

Marine exercise in Toledo, Ohio: an attack on democratic rights

Charles Bogle
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On Friday, February 8, a five-bus convoy transported 200 members of Company A, 1st Battalion, 24th Marines, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to Toledo, Ohio, for three days of patrol exercises in the central downtown area.

Using the nearly abandoned Madison Building on Madison Avenue as headquarters, the company of Marines, carrying M16 rifles and wearing camouflage uniforms, planned to drive military vehicles through the city streets and carry out foot patrols, engaging in mock gunfights and ambushes with blank ammunition.

A member of the company, Sergeant Davis, had driven ahead of the convoy, but when he arrived downtown and stepped out of his vehicle at approximately 3:20 p.m. (when school children were being bused through the city), he was told by a city employee that Toledo Mayor Carty Finkbeiner wanted him and his soldiers to pack up their equipment and leave by 6 p.m.

The mayor subsequently declared that he had not even been notified of the Marine deployment, and learned of it only through Toledo's major newspaper, the *Blade*, on the day of their arrival.

Sergeant Davis agreed and, after a brief stop at a Marine base in nearby Perrysburg, Ohio, he and the rest of the company returned to their Grand Rapids, Michigan, base.

According to Brian Schwartz, the mayor's spokesperson, Mayor Finkbeiner took this action because armed Marines patrolling city streets "frighten people" ("Mayor to Marines, Leave downtown," the *Blade*, 9 February 2008). In 2006, the same Marines battalion trained in downtown Toledo, and the mayor said that at that time he "saw the military with guns drawn emulating warfare, and I observed the expressions of citizens who happened to just be coming down the sidewalk that particular Saturday noon in wonderment, asking, 'What have I found myself in the middle of?'" The mayor added that he saw looks of "wonderment" and "fear" on the

faces of these citizens.

In deciding not to allow the Marine Battalion to patrol the streets of Toledo, Mayor Finkbeiner was asserting the US constitutional principle of civilian authority over the military.

While the mayor has stated that he had no advance notice of the planned Marine exercise, the Toledo police knew several days in advance of the battalion's plans, and had issued press releases to media outlets on behalf of the Marines, urging "Toledoans not be startled by the sight of camouflaged soldiers toting M16 rifles."

The only official reason given for not informing the mayor of the Marines' visit relates to the 2006 exercise. At that time, the battalion's exercises drew protests from the downtown citizens and an order from Mayor Finkbeiner to then police chief Jack Smith (a former Marine) that "he did not want the Marines back." Police Chief Smith "took his run-in with the mayor as an objection to that last visit [2006] and not future training in Toledo," according to a February 8 article in the *Blade*.

Bypassing the authority of the Toledo mayor to exercise civilian authority over the military constitutes an attack on basic democratic rights, an attack that must be understood within the context of the utilization of the "war on terror" as a pretext for imposing draconian economic and social conditions on American working people and erecting the institutional framework for police-state forms of rule.

The danger of police-military repression has grown apace with the economic slide into recession and the social crisis fueled by the collapse in the housing market and the growing wave of home foreclosures. There can be little doubt that exercises such as that planned by the Marines in downtown Toledo are directed far more against the American population than against foreign or domestic terrorists. The question posed is: are such military exercises in major US urban areas dry runs for measures to be taken in the event of widespread social

unrest?

Given its deteriorating economic environment, Toledo offers the distinct possibility of such unrest. The official Toledo unemployment rate is 6.4 percent, 1.5 percent above the national rate. Overall, the Toledo poverty rate, as of 2006, is 22.7 percent, while 31 percent of Toledo Public Schools students live in poverty. Since 2000, the number of manufacturing jobs has fallen by 22.6 percent, and, according to the Toledo homeless planning and advocacy community, 2,785 Toledoans experienced homelessness during the past year. With several more manufacturing sites due to close this year and the city foreclosure rate among the top 20 nationally, social tensions will only worsen.

Toledo also has a history of explosive labor struggles. The most famous, the Toledo Electric Auto-Lite strike in 1934, was called by the workers for the right to be recognized and bargain as a union. At one rally, hundreds of picketers and supporters were injured while two were killed by the Ohio National Guard. Ultimately, the striking workers won reinstatement and their local won recognition as a legitimate bargaining agent. In 2006, the *Blade's* lengthy lockout of 650 members of the Toledo Newspaper Guild included a successful rally against the employer's use of a union-busting law firm, even though the locked-out employees were surrounded by police officers in riot gear and police helicopters circling overhead.

Military exercises in cities other than Toledo have been carried out as supposed anti-terrorist exercises. The same Marines battalion that visited Toledo has engaged in similar exercises in urban areas of Florida, a state also being hit hard by the present economic crisis. Also, the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, Camp Pendleton, California, have taken part in "urban assault training" in parts of Arizona ("The Marines land in Arizona: Units engaged in urban assault training exercises," www.worldnetdaily.com), a state with a growing Mexican immigrant population that is experiencing declining economic conditions.

For 2008, US Northern Command has announced an anti-terrorism exercise called Vigilant Shield 2008 to prepare the US for terrorist or natural disaster scenarios. These exercises, making domestic use of the US military including the US Air Force, will take place in Portland, Oregon, Phoenix, Arizona, and the Territory of Guam. Tellingly, part of the thinking behind these exercises is that if a terrorist incident were to take place and Iran were to be blamed for the attack, the military could be used

against antiwar agitation in the US ("Vigilant Shield 2008," www.globalresearch.ca).

One Toledo city employee told this reporter that a Homeland Security grant to the city's police department is rumored to be coming due. The same employee also spoke of the growing militarism of police departments, both locally and nationally. As an example, he noted the fact that Toledo police offices have been receiving M16s, which are then converted to semi-automatic weapons.

Political attacks on Mayor Finkbeiner underscore the increasing weight of the military on civilian affairs. On February 13, the Toledo City Council, composed of Democrats and Republicans, voted unanimously to go over the Democratic mayor's head and approve a resolution apologizing to the Marine battalion for the mayor's action. Preceding the vote, one of the council members, former Marine John Schaub, stated, "We are at war and no one seems to understand that, so we should be rolling out the red carpet for these kids so they can be trained." Another council member, D. Michael Collins, called the situation "an embarrassment for the city," according to the *Blade*.

The mainstream media's role in this and similar incidents is to stifle dissent. Alongside the Toledo story, which has focused on the mayor's lack of patriotism and unwillingness to apologize to the Marines, print and visual media have been covering a story that began January 29, when the City Council in Berkeley, California passed a resolution opposing US Marine Corps recruitment in the city.

A right-wing campaign ensued, including efforts by lawmakers to withdraw federal funding from the city and decisions by business reporters to boycott Berkeley. This assault—echoed by favorable reports in the media—has been aimed at sending a clear message to the general population that a heavy price will be attached to any form of dissent. In the face of the right-wing campaign against their actions, the City Council made a hasty and cowardly retreat.



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