Occupy DC: Police arrest 31, demolish protest structure

Our correspondents
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Police in Washington, DC, arrested 31 people at a protest camp Sunday, after authorities claimed that a temporary wooden structure erected by Occupy DC was illegal.

The shed, built by demonstrators the day before as a meeting place, required a permit, police claimed. Christened the "People's Pentagon" by protesters, the structure was built of prefabricated pieces in the span of a few hours. It lacked a foundation, was moveable, and protesters sought to meet city codes on other aspects of its construction.

When Occupy DC protesters refused to dismantle the structure, officers of the US Parks Police, a federal agency whose jurisdiction includes much of the green space in the District of Columbia, descended on the camp.

Police on horseback entered the encampment, where scores of demonstrators have camped for several weeks, while officers on foot dragged protesters out of the temporary structure. Efforts to demolish the building were hampered for several hours as protesters scaled the roof and refused police demands to climb down.

Indicating that the police raid was well planned and coordinated with Washington Metropolitan Police and city officials, the streets around the camp in McPherson Square were closed with barriers and police tape during the standoff. Protesters chanted "Put the pepper spray away!" and "This is a non-violent movement!" as police moved in.

Fifteen demonstrators were charged with crossing a police line, and another 16 with disobeying a lawful police instruction. Most of those detained were fined $100 and released, while the structure was eventually demolished with forklifts by police. The rest of the Occupy DC camp, just a few blocks from the White House, is still in place.

One Occupy DC protester, Nathan Moore, a student at a nearby community college, spoke to the WSWS about the police raid on McPherson Square:

"The architecture was created mainly to shelter people from the elements during the winter, so that general assemblies could be held out of the cold. Due to the onset of winter there has been a lot of discussion on what to do at these protests in order to deal with hypothermia, the elements, and things like that. This attack, like the other assaults on protestors, is an attempt to make the Occupy protests not stick through winter."

Nathan added, "I feel like these attacks and criticisms about the 'dangerousness' of these protests are an attempt to take concentration off the actual issues people are protesting about."

The nation's capital has epidemic levels of homelessness and a dire shortage of shelter beds. From the beginning of the Occupy protest in D.C. two months ago, homelessness and foreclosures have been central concerns among the participants. Three weeks ago, 13 protesters were arrested after occupying the Franklin School, a facility opened in 1869 and run as a homeless shelter until the city shut it down in 2008. Protesters had demanded it be reopened to meet rising social need.

Camp organizers announced that they plan to re-erect a structure that meets police approval. Claiming that the police were solely concerned with public safety, Parks Police spokesman David Schlosser told the media that Occupy protesters, "would be best served by working with the National Park Service."

However, the arrests in Washington are the latest manifestation of a nationwide crackdown on Occupy Wall Street protests. Police have attacked and arrested

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hundreds of protesters at encampments across the US, with local officials dismantling camps in public squares and university campuses.

On Saturday, police forcibly evicted protesters encamped in Portland, Oregon, tearing down tents and beating peaceful occupants, including a 15-year-old boy. (See “Police arrest 19 Occupy Portland protesters ”.) Protesters in Boston are facing the prospects of an aggressive police response to plans to winterize their camp with a large cold weather tent that was donated to the movement by a homeless man.

Asked what direction the Occupy movement should take in response to the bipartisan attacks on the protest camps, Nathan said:

“I agree that we need a political turn towards the working class and break from the Democrats. Many people at Occupy DC are saying they will vote for Obama simply because there is nowhere else to turn. I simply refuse to vote because it solves nothing. The sooner a real workers alternative appears, the better.”

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