

Oakland residents demand accounting of police attack on antiwar protest

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Hundreds of citizens of Oakland, California jammed a City Council meeting on Tuesday, April 8 to protest the violent police attack on an antiwar demonstration the day before that left scores of demonstrators injured. Chanting, “Shame, shame,” the Oakland residents showed their outrage over the attack and demanded an investigation. Sri Louise, a pacifist, who was struck by a wooden bullet that left her with a softball-sized welt on her jaw, told council members they had a responsibility to investigate police conduct.

“I, for one, will not settle for anything less than an absolutely thorough investigation into what happened,” she said. Referring to the large welt on her cheek, she said, “You might have seen it; it’s been all over the world. The entire world is watching what Oakland will do.”

There is every indication that the police attack on demonstrators at the Port of Oakland was pre-planned and totally unprovoked by the protesters. Eyewitness reports from several sources indicate that when the police attacked the demonstrators there had been no acts of violence and no acts of civil disobedience. No traffic was being blocked in or out of the port.

The 500 people there were exercising their First Amendment right to protest the role being played by American President Line (APL) and the Stevedoring Services of America (SSA) in the current war on Iraq. The reports also indicate that the demonstrators were already moving away from the APL gate when the Oakland Police Department (OPD) attacked them, at close range.

Police repression of antiwar demonstrators has been on an increase since the US war on Iraq began on March 20. The focus of Monday’s police attack was the International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU). The attack on protesters by the OPD on April 7 reveals

the concern by the White House and the ruling elite that sections of the working class will play a more active role in the antiwar movement. Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown, himself a veteran of Vietnam-era protests and of recent demonstrations at the docks, closed ranks with the police and applauded their methods against the demonstration and the workers. Both shipping companies have long-standing connections with the White House.

On April 7 at 5 a.m., 500 antiwar protesters set up a picket line at the Port of Oakland, with the expectation that longshore workers would not cross. The antiwar positions of many members of ILWU Local 10 were well known—many of them have regularly participated in recent demonstrations in San Francisco and Oakland. When ILWU members arrived at the picket line, they were instructed by union officials not to enter the APL dock, pending an arbitrator’s decision that the picket line constituted a safety hazard, a finding that, under the current contract, would have allowed them not to load cargo for APL or SSA.

Despite having been informed by the organizers of the protest that no civil disobedience was planned and traffic would not be blocked, the OPD sent riot-equipped forces that set themselves up in a military formation, a “skirmish line,” in OPD terminology. With little or no warning, the police formation charged the picket line with so called non-lethal weapons—beanbags, wooden bullets, tear gas and concussion grenades.

Every on-the-scene report indicates that the police attack was totally unprovoked. Police were seen deliberately running over protesters with their motorcycles and shooting protesters at very close range. Ms. Louise was shot in the face with a wooden bullet as she complied with police commands; another protester

was shot nine times with rubber and wooden bullets. Many of the injured protesters were shot in the back, clearly indicating that they were moving away from the police when they were hit, while concussion grenades exploded over their heads.

Although the OPD and the mayor now claim that the demonstrators threw rocks, there is no credible evidence that the police were attacked at all. On the contrary, the protesters were complying with police demands when they were attacked. About 50 protesters and nine dockworkers reported injuries, including large welts and bruises to the back, chest, neck and face. Ten demonstrators went to the hospital.

The members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union shot by the police were standing by at a safe distance, awaiting a determination from the arbitrator. Five ILWU members had to be taken to the hospital, with one member requiring surgery on his thumb. When a business agent of ILWU Local 10 approached OPD officers to complain about the shooting of the workers he was dragged from his car, thrown onto the pavement, handcuffed and arrested. March organizers who demanded to know from the police what laws were being broken were threatened with arrest.

After having chased the demonstrators away, OPD officers intimidated longshore workers into entering the APL and SSA gates without an arbitrator's ruling. As the OPD rock-throwing claim began to unravel, a spokesman for the police charged the protesters with engaging in an "aggressive stance."

On other occasions dockworkers have refused to cross picket lines not officially sanctioned by the union. In 1997, in solidarity with striking dockworkers in Liverpool, longshore workers refused to cross a picket line to unload the Neptune Jade ship. Then Democratic Party mayoral candidate Jerry Brown participated in that protest, which successfully forced the Neptune Jade to leave Oakland. Brown also participated in the defense campaign on behalf of those being sued by the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) over that job action. He now asserts that he won't tolerate shutdowns at the port.

"Groups were coming to take over the port, all right, now that's not acceptable," Brown told Reuters. "Police in the line of fire there reacted in the best way they know how. You've got some pretty violent people

there, those fellows who put on black masks and picked up big rocks. One guy took a slab of concrete and threw it at one of the officers," the mayor added. City officials at the scene reported no rock throwing and have contradicted Brown's allegations. Joel Tena, a staff member for Oakland Vice Mayor Nancy Nadel, said, "I was there from 5 a.m. on, and the only violence that I saw was from the police."

APL has a long-standing relationship with the US military. It is part of the Maritime Security Program, which makes privately owned ships available to the US military when needed. In 2002 it received nearly \$57 million from the Defense Department. Seattle-base SSA received \$2.1 million from the Defense Department last year. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reports SSA was given a contract to assess the condition of the Umm Qasr port in Iraq and to run it for a year.

The docks are crucial in Washington's war effort. The White House made clear where it stood last summer when it threatened to call out troops against the ILWU in the event of a strike, claiming that a work stoppage would endanger national security.

The dockers ended up being locked out by the employers' association, the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) for 10 days. One of the more intransigent members of the PMA in that dispute was the SSA itself, a notorious antiunion company. President Bush then imposed the Taft-Hartley act, with bipartisan support. The attack on the Oakland protesters is an ominous warning to the antiwar movement that the ruling class is prepared to severely limit and aggressively punish the right to protest, particularly when it involves powerful sections of the working class.



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