed. One read, ?Books, not bombs.?

Bloomer and Cordaro were held overnight. As of Oct. 8 they were expected to be set free on probation.

Before the two arrests, all 14 of the activists originally arrested for the August action went on trial on charges of illegal trespass. Six of them accepted a finding of ?technically guilty,? which meant they did not contest the charges. One pleaded guilty outright.

In those seven cases, Municipal Court Judge E.M. Franco did not allow witness testimony or statements from the defendants.

The remaining protesters pleaded ?not guilty? and faced a new trial before Municipal Court Judge Anna J. LaBella.

In that trial the defendants argued, in part, that international law compelled them to speak out against the production of nuclear weapons. One of the defendants, Stephen Clemens, allowed to speak in his own defense, said the Nuremberg Principles, which hold all persons accountable under international law for war crimes, obligated him to call attention to the new weapons facility in order to ensure that a future war crime -- nuclear war -- would be prevented.

Once convicted, each of the 14 activists had a choice as to whether to pay a fine or do community service. Cordaro, Bloomer and Steve Jacobs, a member of the St. Francis House Catholic Worker community in Columbia, Mo., refused to pay the fine or do service.

A cashier for the municipal courthouse informed the three that, unless they changed their minds, a warrant would be issued for their arrest Oct. 17. Jacobs told *NCR* that he ?didn?t want to give money to a municipality that builds weapons of mass destruction.?

The other defendants included Gina Cook and Rachael Hoffman of the Holy Family Catholic Worker House community; Eric Garbison and Josh Armfield of the Cherith Brook Catholic Worker community; Robby Jones of the St. Francis House Catholic Worker community; Brian Terrell of the Strangers and Guests Catholic Worker Farm; Felice Cohen-Joppa; Donna Constantineau; Beth Seberger; and Franciscan Fr. Jerry Zawada. Terrell acted as his own counsel.

[Joshua McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer.]

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Editor's Note: For photographs from the event Aug. 16 for which the activists were found guilty of illegal trespass take a look at the slideshow below.

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