

Minnesota: massive police action dislodges anti-highway protesters

By Cory Johnson
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In the cold, early morning hours of Sunday, December 20, over 600 Minnesota State Troopers, Minneapolis Police and Hennepin County Sheriff's deputies stormed seven houses occupied by the environmental group Earth First! and Native American members of the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Community. The activists were protesting the rerouting of Highway 55 through Minneapolis's Hiawatha Avenue neighborhood and the adjoining area of Minnehaha Park.

In a carefully coordinated action, 130 squad cars and seven Ryder moving trucks filled with police in riot gear moved into the area to secure a 3,600-foot perimeter--one officer for every 10 feet--around the vacated houses. Officers filled the homes with teargas and sprayed pepper spray directly into the eyes of protesters as they came out. After police removed the last protesters, one locked to an outdoor platform and another chained to a cement-filled pipe in the top of a chimney, construction equipment rapidly leveled the homes.

Thirty-six people were arrested, some injured and bleeding, and thirty-three ultimately booked and held at the Hennepin County Adult Detention Center. Outgoing Republican Governor Arne Carlson, who ordered the raid, appeared at the site and praised the operation, declaring, "These people are essentially outside the law." Minneapolis Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton and Hennepin County Commissioner Peter McLaughlin, both members of the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party (DFL), joined Carlson and other area legislators at a news conference to show their support for the police action.

Earth First! estimated the assault, which occurred between 4:00 and 7:30 a.m., will cost over \$1 million dollars. State officials are expected to seek a special

legislative appropriation to reimburse city and county agencies which participated in what they claim was the largest police operation in state history. On December 30 Minneapolis Police Chief Robert Olson gave the raid's planners the Chief's Award of Merit for their "expert planning and attention to detail."

The action brought to an end a four-month protest by activists who opposed the demolition of the last group of houses that stood in the way of the Minnesota Department of Transportation's plans to construct a rerouted Highway 55, expanded to four lanes. The construction cuts through land at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers and Minnehaha Falls. Historic Fort Snelling, founded in 1805 by Zebulon Pike, is located there, and for this reason construction has been opposed by the Minnesota Historical Society. The land is also considered sacred by the Mendota Mdewakanton band, who fear construction will upset burial grounds. It also cuts through Minnehaha Park, valued by residents for its picturesque waterfall and forest, laced with bike trails and hiking paths.

It is believed the new corridor will have an adverse impact on the falls and Coldwater Spring, along with the area's wildlife. Homes in the neighborhood average about \$80,000. Many of the Hiawatha Avenue residents have opposed the plan for the transit corridor for years and welcomed the Earth First! and Indian activists.

But business interests are determined that the plans for Highway 55 go forward, with construction slated to begin in the spring of 1999. The final four-lane parkway will provide a more direct connection between Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport and downtown Minneapolis. Governor Carlson's decision to move against the activists came as the occupation began to gain national notoriety, and on the eve of the

inauguration of Reform Party Governor Jesse Ventura. Ventura's surprise election victory has resulted in a rocky transition, as Republican and DFL politicians, along with businessmen, jockey for positions in the new administration. Carlson's action against the protestors saved this new coalition from an unpopular decision in the new year.

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