



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Canadians campaign against nuclear testing on Amchitka Island (Don't Make a Wave), 1969-1971

September

1969

to: November

1971

Country: Canada

Location City/State/Province: *Vancouver, B.C., across Canada, and the Bering Sea*

Goals:

To stop the Milrow and Cannikin U.S. nuclear tests on Amchitka Island, Alaska, U.S.A.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 036. Performances of plays and music

Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Announced intention to nonviolently interject in test zone
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 041. Pilgrimages
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Announced intention to nonviolently interject in test zone
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 038. Marches
- 041. Pilgrimages
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 097. Protest strike
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Environment

Peace

Group characterization:

- Activists
- Journalists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Society for Pollution and Environmental Control (SPEC), Don't Make a Wave (DMAW) Committee

Partners:

Students and other environmental groups in Vancouver and throughout Canada

External allies:

U.S. Coast Guard Sailors, Several foreign governments, Canadian government, U.S. Senators, U.S. environmental and disarmament groups, media outlets in Vancouver

Involvement of social elites:

The anti-nuclear test campaign got the support of the Canadian government and several U.S. governmental departments. Famous musicians helped raise funds. Prominent Canadians and Canadian authors helped with campaign

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- B.C. Voice of Women
- Coalition to Stop the Amchitka Nuclear Blast
- Don't Make a Wave Committee
- University of British Columbia Students

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Quaker groups

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Growing numbers of citizens and environmental groups in Canada and U.S.
- Several prominent musicians

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Canadian High School students and faculty
- Canadian and Japanese government officials
- Prominent Scientists
- U.S. Coast Guard sailors

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Prominent Canadian citizens

Segment Length: *Approximately 5 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Atomic Energy Commission, U.S. Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Arrest of Greenpeace crew in Alaska

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

They did not stop either campaign, however, there were no further tests on Amchitka after the campaign.

The DMAW Committee survived and became Greenpeace after the campaign.

The campaign grew hugely, from a small group of protestors to parallel actions in the United States and Canada encompassing thousands of people. Additionally their budget increased hugely with benefit concerts and fundraisers

The direct action campaign against nuclear testing in Amchitka Island began with an organization called the Society for Pollution and Environmental Control (SPEC), which grew from a group of ecologists, journalists, and activists in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. When the United States announced an underground test of a 1-megaton nuclear bomb on Amchitka Island, Alaska, SPEC began their protests.

Amchitka Island is a part of the Aleutian Islands, an archipelago in southwestern Alaska. It was named a wildlife refuge by the American government in 1913, but was to remain open for military use if necessary. After World War II, the military decided to establish military bases on Amchitka. They reached an agreement with conservationists to leave most of the island as a wildlife refuge.

As the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union intensified, the need for nuclear testing sites grew. The U.S. first planned to begin nuclear testing on Amchitka in 1951, but these tests were cancelled due to a media leak and fear of the effects of radiation.

Nuclear scientists, geologists, seismologists, and ecologists substantiated these fears after the first, successful underground explosion, which took place in 1965. Amchitka Island lies on a fault line and is prone to earthquakes. The shock wave of a nuclear blast, which could trigger an earthquake, would disrupt the geology of the island, destroying natural habitats and killing wildlife. If the blast were large enough, it could even cause a tidal wave in the Pacific Ocean. In addition to the geological and environmental effects on animals, the radioactive chemicals from the 1965 blast were detected in Alaskan citizens far from the blast site. Furthermore, testing so near to Soviet territory could have negative effects on the already unstable relationship between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

In 1963, the two countries had signed a Nuclear Test-ban Treaty, which allowed only underground tests of nuclear weapons. Despite the treaty, the nuclear arms race showed no signs of slowing. The U.S. military argued that the Amchitka tests were necessary for the development of protective nuclear weapons against the strengthening Soviet arsenal. In August 1969, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) announced that the second nuclear test, Operation Milrow, would be held on Amchitka in October.

That September, SPEC organized protest demonstrations at the U.S. consulate in Vancouver. Protesters held signs that said, "It's your fault if our fault goes," and, "Don't make a wave," addressing the geological destruction and possibility of a tidal wave as a

result of the test. The organizers tried to keep anti-American sentiments low, so as to increase the consulate's receptiveness. The consul-general agreed to pass on their message to Washington, D.C.

In October, SPEC joined forces with students from the University of British Columbia to stage a demonstration on the Canada/U.S. border near Vancouver. High schools shut down to allow students to go. At Peace Arch Park, a symbol of friendship between the U.S. and Canada on the border crossing, 6,000 people demonstrated against the test. The British Columbia Attorney General threatened arrests if protesters blocked the roads, but no mounted police showed up to enforce the threat. Protesters held "Don't make a wave" signs as they blockaded traffic entering Canada. A SPEC leader addressed the crowd, telling them it was the first time the border had been closed since 1812. The blockade lasted one hour.

Meanwhile, on Amchitka Island, the AEC went through with the bomb test. The shockwave reached 6.9 on the Richter scale, drained lakes, and killed wildlife on the former wildlife reserve.

In November 1969, the AEC announced that a third test, Operation Cannikin, this time using a 5-megaton bomb, would happen in the fall of 1971. Following the announcement, SPEC called on the Canadian Prime Minister to object to the test, attempted to organize a boycott of American goods, and wrote a petition. They had the support of several scientists.

Several SPEC members formed a British Columbia branch of the Sierra Club, which in turn began the Don't Make a Wave Committee (DMAW) to organize against Operation Cannikin. DMAW meetings were informal and the small group of participants included some journalists, ecologists, and full-time activists. They began by organizing funds and meeting with students, other activists, women's groups, and Quaker groups for support. Soon they had the support of the B.C. Voice of Women, Vancouver labor groups, and churches.

