

NOTES ON THE UPSTATE DRONE ACTION CAMPAIGN TO EXPOSE REAPER DRONE WAR CRIMES AT HANCOCK AIR BASE

Our campaign to expose Hancock's Reaper began in 2009 as President Obama, the Pentagon and the CIA ratcheted up the use of these hunter/killer drones over Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. The Reaper maims and kills (including extra-judicial executions and assassinations), perpetrates home demolitions and other bombing – i.e. perpetrates war crime and terrorism in the ironically labeled “War on Terrorism.” Our campaign was soon joined by folks from Syracuse and all over New York State and beyond. (In 2009 Veterans for Peace members, for example, held a four-day anti-drone fast in downtown Syracuse over the Thanksgiving holiday.) We all coalesced into a group calling ourselves Upstate Drone Action. Our Mission Statement Reads:

“Founded in 2010, **Upstate Drone Action** also known as **The Upstate Coalition to Ground the Drones and End the Wars**, is a decentralized, informally-organized grassroots organization, primarily composed of upstate New York activists representing a diverse assortment of Peace and Justice organizations in different cities.

We seek to educate the public and Hancock Air Base personnel about the war crimes perpetrated in Afghanistan with the MQ9 Reaper drone piloted from Hancock Air National Guard Base, on the outskirts of Syracuse. It is also our mission to illuminate the perversity of a society that chooses war over all other solutions.

We also seek to educate the public about drone proliferation and the danger of blowback, as well as the surveillance and civil liberties threat the Predator, Reaper and other military robots pose domestically.

Drawing legitimacy from International Law and from the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, **Upstate Drone Action** members heed our consciences and the Nuremberg mandate to expose and impede our nation's war crimes. Committed to nonviolent direct action as well as other forms of public education, members periodically endure arrest, trial and even incarceration.”

Here are some elements and events in our campaign:

Articles:

In 2009 the Syracuse Post-Standard began a series of lengthy front page articles publicizing – some might say hyping -- the Reaper at Hancock, the home of the 174th Attack Wing [sic] of the New York Air National Guard. These articles revealed that

- ✓ Hancock was piloting Reapers over Afghanistan
- ✓ Hancock was the national center for training technicians to maintain Reapers
- ✓ Then commander Col. Kevin Bradley was looking forward to having drones used for domestic police work.

The P-S articles have generally sidestepped the moral, ethical and legal issues, and ignore Reaper war crime. Also in 2009, the Syracuse Peace Council's Peace Newsletter began publishing occasional articles that do raise such issues.

Speakers:

To further educate ourselves and the public, SPC and Upstate Drone Action have sponsored drone-oriented talks here by prominent national activists. These have included Col. Ann Wright ; Dan Pearson and Kathy Kelly (Voices for Creative Nonviolence); Brian Terrell (Catholic Worker); Elliott Adams (Veterans for Peace); Debra Sweet (World Can't Wait), Leila Zand (Fellowship of Reconciliation) and Medea Benjamin (CodePink). ArtRage Gallery in Syracuse often hosts these talks.

In turn SPC speakers have spoken about the Reaper to audiences in Cortland, Binghamton, Utica, Albany, Oswego, Rochester, Saratoga Springs, New York City, Connecticut and Massachusetts. We'll also be talking at the April 5 to 7 Historians Against the War conference in Baltimore.

Tableaux:

Each August since 2010 the "SPC Players" perform a tableau at the main entrance to the NY State Fair. Our tableaux involve a costumed cast of about seven who stay silent and motionless for about 20 minutes. The tableaux, featuring a five foot-long scale-model Reaper, a pilot at a computer, an Islamic mother and dead infant, several corpses covered by bloody shrouds, an "al Qaeda" recruiter, and a young recruit. The backdrop is either rubble or a banner depicting rubble. There's signage identifying the tableau elements and one by the corpses and mother saying, "How would you feel if this were your family?" We do several performances every other day of the ten-day Fair and have distributed thousands of our flyers to fairgoers.

Street Heat:

Beginning in September 2009 we've been holding ongoing weekly, monthly or twice-monthly (depending on the season) anti-war/anti-drone demonstrations and vigils outside Hancock's main gate on East Molloy Rd. and elsewhere in the county. November 2009 saw the first of several rallies at Hancock drawing in 200 and more folks from Albany, Binghamton, Buffalo, Ithaca, NYC, Utica and beyond. These events have sometimes been preceded by folks with signs and banners walking to the base from Ithaca, downtown Syracuse or from the nearby village of Mattydale.

Direct Action/Civil Resistance:

On several occasions since the spring of 2011 SPC/Upstate Drone Action has engaged in nonviolent direct actions attempting to deliver letters or citizens' war crimes indictments to the base. As these attempts are rebuffed, we block Hancock's main entrance. NYS troopers, Onondaga County sheriffs & Town of DeWitt police arrest us. So far there's been no rough stuff.

