



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## California anti-nuclear activists occupy governor's office (Rancho Seco Sit-Ins), 1979-80

- Anti-Nuclear Power Movement (1960s-1980s)

28 November

1979

to: 5 January

1980

**Country:** United States

**Location City/State/Province:** *Sacramento, California*

**Location Description:** *Inside the governor's office in the State House*

### Goals:

The campaigners wanted Governor Jerry Brown to immediately shut down the Rancho Seco nuclear power plant using his executive authority.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions › Presented a 35-point list of concerns
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 015. Group lobbying › Many meetings with governor, chief of staff, and other staffers
- 050. Teach-ins
- 162. Sit-in

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 015. Group lobbying › Many meetings with governor, chief of staff, and other staffers
- 050. Teach-ins
- 162. Sit-in

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 015. Group lobbying › Many meetings with governor, chief of staff, and other staffers
- 050. Teach-ins
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 015. Group lobbying › Many meetings with governor, chief of staff, and other staffers
- 050. Teach-ins
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 050. Teach-ins › Special Christmas Day open house in governor's office
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 015. Group lobbying › Many meetings with governor, chief of staff, and other staffers
- 050. Teach-ins
- 162. Sit-in

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Environment

**Group characterization:**

- environmental activists

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Abalone Alliance, Greenpeace

**Partners:**

Not known

**External allies:**

Gov. Jerry Brown and his staff; State House police

**Involvement of social elites:**

Gov. Jerry Brown allowed the occupants to stay because he was permissive of occupations generally and sympathetic to the

anti-nuclear cause specifically. He felt he could not acquiesce to campaigners' demands, but did provide them with material and political support.

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

### Groups in 1st Segment:

- People United Against Rancho Seco

### Groups in 2nd Segment:

### Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Gov. Brown first meets with protestors

### Groups in 4th Segment:

### Groups in 5th Segment:

### Groups in 6th Segment:

**Segment Length:** 6.3 days

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

In this case, Gov. Brown could be considered both an ally and an opponent.

### Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

### Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence

### Repressive Violence:

No repressive violence

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

Gov. Brown did not shut down the Rancho Seco nuclear power plant, but he did donate \$2,000 towards anti-nuclear activism; arrange for public testimony at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission hearings in Sacramento; permit activists to distribute anti-nuclear literature to visitors in his office; sponsor three screenings of Helen Caldicott's film on nuclear waste; and provide the Abalone Alliance office space one block away from the State Capitol.

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After the meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear power facility in March 1979, northern Californian residents feared that a similar incident could occur at their local nuclear plant, Ranch Seco. Located 25 miles southeast of Sacramento, the Rancho

Seco Nuclear Generating Station operated a system of reactors that was a technological twin to the facility at Three Mile Island, both designed by General Electric. With the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission having already warned of the possibility of a safety incident at Rancho Seco, anti-nuclear activists in Northern California were particularly concerned and redoubled their efforts to close the plant. Their aim was to convince Governor Edmund “Jerry” Brown – a vocal critic of nuclear power – to invoke his executive authority to shut down the plant. While one group of campaigners was holding events at the plant itself, another group decided to take their message to the governor directly.

On 28 November 1979, a group of approximately 50 protesters went to occupy the governor’s office at the State Capitol, dubbing themselves People United Against Rancho Seco. Having entered the outer suite of his office, they sat down on the floor, requested to meet with Gov. Brown, and presented a 35-point list of concerns to his Chief of Staff Gray Davis. The group of protesters, organized by the Abalone Alliance and Greenpeace, had initially thought they would sit in the governor’s office only for the day. After his staff informed them that he was out of town (he was on the East Coast seeking the Democratic presidential nomination at the time), the protesters debated among themselves and decided that while some people would return home (to points all over the state) to raise support in their local communities, others would wait in his office until Gov. Brown returned to meet with them. What had originally been intended as a short sit-in turned into a 38-day occupation of the office.

