



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Canadians sit-down for nuclear disarmament of the United States Bomarc Missile in La Macaza, Quebec, 1964

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

Time period notes: *The entire Canadian disarmament movement lasted from 1957 when Canada signed the North American Aerospace Defense Command to 1971, when Canada signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.*

13 June

1964

to: 9 September

1964

Country: Canada

Location City/State/Province: La Macaza, Quebec

Location Description: *There is a military base at La Macaza.*

Goals:

To achieve nuclear disarmament by ending the housing of 56 Bomarc missiles fitted with nuclear warheads in Canada

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 138. Sitdown

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 138. Sitdown

Notes on Methods:

There were two sit-downs, one in June and one in late August that lasted until early September. Both used the same methods.

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Environment

Peace

Group characterization:

- Mainly university students
- also local Canadians living near La Macaza

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament(CUCND)

Partners:

Canadian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CCND), Voice of Women (VOW)

External allies:

Robert Gore, a member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) who had experience in civil disobedience through the work of the concurrent American civil rights movement

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 14.67 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Prime Minister Lester Pearson and his Liberal Party government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

In the June sit-down: For two hours, the protesters continued to move from the ditch to the front of the gate to block the entryway. At first, the soldiers forcefully dragged the protesters from the gate to the ditch. At some point, though, the soldiers and the protesters developed an informal agreement, in which the soldiers would just reach out and touch the protesters, and

they would move to the ditch. The soldiers eventually lined up in between the protesters in the ditch and the military base gate so that protesters could no longer block the entryway.

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Soldiers dragged the protesters from their place blockading the road into ditches.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Canada did not agree to disarm its nuclear weapons until 1971. The Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament remained together throughout the campaign, but then it formed the Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA) which grew in numbers.

In fall 1958, Canadian Prime Minister John Diefenbaker agreed to house 56 American Bomarc missiles in North Bay, Ontario and La Macaza, Quebec, in keeping with the terms of the NORAD agreement. The American manufacturers designed the Bomarc missiles to be fitted with nuclear warheads, but when the missiles arrived in Canada, the nuclear warhead parts had not yet arrived.

When the Canadian public learned that nuclear warheads might soon enter the country, many began to speak out against their introduction. The main leaders of the movement for Canadian nuclear disarmament were the Voice of Women (VOW), the Canadian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CCND, formerly the Canadian Committee for the Control of Radiation Hazards, or CCCRH), and the Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CUCND). These organizations had differing goals. VOW aimed to achieve universal disarmament and the cessation of nuclear testing; CCCRH aimed to end nuclear testing immediately and to enforce this rule through country inspections by the United Nations; and CUCND aimed to achieve unilateral nuclear disarmament in Canada.

These leaders engaged in the following nonviolent methods in order to urge the government to reject US nuclear missiles: (1) created petitions, (2) wrote letters to Parliament, Cabinet ministers, and ministers, (3) placed advertisements in local newspapers, (4) held vigils and press conferences, (5) produced radio and television shows favoring nuclear disarmament, and (6) held marches.

Prime Minister Diefenbaker wavered in his decision to accept or reject the nuclear warheads that accompanied the Bomarc missiles. Diefenbaker's Cabinet held differing views: the Minister of External Relations, Howard Green, advocated for disarmament, while the Minister of Defense, Douglas Harkness, advocated for Canadian storage of nuclear weapons. Eventually, with increasing public dissent over the storage of the nuclear warheads, Prime Minister Diefenbaker in 1961 announced to CCCRH that nuclear weapons would not be allowed into Canada.

After the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, however, Canadian public opinion shifted, and more people favored nuclear weapons in Canada. Prime Minister Diefenbaker continued in his indecision, though, which led Minister of Defense Harkness to call for a Vote of Confidence in Parliament on 3 February 1963. Parliament members officially voted that they did not have confidence in Diefenbaker's government and leadership, and in mid-April of 1963, elections were held for a new government.

Although CCND, VOW, and CUCND held public meetings, interviewed candidates, created radio and television shows, and placed advertisements in newspapers promoting the election of a government in favor of disarmament. The Liberal Party, which was in favor of nuclear weapon storage, won the election with 41% of the vote.