- 22 April 2011...38 arrests for dying-in with bloody shrouds. In a week-long bench trial Judge Gideon found all 38 guilty of trespass and sentenced us to 20 or 25 hours community service + \$375 fines (which many of the defendants diverted to a peace group in Afghanistan). We had originally been also charged with interfering with government administration, a misdemeanor -- but that was dropped, presumably to prevent us having a jury trial. Amy Goodman attended one court session and did a nationwide TV broadcast of "Democracy Now" from Syracuse featuring interviews with two defendants. Check out our closing statements on YouTube.

- 22 April 2012...33, mostly pre-emptive, arrests as we got within a few hundred yards of the base during a two-mile silent and solemn procession from Mattydale. The charge of assembly without a permit was eventually dismissed.
- 2 May 2012...two arrests during our bi-monthly Tuesday afternoon shift change vigil; the charge of disobeying a “legal” order to disperse was dismissed. In this and the previous Hancock arrest the police seemed woefully ignorant of the First Amendment and their oath to uphold the US Constitution.
- 28 June 2012...15 arrests for blocking Hancock’s main entrance with banners as we unsuccessfully attempted to hand deliver a citizens’ war crimes indictment. Judge Jokl found all guilty of trespass after a several-hour bench trial on December 13. Most of the H15 were fined \$375. Five recidivists (former H38 defendants) served a week in Jamesville Penitentiary.
- 5 October 2012...10 arrests for blocking the main entrance with banners. The trial for trespass is as yet unscheduled.
- 25 October 2012...17 arrests for blocking three base entrances resulting in charges of trespass and disorderly conduct and an order of protection against the 17. The trial has yet to be scheduled.
- 13 February 2012 (Ash Wednesday)...a Catholic Worker Gandhian Wave action with eight arrests for trespass and one for allegedly violating the 25 October order of protection, a misdemeanor. The trials have yet to be scheduled.

Note: We say civil resistance, not civil disobedience. The latter phrase suggests breaking the law, whereas our Hancock actions seek to enforce the law – international law. Under Article 6 of the US Constitution, international law is the supreme law of the land...and, while often ignored by local courts (as once was lynching), governs local, state and federal courts.

Court and Jail Witness:

All our court appearances and trials take place at the DeWitt Town Court. Most of the defendants “go pro se,” i.e. defend themselves without legal counsel. Former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark spent four hours on the witness stand for the H38 defense. The AG testified that the defendants’ action was consistent with the Nuremburg principles and that Hancock drones perpetrate war crimes. In our further defense we argue that our arrests have violated our First Amendment right to petition our government for a redress of grievance. In a gross violation of this First Amendment right, one of the H38, Brian Terrell of Maloy, Iowa, later was arrested for attempting to deliver a version of the Hancock citizens’ indictment to Whiteman AFB in Missouri. Brian is now serving a six-month federal sentence (until May 2013).

Recent Initiatives:

Here are some of our other “educate, agitate, organize” anti-Reaper activities:

- One summer day Peace Council activists flashmobbed our busy outdoor farmers’ market in downtown Syracuse. As our scale model drone entered the market, we screamed out, “The drones are coming! The drones are coming!” Several of us then dropped to the pavement as if dead, covered by bloody shrouds. Although cops drove us out within a few minutes, we got the video on YouTube.
- Last year several SPC folks took part in a two-day National Drone Summit in DC organized by CodePink, a key player in the national campaign against weaponized drones.

- In October 2012 several Upstate Drone Action members took part in the CodePink-led delegation to Pakistan to meet with Reaper drone survivors. (Our October 5 Hancock action was timed to coincide with the delegation. Much applause when delegates told Pakistanis about this gesture of solidarity.)
- Last year the “Peace Council Players” did several public readings of Jack Gilroy’s play, “The Predator.”
- Last fall young SPC activists organized a “Drone Country Tour,” a teach-in and caravan – with sheriff cars following close behind -- to drone-implicated sites around Onondaga County (Lockheed, SRC, Hancock). Presentations at each site explored the role these entities play in the burgeoning drone industrial/military complex. A wine and cheese party topped off the Tour.
- Currently the Peace Council anti-drone committee has a sub- committee working on getting a “No Surveillance Drones Over Syracuse” ordinance passed in the Common Council.
- Also we’ve had dozens of copies of the Stanford & NYU Law Schools’ superb report, “Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians From US Drone Practices in Pakistan,” copied and bound. We’ve distributed scores of these -- some free, some at cost -- to activists, media and other influentials.
- On January 11, 2013 about 20 supporters walked miles in the rain from Hancock to our downtown federal building and then much of the way on to Jamesville Penitentiary. We were giving three of the H15 a sendoff as they self-surrendered there to begin their sentences.
- Planning is now ongoing for our April 26-28 for our “Resisting Drones, Global War & Empire” convergence in Syracuse. To learn more and to register, contact the Peace Council at (315) 472-5478 or go to <http://upstatedroneaction.org>.

La lucha continua – The struggle continues,

-- Ed Kinane

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