The state police chief announced that he did not anticipate any arrests if the protesters were peaceful. As Gov. Brown had a liberal attitude towards sit-ins (his office had been the site of occupations on multiple occasions during his administration, with the United Farm Workers occupying it six months earlier), the protesters and staff (including the security staff) interacted very amicably, developing a cordial relationship. While the protesters were not permitted to unfurl sleeping bags, they were permitted to stay in the office 24 hours a day. The security guards would leave the hallway door unlocked at night so the protesters could return after buying food. At one point, on Christmas Eve, there were no protesters present and the guards could have locked the doors and finally ended the sit-in, but the guards did not. Generally, throughout the campaign, there was a core group of 10 occupants and the sit-in would swell to 30 or 40 occupants on days they met with the governor.

To facilitate good relations with the staff and public, the occupants designated one demonstrator at any given time to be the greeter, who greeted visitors and explained the activists’ campaign, as well as reiterated their commitment to peaceful protest. The occupants welcomed anyone to join them in the sit-in, but required that all participants first sign a six-point commitment to nonviolence. The protesters also held news conferences, generating significant media coverage of their occupation, and invited the general public to come to the governor’s office on Christmas Day for their “open house” information session.

One visitor to the occupation was Dennis Banks, a founder of the American Indian Movement. Banks, who was receiving sanctuary in California while wanted by law enforcement in South Dakota, urged the protesters to cease their occupation because he feared they were hurting Gov. Brown’s chances for reelection. Assuming Gov. Brown would not win the Democratic presidential nomination, if the voters did not grant him another term as governor then his successor might extradite Banks to South Dakota, where he would be imprisoned. The anti-nuclear campaigners did not end their sit-in.

Outside the governor’s door, protesters posted an excerpt from Gov. Brown’s speech the previous June, when he visited an Abalone Alliance rally in San Luis Obispo and promised to do everything in his power to stop the use of nuclear power. When the governor returned from the East Coast during the second week of the sit-in, he would not immediately meet with the protesters, but dispatched Davis, the Chief of Staff, to negotiate with them. The protesters wanted the immediate closure of Rancho Seco, but for the governor to invoke such authority, federal law would require him to cite “imminent peril” posed by the plant’s operation. The protesters retained an attorney to argue that such a danger did exist, but the governor’s legal advisers were unconvinced. Upon meeting with the protesters, Gov. Brown surprised them by having already researched their demands. Don Eichelberger, a sit-in participant, recalled the governor saying, “I just got through a five-hour conversation with [anti-nuclear activist and filmmaker] Helen Caldicott. I know what you guys want, I just won’t give it to you.” In the course of the 38-day sit-in, the protesters had two or three meetings with the governor, in which they were joined by representatives from Physicians for Social Responsibility and the Northern California Ecumenical Council. Although the governor stressed that he was sympathetic to the anti-nuclear campaigners’ concerns, he maintained that his hands were tied by federal law.

With the New Year approaching, the governor wanted the occupants to vacate his office before the legislature returned, fearing additional media attention. To that end, the governor offered the demonstrators the following: a \$2,000 donation towards anti-nuclear activism; to arrange for public testimony at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission hearings in Sacramento; to set up an anti-nuclear information kiosk in his office; to sponsor three screenings of Caldicott's film on nuclear waste; and to provide the Abalone Alliance office space one block away from the State Capitol. With the core group of occupants starting to feel fatigued after such an unexpectedly long occupation, the protesters accepted the governor's terms, agreeing to limit their presence to regular business hours starting 5 January. While this marked the end of the official occupation, anti-nuclear activists continued to make themselves a fixture at the State House during weekdays, as a few activists staffed the nuclear information kiosk in the governor's outer office, providing literature about their cause to visitors.

Ten years later, in a separate campaign, the City of Sacramento shut down the Rancho Seco nuclear plant after a referendum in favor of doing so, which Time magazine called "the most potent demonstration ever against nuclear power." The campaign around that referendum, however, focused on the lack of economic benefits from the plant, rather than safety and environmental issues.

## Research Notes

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**Additional Notes:**

Special thanks to Don Eichelberger for generously contributing his time for an interview.

For more information on the anti-nuclear movement see Bill Moyer. Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2001.

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

Alexander Blocker, 26/9/2011

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