Consequently, on 31 December 1963, the Canadian government installed nuclear warheads in North Bay, Ontario, and on 10 January 1964, the government installed them in La Macaza, Quebec. CCND lobbied parliament and distributed antinuclear literature, while VOW held antinuclear Mother's Day vigils and sent delegations of members to attend NATO discussions in Paris and the Netherlands.

Perhaps the largest demonstrations against the La Macaza nuclear weapons were organized by the CUCND. On 13 June 1964, members of this student organization began a 10 day vigil and sit-down campaign at the military base to protest the nuclear warheads, and on 31 August 1964, members again engaged in a vigil and sit-down campaign.

On the morning of 13 June 1964, six CUCND members lined up along the road towards La Macaza and held a vigil. Eight days later, on 21 June 1964, at least one hundred people had joined in. Three protest leaders, Andre Cardinal, Michel Boyer, and Christian Sivrel, reached out to the neighboring community in order to explain the protests and gain community support. They met with mixed reactions, support from people who disliked the missile base and resentment from people who disliked the introduction of protesters into their neighborhood.

Seventeen of the 100 people who gathered on 21 June 1964 agreed to engage in a sit-down in front of the gate to the military base. After rehearsing their advance towards the gate in the morning, these 17 people approached the gate at 2:30 pm singing "We Shall Overcome." When military police denied them entry into the military base, the protesters sat in front of the gate for a total of 17 hours. As more guards arrived in the morning, the protesters remained, singing peace songs and reading books. The commanding officers ordered the removal of the protesters, so guards dragged the 17 protesters into nearby ditches while the other demonstrators looked on. The protesters defied this forceful relocation by moving back to their places in front of the gate. The guards' dragging of protesters and the protesters' returning to the gate lasted for a total of two hours until guards confined the protesters to the ditches and blocked them from returning to the front of the gate. During this two-hour time period, though, the guards became more sympathetic towards the protesters and "hated dragging [them] around" from the gate to the ditches. As one protester, Mr. Eilert Frerichs, explained, "At one point, we had reached an agreement with [the guards] that all they had to do was reach and touch us and we would go to the ditch...everybody had to be non-violent, including them. And I think, in that process...they were no longer air force police, but they were normal men, forced to do something they didn't want to do." By the afternoon of 22 June 1964, the protest concluded for no apparent reason. The protesters stood outside the military base on one side of the barbed wire and the air force police stood inside the base on the other side. The protesters prayed and when they started to sing We Shall Overcome, one of the protesters reached out for the hand of an airman, who took the outstretched hand.

A second protest of similar methodology occurred from 31 August 1964 to 9 September 1964 because protest organizers wanted to spark a widespread campaign of nonviolent direct action at military bases. During this second protest, 150 demonstrators participated in a vigil along the road to the base, and from 7 September to 9 September over 59 demonstrators sat down at the gate entrance to the base. In addition to having more protesters from more diverse backgrounds in the second protest, the military were not as friendly during this second protest. The Commanding Officer told his airmen to pay no attention to the protesters' messages and that the protesters were affiliated with the Communist Party. According to a newspaper published by the protesters, the airmen were considerably rougher than they had been in June. As in June, it is not clear why the September protest ended.

The protests at missile bases did not lead to the removal of the Bomarc air missiles and their nuclear warheads from Canada, but the demonstrations inspired further civil disobedience campaigns in Canada. The Bomarc campaign also led to the development of the Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA), which gained more supporters and later pushed for even greater national political change during the era of the New Left government. An unconnected nonviolent demonstration at the Comox military base took place in 1965.

It was not until 1971 when the Canadian government announced its intentions to remove the Bomarc missiles, and they did not officially remove the missiles and their accompanying nuclear warheads until 1972.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced by the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), which spearheaded nonviolent nuclear disarmament campaigns that then were taken up by many Canadian disarmament supporters, including CUCND.

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

The sit-down was significant because it was one of the largest civil disobedience campaigns to ever occur at a Canadian military base. Many of the participants had never participated in nonviolent direct action before.

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

Meghan Kelly, 27/09/2015

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