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Undercover police among arrested at SOA vigil

by Joshua J. McElwee



People are taken into custody by Muscogee, Ga., county sheriff's officers near the gates of Fort Benning Nov. 20. (NCR photos/Joshua J. McElwee)

At least one of the 29 persons taken into custody outside Fort Benning during a rally at the annual School of Americas Watch vigil Nov. 20 in Columbus, Ga. was an undercover police officer.

The revelation came as Lauren Stinson, an undercover narcotics agent with the Muscogee, Ga., county sheriff's office, testified in court Nov. 21 that she participated in two meetings with SOA Watch protesters and allowed herself to be rounded up with activists during the rally.

SOA Watch organizers, meanwhile, said Nov. 22 they believed that at least four more of those arrested near the alley leading to the gates of the military institution were also undercover agents.

Backing their allegation, they said, is video taken at the scene of the arrests. SOA Watch organizers said that from the video they can see that five of those taken into custody at the rally were never put in jail and never ended up in court.

Several of those tried for Saturday's action also said they could recognize the missing arrestees on the video as people who attended discussions with organizers before the arrests.

SOA Watch founder Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois expressed anger and frustration at the new revelations.

Said Bourgeois: "They should be ashamed of themselves. They're seeing us as the enemy, when just down the street is this military base that has contributed to a lot of violence."

Center for Constitutional Rights legal director and SOA Watch legal volunteer Bill Quigley said the use of undercover officers seemed like "overkill" and a "waste of taxpayer resources."

"It was probably a great weekend in Georgia to be a drug dealer," said Quigley. "A number of the people in Columbus who would normally be enforcing drug laws were instead talking to priests and nuns and college students about sitting down in a street for 10 minutes."



Saturday's arrests came as activists were concluding a rally at the gates of Fort Benning for the afternoon. Hundreds had gathered at the edge of the alley leading to the military base, facing towards a nearby shopping center while chanting slogans and carrying large puppets made of cardboard.

Police stood directly opposite the activists. As the activity continued, police warned activists that they would be arrested for unlawful gathering if they stepped into the street and out of the designated protest area as a group.

As activists began to leave the rally, SOA Watch organizers say police arrested 29 people in two separate groups.

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One group of 17 people were arrested as they attempted to leave the rally in twos and threes. They were charged with blocking the road and failure to disperse. SOA Watch said no one in this group intended to be arrested.



Included in this group were three journalists with the television network Russia Today: Kaelyn Eckenrade, Jihan Abdel-Hafiz, and Khadja Abdel-Hafiz. The three were taking photos and video of the arrests.

Also included in this group was Curtis Thornton, a resident of Columbus who testified in court Nov. 21 that he worked at a nearby barber shop and had stepped out of his building to take photos of the action when he was arrested.

Another group of 12 people were arrested as they were purposefully blocking the street in an act of civil disobedience. SOA Watch organizers say five people in that group were not put in jail with the other seven and were not charged with any crimes. The remaining seven were charged with blocking the road and failure to disperse.

Twenty-two of the 24 people who were charged with crimes Nov. 20 went before Columbus Recorder's Court Judge Michael Cielinski Nov. 21. Cielinski found 21 of those in that group guilty and ordered them to pay fines between \$1,300 and \$5,500.

The other two people who were charged Nov. 20 -- Jesuit Fr. Bill Brennan and Janice Sevre-Duszynska -- faced trial separately. They went before Georgia State Judge Stephen Smith Nov. 22 and were also found guilty.

Brennan was ordered to pay \$50 in fines; Sevre-Duszynska \$500. Both also received six months probation.

The two faced trial separately because Brennan uses a wheelchair and could not be arrested by police officers at the scene. Sevre-Duszynska, an ordained member of Roman Catholic Womenpriests, was accompanying Brennan at the scene.

Over the weekend four other people were arrested by federal authorities for trespassing onto the Fort Benning military complex in an act of civil disobedience.

Franciscan Fr. Louis Vitale and Nancy Smith walked onto the base Nov. 20. David Omandi, a member of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community, and Christopher Spicer, a member of the White Rose Catholic Worker community in Chicago, climbed over the barbed wire fence located at the main entrance of Fort Benning Nov. 21.

Vitale and Omandi pleaded no contest to charges of trespass in federal court this morning (Nov. 23). U.S. magistrate judge Stephen Hyles sentenced them both to six months in jail. They are currently being held

in Muscogee county jail pending transfer.

Spicer and Smith pleaded not guilty. They were both released on bond with a trial set for Jan. 5.

The arrests came during the annual School of Americas Watch vigil. In its twentieth year, the vigil commemorates the deaths of the Salvadoran Jesuit martyrs and thousands of other Latin Americans with a weekend gathering.

Put together by SOA Watch, an organization which was founded in 1990 by Bourgeois, the annual vigil calls attention to the training of soldiers from Latin America at what used to be called the School of the Americas and is now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, located at Fort Benning.

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Editor's Note: See the slideshow below for photos *NCR* took of the arrests.

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