

Pittsburgh police lock up antiwar protesters for 30 hours

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Below is the account of the experience of some of the 122 protesters in Pittsburgh who were arrested at the end of the March 20 march against the war in Iraq. The account is based on interviews with two of those arrested, Jennifer and Ethan, and confirmed by other accounts published in the press. Both Jennifer and Ethan are librarians at the University of Pittsburgh.

The protest started at 5:00 p.m. and drew nearly 5,000 people. The march went throughout the downtown section and then proceeded across the Monongahela River to the Southside. Throughout the march the police were clearly unprepared and frustrated by both the size of the protest and its general peaceful nature. By 7:30 in the evening, the crowd had dwindled and those remaining had split up into smaller groups as they walked back to where their cars were parked when they were attacked and arrested by police.

The account below is just one example of the anti-democratic measures being taking by the government against those who oppose the war in the United States.

Timeline of events

5-7:30 p.m.: During the march downtown, the several thousand marchers swelled the streets and forced traffic to wait until they had passed. Around 6:45 after marching throughout downtown they headed for the Southside. Once on the Southside, however, the police, decked out in riot gear and accompanied by rottweilers and German shepherds, shouted through loud speakers that anyone who stepped in the street would be arrested. By this point, the number of marchers had been reduced, and they were able to stay on the sidewalks. However, one police officer grabbed a woman marcher and yanked her into the street so that he could arrest her.

7:30 p.m.: Not being freely able to march through the Southside, the marchers returned to downtown and began dispersing. They were actually finished marching and were merely returning to where their cars were parked so they could go home. The police blocked the marchers from walking along the main street and forced them onto a narrow side street.

Police cars appeared in front of them, behind them and to the left and right. Police officers in riot gear were screaming, "Disperse! Disperse!" but the marchers had nowhere to go. Several did try to disperse but were beaten back; Jennifer saw one officer, who was screaming "Get back!" striking with hard plastic riot handcuffs the people who were attempting to follow the directives of the other officers to disperse.

"The cops stormed us," said Ethan. "And we thought it's better to get away and then in a second we were trapped and could not walk anywhere."

Several people were thrown to the ground and then punched and kicked by the police. Jennifer witnessed the police beating a young man, and when a woman (Jennifer thought she was approximately 4'11" and weighed less than 100 pounds) yelled, "Don't hurt him, Don't hurt him," the officers grabbed her and threw her against a brick wall. At this point, the woman demanded to speak to an attorney, to which one officer

responded by grabbing her by the neck and twisting her head around and smashing her against a wall.

Ethan told a policeman he was going to his car to go home, and the policeman waved his club, and Ethan stepped back and did not move, but continued to repeat to him again that he was going home while he continued waving the club. "I turned around and I was shoved to the wall with raised hands, like everyone else. They were pushing people against the wall on top of each other, and people kept screaming that they could not breathe. We were cooperating."

Approximately 7:45 p.m.: Within minutes of the marchers being cornered and handcuffed, two Port Authority buses were commandeered. All the passengers were forced to get off and the bus driver was directed to pick up the handcuffed marchers and drive them to jail. Jennifer noticed that one of the patrol cars had its trunk open, and within it were hundreds of riot cuffs. "It was clear that this whole thing was premeditated."

Despite being ambushed by riot-gear-clad officers, the people were very calm and cooperative, said Jennifer. Nevertheless, as she was climbing onto the bus a female officer shoved her roughly in the back.

Ethan witnessed an undercover police officer among the marchers passing himself off as "CMU faculty" approach an Iranian man who was there with his 15-year-old son. The undercover officer asked them, "What are you doing? How is it going? Where are you from?" The Iranian man said that he was in the protest, about to go home and that he is from Iran. As soon as he said that, the undercover agent called police and arrested them immediately. His son was taken to the juvenile jail. In jail, Ethan saw him being interrogated by several plainclothes detectives. In a clear attempt to intimidate him, he was shown pictures of himself at the march that they had taken that day and had already developed. The police asked repeatedly if he was one of the organizers.

Approximately 8:30 p.m.: Once in the jail, the marchers each had their picture taken and their belongings were confiscated. Each person was subjected to a full body search, said Jennifer. "I had to take off my coat, put my arms up against the wall, spread my legs; they patted my whole body, every place.... I couldn't believe that they were doing this. It was so intrusive and violating."

Later, in her cell, which Jennifer shared with four other women, she heard many more stories of police brutality. One of her cellmates was actually not a protester, but an ACLU observer who had been present at the march. She had witnessed many civil rights violations committed by the police, and had asked one officer for his badge number. The officer responded, "It is time for you to leave." The ACLU woman again demanded to have the officer's badge number—which he refused to provide, although legally obligated to do so. Instead, he responded by throwing *her* to the ground. Jennifer observed that the woman had scrapes on her face and stomach and that her ACLU shirt was scuffed up and dirty from contact with the pavement.

The ACLU has issued a formal complaint about the treatment of their observer. The police had been notified that she would be there; she was

wearing a white T-shirt identifying her as an observer and she followed all instructions of the police. When she was arrested, four police officers threw her to the ground on her face.

