



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Texans defend Sierra Blanca community against nuclear waste disposal, 1996-1998

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

05 June

1996

to: 22 October

1998

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Sierra Blanca, Texas*

Goals:

To defend Sierra Blanca against nuclear waste disposal.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 019. Wearing of symbols

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 038. Marches
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 5th segment:

- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 6th segment:

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Environment

Group characterization:

- environmentalists
- townspeople

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Bill Addington, Save Sierra Blanca, Sierra Blanca Legal Defense Fund (SBLDF)

Partners:

Residents of Hudspeth County

External allies:

Mexican officials, congresspeople and citizens, Sierra Club; Citizen's Awareness Network, Nuclear Information and Resource Center of Vermont

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Mexican citizens
- Save Sierra Blanca
- Sierra Blanca Legal Defense Fund

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Mexican government officials

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Citizen's Awareness Network
- Nuclear Information and Resource Center of Vermont
- Sierra Club

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 2 months and 20 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Governor George W. Bush, Texas Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Authority (TLLRWDA), Merco Joint Venture, Bernie Sanders

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Addington was met with repressive violence tied to Merco such as the arson of his lumber yard, shootings, surveillance and death threats.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaign successfully diverted the nuclear waste project, but Texas continues to seek a disposal site. SBLDF has taken on the responsibility of fighting any site chosen in favor of more environmentally sound options.

In 1991, the Texas Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Authority (TLLRWDA) began searching for a disposal site for dangerous toxic waste in the Hudspeth County area. According to the 1983 La Paz agreement, Hudspeth County falls in a no-contamination zone surrounding the Mexican border. Regardless, the TLLRWDA selected Sierra Blanca, a small low-income town in an environmentally fragile region.

In 1992, local Bill Addington responded by forming the foundation “Save Sierra Blanca,” which opposed the establishment of the disposal site and rallied support among the primarily Spanish speaking population, who did not have access to information about disposal. In 1992, Texas agreed to dispose of nuclear waste from Maine and Vermont in exchange for \$55 million, which caused outrage in the local group. The group then allied with the Nuclear Responsibility Network to form the Sierra Blanca Legal Defense Fund (SBLDF).

On 5 June 1996, the SBLDF dispatched five hundred children from Acuna, Mexico, along with their parents, mayor, and city council members to Austin to protest the establishment of the disposal site to Governor George W. Bush. The campaigners marched, and conducted a sit-in and a vigil.

By August 1997, seven hundred people in Sierra Blanca (almost everyone in the town) signed a petition against the establishment of the waste site. Twenty other Texas counties, as well as ten cities and two Mexican states had passed resolutions against the disposal of nuclear waste in their jurisdictions as well. Addington and his supporters led a demonstration at an El Paso community college, competing for attention with a rally for George W. Bush. At the demonstration, the SBLDF members carried banners, while Addington and several others also donned costumes with nuclear symbols on them.

The protest gained enough media attention to attract the notice of Merco Joint Venture, the corporation who the TLLRWDA had

contracted for disposal. Merco retaliated against the SBLDF by burning Addington's lumberyard, submitting his property to surveillance, and even at one point threatening his life.

On 16 September 1997, the U.S. House of Representatives stopped the Texas-Vermont-Maine compact in a vote of 243 to 176. This marked the first time nuclear disposal had even been debated as a possibly negative solution. Governor Bush wanted the compact reintroduced; his forces combined with that of the nuclear lobby made sure it was passed when next voted on in 1997.

When President Bill Clinton signed the bill into law, Addington and allies went directly to the media. Sources such as the Washington Post and the New York Times reported on the "environmental racism" of the Sierra Blanca case. 60% of the town's residents were poor and Latino, yet the compact and the TLLRWDA's environmental report had not been translated into Spanish and distributed. The state department had already been receiving pressure from the Mexican government, and the negative American press did not help.

On 16 April 1998, several months before the Texas Radioactive Waste Bill was set to go before Congress, Mexico's Green Ecologist Party announced that several of its members and the Mexico City councilman Jose Luis Rodriguez began a 24-day hunger strike. They spent the duration of the strike on the bridge between Juarez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. They carried letters of protest from Mexican Congressmen, which pointed to the violation of the La Paz Treaty.

On 11 May 1998, twelve Sierra Club activists met with Vermont Representative Bernie Sanders, but he would not denounce the bill. In response, the campaigners marched on Governor George W. Bush's home in protest of the upcoming bill. There was no response from the governor.

On 26 July 1998, three hundred Mexicans and Americans blockaded the Juarez-El Paso bridge in protest of the bill. That same month, the SBLDF sent two representatives to an environmental rally in Vermont to speak on behalf of their community. Campaigners from Vermont were so inspired by the SBLDF representatives that they staged protests at a nearby nuclear plant. The Citizens' Awareness Center and the Nuclear Information and Resource Center supported and organized these protests.

Although the bill passed on 20 September 1998, Texas officials denied the necessary licensing for the establishment of a disposal site in the Sierra Blanca region due to vast social pressure ignited by the SBLDF and their partners. The project was officially shut down by the State of Texas on 22 October 1998.

Research Notes

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