

Washington state protesters disrupt special legislative session

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Washington state troopers tased three people who were taking part in a protest in the capitol building's rotunda in Olympia November 28. The building was ordered closed at 5:30 p.m., at which time the troopers started carrying out protesters who refused to leave the rotunda. The three who were tased had tried to enter the building after it had been closed, but before it was cleared.

Democratic Governor Chris Gregoire announced a new round of budget cuts just before the Thanksgiving weekend. On November 28, convening state legislators were met by an estimated 1,000 protesters, and were forced to delay the start of the budget meeting by nearly an hour. Over the course of the day, the number of protesters grew to an estimated 3,000. One arrest was made in the early part of the afternoon: a schoolteacher who had come with a contingent of other teachers to protest the drastic cuts being proposed for education.

The protesters, many from the various Occupy groups in the state, gathered on the capitol steps, and made their way into the House and Senate balconies overlooking the floors where the lawmakers were meeting in the special session, while a few dozen protesters also managed to enter committee rooms.

By 8 p.m. last Monday, four people had been arrested for refusing to leave the building, and over 30 were given no trespass notices barring them from the entirety of the Capitol Campus, including the Heritage Park area where Occupy Olympia has been set up for several weeks. Troopers tased six more protesters attempting to block the bus carrying those who had been arrested.

Protesters returned on Tuesday, carrying red balloons

and chanting, "We are the 99 percent," while marching on buildings on the Capitol Campus. Eleven people were arrested by state troopers. According to a Washington State Patrol spokesman Guy Gill, four were arrested for disrupting a session in the Cherberg Building, two for creating a disturbance in the legislative building, and five were arrested for violating the previous day's trespass notices. All those arrested were released late Tuesday and originally scheduled for court on Wednesday morning.

On Wednesday, the legislature convened, held a brief prayer and adjourned almost immediately after. The court appearance for the arrestees was delayed until the afternoon.

Through a spokeswoman, Governor Gregoire said that while she respected the protesters' First Amendment rights, keeping the capitol building open at night would be "too expensive." An exception is being made for Friday night's Christmas tree lighting sponsored by the Association of Washington Businesses.

In an effort to divert public opinion from the issues raised by the protesters, local papers are running editorials on how much it costs to bring in state troopers.

Governor Gregoire, in a letter released with her proposed 2012 Supplemental State Budget, stated, "No governor in modern times has had to weigh cuts of the magnitude I am proposing. But I have no choice." The cuts outlined include further reductions in K-12 education—including a shortening of the school year by four days, the loss of \$161.5 million to higher

education, and reductions in social services for the disabled and their families.

These losses come after budgets at every level have already been cut, and at a time when the region, as with the rest of the country, faces eroding social services and decaying infrastructure. Areas outside the metropolitan centers have been especially hard hit.

While Washington's overall unemployment rate stands at 9.1 percent, the levels are significantly higher in rural and semi-rural areas. For example, Pacific County faces the June closure of its sixth-largest employer, the Naselle Youth Camp, a state facility that provides high school-level and environmental education for minimum and medium security juvenile offenders. The closure will see the immediate loss of 112 jobs, which will push Pacific County's official unemployment rate from 11 percent to 12.1 percent. The closure will also mean a loss for the local school district of more than \$87,000.

With no prospect for retraining or re-employment locally, many people will be forced to relocate. This will create a ripple effect in the local economies, with small businesses put at risk of going under. Real estate prices in the area, already in freefall, will drop further as those laid off are forced to sell.

Major employers in the rural areas have been hard hit in recent decades, with lumber mills and canneries closing down. Tourism has likewise been affected by the current slump. The plan to start charging for admission to state parks hurt tourism in areas already slammed by the economic crash.

Gregoire has proposed putting a temporary half-cent increase in state sales tax to a referendum, saying that some of the proposed cuts could be avoided if funds were raised that way. Those most affected by such a regressive tax increase would be the working class and poor.

The special session is expected to continue for thirty days, with Democratic and Republican members set to work out a list of cuts. It is expected that the half-cent sales tax referendum will be forced to a vote by the

general population, using threats of even deeper cuts as leverage to pass it.

Meanwhile, there have been public calls to raise taxes on the state's millionaires, of which there are 226,000 at last count (2010). Indeed, some of the country's wealthiest individuals, Bill Gates (\$59 billion, the richest man in the US) and Steve Ballmer (\$13.9 billion) of Microsoft and Jeff Bezos (\$19.1 billion) of Amazon reside in Washington.

Just for the purpose of illustrating the depth of the social chasm: a half-cent tax on each of Gates' dollars would produce \$295 million, such a tax on Ballmer's wealth would generate \$69.5 million, and on Bezos', \$95.5 million—for a total of \$460 million—which would cover the cuts such figures as Democratic state Senator Tim Sheldon are pushing the legislature to come up with during the special session.

The protesters, some of whom are affiliated with Occupy Olympia, carried a number of signs calling for the taxes on the wealthy to be raised and schools to be funded. Of proposed cuts to schools and social infrastructure, they chanted, "It's immoral, it's illegal!"

Speaking to KOMO reporters, Albert Postema, a produce and nursery stock farmer, said he's considered himself a conservative but is concerned about "economic and political corruption," saying, "The poor and underprivileged have been taking the brunt. How do you make cuts when others have been so greedy?"



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