

Occupy Tampa activist released from jail after protests

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Occupy Tampa member and volunteer firefighter Tim Sommers was released December 22 by Hillsborough County Court Judge James Dominguez after spending several days in jail for allegedly violating the terms of his release for a prior arrest. Sommers was arrested both times while participating with the Occupy Tampa protest in public parks.

The first time Sommers was arrested, on November 6, he and seven others were released without bond. On December 1, 29 people, including Sommers, were arrested after police demanded they leave a public park. When protesters insisted on their right to free speech, officers charged them with trespassing in the park after hours. The December 1 incident nearly doubled the number of people arrested during the several months of the Occupy Tampa protest.

When Sommers appeared before Judge Dominguez December 20, the latter revoked the firefighter's bond and ordered him to jail. A spokesman for the state attorney's office, Mark Cox, claimed that Sommers had "reoffended." Asked if he were ready to go to trial, Sommers requested more time to find an attorney. Judge Dominguez denied his request and informed Sommers that he would be assigned a public defender for his trial which would take place on March 13, 2012. In the meantime, Sommers would be held without bond.

Sommers' fellow Occupy protestors were furious. In discussions on the Occupy Tampa Facebook page Judge Dominguez's telephone number was supplied to those who wanted to express their anger. Others debated whether the judge was right to hold Sommers

for three months without bond.

On Thursday, Sommers was given a hearing to appeal the judge's decision. Occupy Tampa activists marched together down Twiggs Street to the courthouse wearing custom-made t-shirts declaring "Free Tim Sommers" beneath a photograph of the young man's face. Upon arriving outside the courtroom, however, Sommers' mother requested that the group remove their shirts lest they influence Judge Dominguez in a negative fashion.

Inside the room, all of the seats were full, mostly with Occupy Tampa protestors. Nine others awaited their hearings along with Sommers, all in orange jumpsuits. Judge Dominguez asked Sommers to stand first.

Judge Dominguez claimed that only five minutes after Sommers' exit from the courtroom on Tuesday, his intention had been to release Sommers two days later. Dominguez further asserted that the flood of angry telephone calls to his office by Occupy Tampa protestors and others had nearly made him reconsider that decision.

"Where is the only place in the universe that you will not be?" Judge Dominguez asked Sommers.

"In any Tampa area park," Sommers replied.

In the courtroom next door, an additional hearing was going on concerning another Occupy Tampa protestor, Daquari Jones. While Jones was released in a similar fashion to Sommers, his judge demagogically warned him: "100,000 people have died for your right to protest, not for your right to break the law."

The December 1 arrests were the latest in a series of actions by authorities in response to the Occupy Tampa protest movement. Protesters have been sleeping on the pavement outside the Tampa Museum of Art on Ashley Drive. Members report that police often harass them late at night, with helicopters hovering overhead and bright spotlights flashed in their faces.

One Occupy activist reports that two weeks ago a group of police officers requested that he remove a case of water bottles from the ground, but when he placed them on a nearby platform while he waited for a friend to bring a car around to remove them, the police officers aggressively handcuffed him and mocked him while other protesters cleaned up the area. Afterward, the officers let him go with no charge and no explanation of what he had done wrong.



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