

Police fire rubber bullets at anti-war protesters in California

A WSWWS reporter
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Port of Oakland police on Monday fired rubber bullets and tear gas at antiwar protesters who were picketing shipping companies involved in transporting war materials for the US invasion of Iraq.

According to an Associated Press report, at least six demonstrators and six longshoremen were injured. The longshoremen were standing between the police and the picket line. International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 Business Agent Jack Heyman was arrested together with 24 protesters.

The demonstrators were picketing the gates of American Presidential Lines (APL) and Stevedoring Services of America (SSA). The latter container shipping company had been singled out as a war profiteer by the San Francisco group Direct Action to Stop the War.

The police fired so-called non-lethal projectiles, including bean bags, wooden dowels and devices known as “sting balls” that spray BB-sized rubber bullets. These projectiles leave bruises and welts on the skin. The wooden bullets are designed to swell to the size of a doorknob as they fly through the air, leaving football-sized bruises on victims when fired at close range.

Police also used concussion grenades to disperse the crowd. According to one description, these devices create a temporary physiological and psychological response by burning the back of the retina, forcing the victim to hesitate and become disorientated.

Oakland City Council members called for an investigation of the incident.

Deputy Police Chief Patrick Haw later claimed that some of the protesters threw rocks and iron bolts at the cops. Longshoremen and some city officials at the scene rejected the claim.

A dockworker who witnessed the attack wrote on an

ILWU Internet bulletin board: “If I sound a little emotional and hot-headed, well, I was there. I saw a young woman beside me, who was doing nothing provocative, get hit by a wooden bullet. I saw the cops firing concussion rounds for no reason.

“When they attacked us at the SSA gate they gave a ‘three minute warning’ to disperse, and 60 seconds later opened fire. I saw a man with a head wound from one of these projectiles laying on the ground in pain, between two cops, and not receiving any medical attention. I saw a young man, with welts and gashes on his back, from these rounds.”

One of the protesters, Damien McAnany, described the Oakland police as “being the most aggressive of any department I’ve seen in the Bay Area since the war began.” Angry ILWU members left the docks following the incident. “They shot my guys,” said a business agent for the union. “We’re not going to work today. The cops had no reason to open up on them.”

A *Contra Costa Times* article quoted City Councilwoman Jane Brunner as she stood near an injured protester who had a bloody welt on his back that had swelled to the size of a softball. “It’s pretty upsetting to see these big welts,” she said, and added, “We have to investigate this. According to the police chief, a protester threw a rock. My question is: even if one or two people have been disruptive, do you go in like that with that kind of force in a demonstration?”

“I was there from 5 a.m. on, and the only violence that I saw was from the police,” said Joel Tena, the constituent liaison for Oakland Vice Mayor Nancy Nadel. “What happened today was very surprising. It seemed the police were operating under the assumption that they were not going to let any kind of protest happen.”

APL is a subsidiary of Neptune Orient Lines and a

carrier of military cargo. SSA recently won a \$4.8 million contract to manage the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr, where stevedores get paid 25 cents a day.

California police have become increasingly violent and repressive since the US assault on Iraq began on March 20. In the first two days of the war, San Francisco police arrested over 1,300 demonstrators. In Los Angeles one officer was caught on videotape swinging his baton wildly at protesters.

Monday's operation by the Oakland Police Department had the characteristics of a pre-planned military operation. Two dozen motorcycle officers herded the protestors into a side street. A line of patrol officers standing behind the motorcycle cops fired into the fleeing crowd of demonstrators. Some of the protesters were hit repeatedly with tear gas canisters and beanbag bullets.

The Port of Oakland picket line was the largest of several antiwar activities held Monday in the Bay Area of California. Arrests also took place at the Concord Naval Weapons Station and at a blocked-off freeway ramp in San Francisco.



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