

About the Upstate Coalition to Ground the Drones and End the Wars

THE UPSTATE DRONE ACTION CAMPAIGN TO EXPOSE REAPER DRONE WAR CRIME AT HANCOCK AIR BASE
[[last updated June 2014]]

Our campaign to expose Hancock's MQ9 Reaper began in 2009 as President Obama, the Pentagon and the CIA/JSOC ratcheted up the flights of these hunter/killer drones over Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere.

The Reaper perpetrates maimings, killings (including extra-judicial executions and assassinations), and home demolitions – i.e. perpetrates war crime and terrorism in the ironically labeled “war on terrorism.” Violating international law, the Reaper frequently attacks non-combatants outside of war zones.

The local campaign was soon expanded by folks from all over New York State and beyond. (In 2009, Veterans for Peace held a four-day anti-drone fast in downtown Syracuse over the Thanksgiving holiday.) We coalesced into a group calling ourselves Upstate Drone Action (also known as the Upstate Coalition to Ground the Drones and End the Wars). See www.upstatedroneaction.org.

If we had a mission statement, it might read something like this:

Upstate Drone Action is a decentralized, informally-organized, grassroots network of activists mostly from upstate New York.

We seek to educate the public and Hancock Air Base personnel re the war crime perpetrated upon Afghanistan with the MQ9 Reaper. This unmanned aircraft is remotely piloted via satellite from Hancock, home of the 174th Attack Wing of the

NYS Air National Guard located just north of Syracuse in the Town of DeWitt.

We also seek to educate the public re the risks of drone proliferation and blowback as well as the surveillance and civil liberties threat the Reaper and other robotic planes pose domestically.

Legitimized by international law and by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, Upstate Drone Action members heed our consciences and the Nuremburg mandate to expose and impede our nation's war crime.

Committed to nonviolent direct action and civil resistance, members periodically undergo arrest, trial, fines, Orders of Protection and incarceration.###

In 2009 the Syracuse Post-Standard began a series of lengthy front page articles publicizing – some might say hyping – the Reaper at Hancock. 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.

Ignoring Reaper war crime, those P-S articles generally sidestepped the moral, legal and even strategic issues. [Author's note: weaponized drones are tactically clever, but due to proliferation and blowback, strategically stupid – a threat to the ultimate security of the U.S.]

SPEAKERS

To educate ourselves and the public, Upstate Drone Action has organized drone-oriented talks in Syracuse by prominent national anti-war activists. These have included Col. Ann Wright; Kathy Kelly (Voices for Creative Nonviolence); Brian Terrell (Iowa Catholic Worker); Elliott Adams (Veterans for

Peace); Debra Sweet (World Can't Wait), Leila Zand (Fellowship of Reconciliation); Medea Benjamin (CodePink); Bruce Gagnon (Global Network); David Swanson (World Beyond War)....

In turn, our speakers have helped expose the Reaper at campuses, community groups and congregations (including several panels in the Catholic diocese of Syracuse) in Cortland, Binghamton, Utica, Albany, Oswego, Rome, Rochester, Buffalo, Saratoga Springs, New York City, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, Georgia....

TABLEAUX

Each August since 2010 the "SPC Players" (from the Syracuse Peace Council) perform a series of tableaux at the main entrance to the NY State Fair. These involve a costumed cast of about seven who stay silent and motionless for about 20 minutes. The tableaux feature a five foot-long scale-model Reaper, a pilot at a computer, an Islamic mother and dead infant, two or three 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 while leafleters distribute thousands of our flyers to the crowds streaming in and out of the Fair.

STREET HEAT

Beginning in September 2009 from 4:15 to 5 pm on Tuesdays we've been holding ongoing weekly, monthly or twice-monthly (depending on the season) anti-war/anti-Reaper drone demonstrations outside Hancock's main gate on East Molloy Rd. and elsewhere in Onondaga County. We now have a legal permit for our demonstrations across the road from the base. And every Saturday we demonstrate in Syracuse across Park Street from the regional farmers' market from 9 to 10 am (no permit required).

November 2009 saw the first of several rallies at Hancock drawing 200 to 300 folks from across the state and beyond. These events have sometimes been preceded by long lines of folks with signs and banners walking to the base from Ithaca, downtown Syracuse or from the nearby village of Mattydale.