Another woman in the cell had had a bicycle thrown at her by an officer. Fortunately, she had been able to jump out of the way and was only struck by the tire.

Ethan was placed in a cell with 30 other men it had a “filthy floor, three benches and a toilet.”

From approximately 10 p.m. Thursday to 3 a.m. Saturday: From the moment they were placed in their cells until their release almost 30 hours later, the protesters were subjected to continuous harassment and abuse by the police.

The women were subjected to constant verbal abuse, as well as sleep deprivation techniques bordering on torture:

* They were never told that they were under arrest and were never read their rights. In fact, one of the officers stated, “You’re in jail—you have no rights.” Consequently, it was not until their arraignment 20 hours later that they were told what they were being charged with: “Obstructing Public Passageways” and “Failing to Disperse.”

* The police officers in the prison showered them with verbal abuse, calling them, among other things, “f—ers,” “white trash,” “spoiled brats” and “cowards.”

* The cell was brightly lit by a large fluorescent light 24 hours a day. In addition, there was only a metal bench—no beds, chairs or cots—which meant that the women were forced to either stand or sit on the dirty concrete floor.

* Several of the marchers, who were either suffering from medical problems or had been injured by police, were denied medical treatment until Friday afternoon. One of those arrested was suffering from a bleeding ulcer, and the nurse who saw her on Friday, March 21 said, “By our standards you should have been hospitalized immediately after you were brought in.” Nevertheless, the woman was still in jail until midnight Friday, more than 28 hours after being arrested. One of those arrested was a diabetic and needed insulin. The police took away his medication and would not give it to him despite his several requests. When he began to suffer an attack, he had to be taken to a hospital.

* If at any time some of the inmates attempted to sleep, the prison guards and officers would utilize a number of techniques to keep them awake. These included turning a television up to play broadcasts of the bombing of Baghdad, banging on the wall of the cell and shouting, “Wake up! There is no sleeping in jail!” Verbally abusing them, they made a number of comments over the loudspeaker ranging from the mocking, “Do you ladies have everything you need?”—to the vaguely threatening—“I see dead people”—to the overtly threatening—“Any of you protesters who are in here are going to be locked up for a long time.”

* Because those arrested had their belongings taken away from them, and because the cell had nothing more than one roll of toilet paper, which was lying on the ground when they entered, they were in need of items such as sanitary napkins. One woman asked a female jailer to bring her some, and a few minutes later a male jailer appeared with a bag full of tampons and pads. Smiling, he opened the bag and dumped them all over the dirty concrete floor, saying, “Merry Christmas.”

* At one point during the night, a male jailer peeked into the cell and said, “Did you hear what happened to those Iraqi women protesters during the first Gulf war? They were all killed.”

In a further attempt to make the women as uncomfortable as possible, the cell they were in was facing a holding cell for men who had been brought in on charges such as drinking and driving, and who had nothing to do with the demonstration. The wall facing the men’s cell was plexiglas or some other transparent substance, meaning that every time one of the women needed to use the toilet, the other four would have to form a wall around her, to prevent the men from seeing her.

During the day and a half of their stay in the jail, they were fed three times. Breakfast consisted of a small bowl of corn flakes with milk; lunch consisted of a very small soggy bologna and American cheese sandwich, two cookies and an orange drink; dinner consisted of another soggy bologna and American cheese sandwich, one cookie and an orange drink.

Ethan and the 30 men with him in the cell faced similar conditions. When protesters asked for water they were told to “shut the f— up.” Police threatened to break the arms and fingers of any protester who held up a peace sign and none were given any food until 10 a.m. the next day.

Ethan was released around 7 p.m. on Friday, the following day, more than 23 hours after being arrested. Jennifer was not released until 3:00 a.m. on Saturday after spending 30 hours in jail.

Jennifer’s family made two trips to the jail to attempt to help her, and were brushed off with lies on both occasions. The first time they were told that they could not pay the bond because she had not been arraigned yet, and because the computers were down. This was at 6:30 p.m.; she had been arraigned at 4 p.m. The claim about the computers being down was similarly false, as her family could see that people were working on the computers. (In fact, some other marchers were released at 7:30 p.m., so the computers must have been functioning.)

The second time, at 11 p.m., they were able to post bail for Jennifer but were told that it would be several hours before she was released.

Finally, at 3 a.m. Saturday morning, Jennifer and the other women were released. More accurately, they were pitched out onto the sidewalk, and without their belongings. Throughout their stay they had been promised that their belongings would be returned to them upon release. However their things were moved to a police station and could only be obtained Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. until 3 p.m.

Fortunately for them, there were several people outside the jail who were protesting the arrest of the marchers. These people were able to give them some food and provide a ride home. However, without their keys many, including Jennifer, had to wait out the night in order to contact their landlords/building managers to let them into their apartments.

Despite all of the techniques employed by the police during this grueling period, the marchers were able keep each others’ spirits up and even engaged in discussions on what was taking place. According to Jennifer, all of the women in her cell saw the direct connection between the police-state measures being employed and the Bush administration’s unleashing of imperialist war in Iraq.



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