Irving Stowe, Jim Bohlen, and Paul Cote led the committee, which most of the time used consensus to make decisions. DMAW's first action was to produce a study on the effects of radiation.

The committee wanted to remain respectable and non-inflammatory, but they encouraged radical activists to join, nonetheless. They also joined forces with the Canadian Coalition to Stop the Amchitka Nuclear Blast. DMAW and SPEC organized another demonstration at the U.S. Consulate.

In February 1970, DMAW formulated the main strategy of their campaign against the tests; they planned to sail a boat into the test zone to "confront the bomb." They would name the boat, once they had it, the Greenpeace. The committee announced the plan through newspapers in Vancouver and word spread throughout Canada and the U.S. The plan lost the support of the formal Sierra Club, but DMAW continued as an independent organization.

The committee published a pamphlet with information from AEC scientists and others about the dangers of the Amchitka Bomb tests. They sold pins and used donation jars to raise money for the boat they needed for their plan. They also organized a benefit rock concert to raise funds and publicized it through alternative and mainstream papers. The concert was held on October 16, 1970 featuring several popular musicians. Huge numbers of people attended the concert, which raised \$17,000. Afterwards funds poured in for DMAW and meetings grew. They were able to get a boat in February 1971. In May, two DMAW leaders attended an AEC hearing in Anchorage, Alaska and presented their arguments against the tests. They were not the only ones, and as with previous AEC hearings, the statements from scientists and citizens were strongly against the tests. Protests arose from Alaskan citizens and American environmental and disarmament groups.

In Washington, D.C., several of these American groups filed cases against the Amchitka tests. The U.S. Senate ordered an ecological review and called for direct approval from U.S. President Richard Nixon before the test could happen.

Still planning to go through with the tests, the AEC announced a 3-mile security zone around Amchitka from August 31 to October 20, 1971. Anybody within the zone would be at risk of ten years in prison, a \$10,000 fine, and boat seizure.

As DMAW prepared for their voyage to confront the bomb, protests against the tests grew. Canadian and Japanese officials

openly opposed the tests, along with the Alaska State Medical Association, the Federation of American Scientists, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Department of State, Presidents' Council on Environmental Quality, Office of Science and Technology, and the U.S. Information Agency. All of the above called for either postponement or cancellation of the test. As court cases made their way through the judicial system, the test was postponed until October 2.

The Greenpeace set sail on September 15, with a crew of journalists, photographers and representatives from DMAW and the Sierra Club. They were able to send news to papers and the CBC in Canada. When the nuclear test was delayed indefinitely on September 23, the crew had to suspend their journey. During the wait they were arrested and fined by the U.S. Coast Guard, but received a letter of support from the sailors who arrested them, which they then sent on to their media outlets. After the arrest, the crew decided to return to Vancouver, not knowing when the test would be held.

Protests strengthened in Canada. In September, thousands of protesters blockaded different parts of the U.S./Canada border. The Canadian Parliament asked the U.S. to stop the test. Canadian students in British Columbia and Toronto sent letters to the Canadian Prime Minister and President Nixon and skipped school in protest. On October 6, Canadian high school students walked out on classes and 12,000 students, teachers, and parents marched to the Consulate in Vancouver. Students met with government officials, asking them to take action against the tests.

On October 27, Nixon announced a November 4 deadline for the test, giving his approval. The only thing holding up the test was a court case that had reached the Supreme Court. The decision now lay in the hands of the seven Supreme Court judges.

With this news DMAW sent a second, faster ship, Greenpeace II, to Amchitka to protest the test. While the ship quickly tried to reach the island before the test, 150,000 Canadians in the British Columbia Unions went on a half-hour work stoppage in support of their action and marched to the U.S. Consulate with peace signs. Prominent Canadians sent an open letter against the tests, which was published in the Washington Post. Two Canadian authors organized a petition, which 177,000 people signed, and delivered it to the White House on November 4. Protestors in Canada blocked border crossings again and demonstrated at U.S. Consulates around the country.

As Nixon's deadline passed, the Greenpeace II was running into storms that kept it from the island and the Supreme Court had still not reached a verdict. On November 5, thirty U.S. Senators gave Nixon a statement that the test would not help world peace.

On the morning of November 6, the Supreme Court voted 4-3 in favor of the test. Five hours later the bomb was detonated, destroying military buildings and roads, moving the fault line three feet, draining 6 lakes and killing thousands of animals in the area with the shock. The Greenpeace II was still two days away from the test site.

Although the campaigners had failed to stop Operation Cannikin the strong opposition may have prevented the AEC from continuing their planned tests on Amchitka. In February 1972, the AEC announced that they were abandoning the Amchitka test site because of "political and other reasons." Amchitka was returned to the status of wildlife refuge, now with three new craters in its landscape. DMAW became the organization Greenpeace, which, at the time of writing, still continues its direct action for environmental issues.

Research Notes

Influences:

This campaign was influenced by The Golden Rule and Phoenix voyages in protest of U.S. nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, 1958 (1)

This campaign influenced other Greenpeace campaigns (2).

Sources:

Weyler, Rex. Greenpeace: How a group of journalists, ecologists, and visionaries, changed the world. Emmaus: Rodale, 2004.

pp. 55-91.

Kohlhoff, Dean W. Amchitka and the Bomb; Nuclear testing in Alaska. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002. pp. 3-21, 98-108.

Additional Notes:

This campaign gave rise to the organization Greenpeace

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Max Rennebohm 06/12/2009

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