DIRECT ACTION/CIVIL RESISTANCE

Since the spring of 2011 Upstate Drone Action has repeatedly engaged in scrupulously nonviolent direct actions attempting to deliver letters or citizens' war crime indictments to the base command. (We recite a Pledge of Nonviolence before each action.) As these attempts are rebuffed, we have sometimes blocked Hancock's main entrance with banners and our presence. So far NYS troopers, Onondaga County sheriffs & Town of DeWitt police have made over 150 arrests (including recidivists). So far there's been no rough stuff.

We think of the Hancock civil resistance as part of a "Gandhian Wave," a persistent recurrence of actions meant to protest the persistent recurrence of drone war crime. Our Wave is in the Gandhian tradition embodied by the U.S. civil rights movement, and the School of the Americas Watch campaign ongoing since the early '90s at Ft. Benning, Georgia. Here's a chronology:

- 22 April 2011 (Earth Day)...38 arrests for dying-in with bloody shrouds by Hancock's main gate. In a week-long bench trial Judge David S. Gideon found all 38 – the "Hancock 38" ("H38") – guilty of trespass, a violation, and sentenced us to 20 or 25 hours community service + \$375 fines (which many of us diverted to a peace group in Afghanistan). Amy Goodman of "Democracy Now" attended one court session and did a nationwide TV broadcast from Syracuse featuring interviews with two defendants. Check out our closing statements for this and other of our trials on YouTube.
- 22 April 2012 (Good Friday)...the Hancock 33 were arrested as we got within a few hundred yards of the base

entrance during a two-mile silent and solemn procession from Mattydale. An attorney ally watching the procession from across the road was among those – mostly pre-emptive – arrests. The charges of assembly without a permit were eventually dismissed.

- 2 May 2012...two arrests during our twice-monthly Tuesday afternoon shift change demo at the base. The charge of disobeying a “legal” order to disperse was dismissed “in the interests of justice.” 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 crime indictment (co-authored with former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark). Judge Jokl found all guilty of trespass after a several-hour bench trial on December 13, 2012. 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. After an April 18 bench trial Judge Robert Jokl sentenced four of us to 15 days in Jamesville Penitentiary. We served ten days, getting the standard one third time off for “good behavior.”
- 25 October 2012...17 arrests for blocking all three base entrances resulting in charges of trespass and disorderly conduct and, at arraignment, a one-year temporary Order of Protection (OOP). Our bench trial before Judge Gideon was finally begun in late 2013 and completed in early 2014, resulting as usual in maximum fines, a week at Jamesville Pen and “permanent” (two years) Orders of Protection [see below].
- 13 February 2013 (Ash Wednesday)...seven arrests in a Catholic Worker “Gandhian Wave” action for trespass, plus one arrest for allegedly violating the 25 October Order of Protection, a misdemeanor. The trespassers, who

all went pro se, were acquitted by a noticeably reluctant Judge Jokl. In a separate June 2014 trial, the six-person jury under Judge Gideon found the alleged OOP violator, Mary Anne Grady Flores, guilty. She is to be sentenced July 10, 2014.

- 28 April 2013...31 arrested during a “funeral” procession to the base with varying charges including trespass, disorderly conduct, interfering with government administration, and violating Orders of Protection. The upcoming jury trials are scheduled at about one a month through spring 2015.
- 9 December 13...two Yale Divinity School students and a New Haven Catholic Worker arrested at Hancock’s main gate upon delivering a people’s Order of Protection to the base on behalf of the children of Afghanistan. Unusually, Judge Jokl set no bail, releasing the three on their own recognizance. The two students pled guilty and received a two-year Order of Protection; the Catholic Worker will have a jury trial in September.

Besides New York City and Connecticut, folks arrested at Hancock have come from as far as Hawaii (Col. Ann Wright), Illinois (Kathy Kelly), New Jersey, Iowa, Virginia, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Maine and Washington, DC.

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 (against civilian assassination, war of aggression, violation of sovereignty, etc). 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), should trump local, state and federal courts.

