

Occupy Albany encampment brutally attacked by police

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On Thursday, in a pattern that has been repeated across the country, police staged a violent attack on Occupy Albany protesters. Mounted police used pepper spray against peaceful demonstrators and brutally tore down the last of the occupation's tents.

The Occupy Albany protesters had been encamped in city-owned Academy Park, located between City Hall and the State Capitol, for two months. In contrast to the situation at many such occupations, the Democratic city administration had taken a relatively benign approach to the demonstrators, despite the fact that Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo had made clear his great displeasure at its being allowed to continue. Liberal politicians and the occupiers themselves had proclaimed that this was a model of how such protests could be handled.

The encampment had grown to approximately 80 tents and the participants staged a number of rallies and demonstrations against income inequality and other consequences of the economic crisis. In particular, they had focused on the impending expiration of the state's so-called millionaires' tax, a position that especially enraged Cuomo.

Two weeks ago the city's attitude changed, not coincidentally at the same time as the state's passage of a tax "reform" which in fact provided a big tax cut to the wealthy. (See "New York governor packages tax cut for rich as 'reform'") Under the pretext of concern over the demonstrators' health and safety in winter conditions, the city first demanded a substantial reduction in the occupation's facilities and then set a December 22 deadline for complete removal of the camp.

Over the last few weeks, protesters engaged in repeated negotiations with city officials in an attempt to achieve a compromise that would have allowed the maintenance of at least a token presence in the park through the winter. The city's answer came on Thursday, based on a court order obtained that morning behind the backs of the Occupy attorneys. In mid-afternoon, city workers began dismantling the remaining tents. Protesters did not resist the removal of sleeping tents, and actually took down some themselves. But

they were determined to defend two larger tents used for public information and other activities.

Under a heavy police presence, the first of the two tents was taken down. However, the second tent was ringed by protesters who vowed to risk arrest if necessary to defend it.

One of the protesters, Jasmine Shea, expressed her determination. "I think it's ridiculous that Cuomo's kicking us out. I've lived in Albany longer than Cuomo has. I consider this my park. It's my tax dollars that come to this. I'm here to tell Cuomo and everyone else that we're going to stay here until we finally get heard. If that means I've got to get arrested, then I apologize to my grandma."

Regarding Cuomo's recent tax "reform" and the governor's determination to remove the Occupy Albany encampment before the coming budget battle, Jasmine said, "If he doesn't want us here [Academy Park] then I'm sure as hell going to be in there [the State Capitol]."

She had a message for Cuomo, "Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned and I'm a woman scorned. So watch out Cuomo, I'm coming after you for my money back, for my job, and for my town to be put back to where it was in the glory days."

Another demonstrator, Akhtab, described the government's motivation for the coming attack. He said that at a time when state and local governments are working on tax cuts for the rich and budget cuts they do not want visible opposition from protest movements such as Occupy Albany. "They can see that the Occupy people ain't going to shut up. So, what they [the government] have got to do is to bring down the hammer ... to exterminate the movement."

As the police moved in to take the second tent, the protesters suddenly changed tactics. They picked up the tent and paraded it around the city's downtown and the working class neighborhood of Arbor Hill, symbolically occupying the city as a whole.

Significant support was expressed by those who witnessed the procession. The WSWs interviewed Anthony as the protesters passed through Arbor Hill. Regarding the Occupy movement, he said, “The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer and they [the Occupy protesters] have every right to be out here. There’s a cause. There’s a reason for the demonstration. Our government needs to cater more to the unprivileged, those who are less fortunate.

“I think the Democrats and Republicans represent themselves. Their pockets are continuously getting fatter as our pockets are getting smaller. So the demonstrators are doing what they should be doing. The taxpayers bailed out the banks—billions and billions of dollars—so it’s only right that the Republicans and Democrats put back to the people that put in.”

During the parade the police stopped traffic and allowed the procession to move unhindered. When the protesters returned to Academy Park, however, the situation changed dramatically. Police, including two mounted officers, converged, blocking in the protesters. They violently wrested the tent from the occupiers, tearing it to shreds. At least six protesters were pepper sprayed and four were arrested.

The WSWs spoke with several of the demonstrators after the attack.

Jasmine Shea, who had been interviewed earlier, said, “When the police came to take the tent away we put it back up. A random photographer, who was just taking photos, just took my wrist and says, ‘If you touch that again, I’ll break it.’ I have no idea who he is. I went back to grab the tent when the police were taking it, had one officer come behind me, push me, rip my arm off [of the tent], and so I literally went flying to the ground. I was shoved by a police officer. I didn’t get pepper sprayed. We literally were just holding the tent and they came and ripped it from us, and that’s just rude and disrespectful.”

There was no prior warning. “There was no violence,” Jasmine said. She said none of the protesters swung first. “They just started coming in and we started trying to walk a different way and the cops came in and took it away from us.”

Another protester, Dan Kelly, gave the following account of the attack:

“What I saw was a big information tent that had been removed by protesters earlier today. They carried it out of here. They brought it back and set it down on the ground in

the park. We started to convene a general assembly. That wasn’t going so well so we just had a speak-out and people were making speeches.

“Then all of a sudden mounted police came riding up. A couple of them came behind this tent, tried to yank it away from people. And all of a sudden police came from every end. It was a mounted cop on a white horse; he pulled out a bottle of pepper spray.

“I started yelling repeatedly ‘pepper spray, pepper spray’ to alert everybody so they’d know enough to duck. Then he started spraying it indiscriminately into the crowd. There was no need for that. Nobody was threatening him or anybody else. Then they ripped the tent away from us, tore it up into shreds, which was also uncalled for.”

“Yeah, we were angry,” Dan added. “We were down there demonstrating on the sidewalk, yelling. I think it’s ok for us to stand on the sidewalk and yell. And then that same cop on horseback started spraying everybody in the crowd indiscriminately with pepper spray again. I got a little bit of it on the right side of my face, a little bit in my nose and mouth. Fortunately, my glasses kept it from going in my eyes.

“When they were yanking the tent away one guy got hit in the head pretty hard with one of the metal bars in the tent. There was no need for them to yank it away like that, knocking somebody out. And then a young guy, I’m not sure what his name was, he got hit really hard with pepper spray in the face. He went into some kind of seizure or something. He was either having a bad reaction to it or I don’t know what.

“He was lying on the ground, having extreme difficulty breathing. The police refused to call paramedics or an ambulance. So people in the crowd had to do it. They would have left him on the ground to die.”



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