ORDERS OF PROTECTION

Beginning with our October 25, 2012 arrest, the DeWitt Court – as part of its escalating attempts to deter our resistance – began issuing year-long temporary “Orders of Protection”

against all those arrested. This legal device, designed to protect vulnerable children and women, is being used to “protect” the base commander against we (nonviolent) activists...who are subject to arrest if we step on base. Ironies abound.

Although we have entered motions pointing out the inappropriateness and absurdity of directing OOPs against us, the DeWitt judges have never required the base command to explain how we threaten them. Judge Gideon repeatedly declares that OOPs are issued “at my discretion.” The OOP has twice been appealed to a higher state court – once successfully for one defendant, and once not successfully for several others.

COURT AND JAIL WITNESS

All our court appearances and trials have thus far taken place at the DeWitt Town Court. To assure our voices are heard, most of our defendants “go pro se,” i.e. defend ourselves without legal counsel (though sometimes with informal attorney advice and accompaniment).

Ramsey Clark spent four hours on the witness stand for the H38 defense. The former Attorney General testified that the defendants’ action was consistent with the Nuremburg principles and that Hancock drones perpetrate war crime. In our trials we seek to turn the tables and put such crimes on trial.

In our further defense we argue that our arrests and the ensuing OOPs 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, later was arrested for attempting to deliver a version of the Hancock citizens’ indictment to Whiteman AFB in Missouri. Brian subsequently served six months in federal prison. We have yet to receive federal charges at Hancock. Currently, and ongoing into 2015, we have a number of jury trials scheduled in DeWitt.

OTHER 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 expelled us within minutes, we got the video on YouTube.
- In 2012 and again in 2013 several Upstate Drone Action folks took part in two-day National Drone Summits in DC organized by CodePink, a key player in the national campaign against weaponized surveillance drones. (CodePink cofounder, Medea Benjamin, wrote, “Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control,” Verso, revised edition, 2013)
- In October 2012 several Upstate Drone Action members journeyed with CodePink 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.)
- In 2012 the “SPC Players” did several public readings of Jack Gilroy’s anti-Reaper play, “The Predator,” with its four-women cast.
- In 2012 young SPC activists organized a “Drone Country Tour,” a teach-in and caravan – with uninvited 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.
- An SPC sub-committee submitted and persistently lobbied for a “No Surveillance Drones Over Syracuse” non-binding

resolution (watered down from our proposed binding ordinance) before the Syracuse Common Council. It passed unanimously in December 2013.

- Since it was published in the fall of 2012 we downloaded [at livingunderdrones.org] the Stanford & NYU Law Schools' superb report, "Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians From US Drone Practices in Pakistan." We've distributed scores of bound copies – 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 the federal building downtown and then much of the way to Jamesville Penitentiary. We were giving three of the H15 a sendoff as they self-surrendered, beginning their 15-day sentences (under a double rainbow!).
- On April 26-28, 2013 we held our "RESIST GLOBAL WARS, DRONES & EMPIRE" convergence at the Southwest Community Center in Syracuse with speakers, panels, workshops, music and dance. Over 200 took part. On Sunday (4/28) a solemn permitted "funeral procession" with cardboard coffins, etc. walked from BOCES on Thompson Rd to Hancock's main entrance. An unpermitted die-in with arrests there (see above) followed.
- On April 27, 2014 SPC and Upstate Drone Action brought Union Theological Professor Cornell West to Syracuse to speak on "Connecting the Dots: Racism, Poverty and Drones" at Tucker Missionary Baptist Church on Syracuse's South side. An overflow bi-racial crowd of about 600 heard this remarkable orator, activist, scholar and public intellectual. Cornell then joined a couple hundred of us at a rally that afternoon in the BOCES parking lot near Hancock's east gate at the end of Thompson Rd, followed by a solemn funeral walk to, and permitted – and penned-in gathering near, the main gate.

April 1, 2014 marked the official opening of yet another

military drone base in Upstate New York – at the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station. The Buffalo-based No Drones Niagara, part of Upstate Drone Action, was there in protest.

Earlier in 2014 the FAA designated Upstate New York (and part of Massachusetts) as one of six national research regions for developing domestic drone technology. Along with various universities and corporations in the area, Griffiss Airport in Rome, NY has become the center for such research. The drone, so menacing abroad, is now come home to roost.

La lucha continua – The struggle continues,