

Report Back from the Battle for Sacred Ground

CrimethInc.

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Contents

The Battle	3
Riot on the Prairie	5
Aftermath	6
Considerations for Solidarity	7

For months, hundreds of people, including members of nearly a hundred different indigenous peoples, have mobilized to block the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. On October 27, police raiding the Sacred Ground camp encountered stiff resistance. We've just received the following first-hand report from comrades who participated in the defense of the camp. Describing some of the fiercest clashes indigenous and environmental movements in the region have seen in many years, they pose important questions about solidarity struggles.

The Battle

When we arrive on Wednesday, October 26, we can't find our contacts, the friends and friends of friends who have been vouched into the secretive Red Warrior camp. Word around the camp is that eviction is imminent for Sacred Ground, the only camp in the direct path of the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline. The tribe claims this land is territory granted to them in the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, and that they were using their own "eminent domain" to take it back when they set up the camp. We decide to set up at Sacred Ground and to figure out how to make ourselves useful in stopping its eviction.

The Sacred Ground camp is located about two miles north of the main camp on highway 1806. The main camp itself is just north of the Standing Rock Reservation, where two more NoDAPL camps, Rosebud and Sacred Stone, are located. Before arriving, we had seen images of barricades blocking Highway 1806 to the north of the Sacred Ground camp.

When we walk to that site, however, we find those barricades have been pushed to the sides of the road, the northernmost one turned into a kind of checkpoint. According to the people at the checkpoint, they were ordered to remove the blockade by the camp leaders, who plan on allowing the police to enter and evict the camp.

The "camp leaders" are hired Nonviolent Direct Action consultants. They are utilizing a classic strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience: they hope that the images of police evicting people in prayer will win them the sympathy of the public. The people we speak with at the checkpoint are clearly not buying this. But what can they do? Their elders have hired these people to stage-manage the moment.

After some conversation with the folks on the barricades and with the "camp leaders," it is decided that we'll leave the road open until the police actually arrive, and then we'll build up the barricades quickly in order to slow their progress. This will hopefully buy time to allow the people who want to get arrested while in prayer to assemble and prepare themselves. For what its worth, this plan was crafted with the approval of the "proper channels."

As soon as this course of action is proposed, some new organism bursts into life, and thirty people we've never met are loading logs and tires and barbed wire onto trucks in the middle of the night. A plan comes together for when and how to start blocking the road. The energy is electric; the possibility of a real physical defense of this strategically decisive camp is in the air and in people's conversations.

"I don't know who those 'leaders' are," a Native guy tells us as we throw tires on the side of the road. "They're not my elders. I came here to defend this camp, and I'm going to do what I have to." We still don't know where the fabled Red Warrior folks are, but we feel that we've found people we want to support in this battle.

This is the plan: the folks up the hill at the checkpoint are the first line of defense. When the cops come, they will get in the road and begin a prayer ceremony. They inform us they have no intention of moving until they are arrested or worse. While they block the road, it will be our job to build up the next barricade about a quarter mile down the road to buy time for the prayer circle to assemble in the camp. To us, this is not ideal, because it still means that the eviction will go through. But we also feel that we have very little agency in this situation. We're white. We just showed up. At least we'll be a part of putting up a fight, we tell ourselves. At least the police won't just be invited in.

We take shifts all night, trying to decode the flying objects in the sky. Is that a drone or a satellite? Is that the moon behind the clouds? Then why is it moving? Why is that surveillance plane flashing those lights over there? For hours, I have the feeling that we've stepped into some deep historical current, that this moment is connected to every other moment in which people waited to defend barricades against overwhelming adversaries. We joke and tell stories, we snap our attention to any movement on the hillside, we speculate and scheme. We receive new names based on stupid things we do or say. The night is long and cold and at dawn the sun is welcome.

The next morning, we learn that there has been another barricade all along, located on a bridge on Route 134, the only other entrance by which the police can access the Sacred Ground camp since all other entrances go through the Standing Rock reservation. Apparently this is what Red Warrior has been up to, and they have no intention of letting the police through. While that is exciting to hear, we can't understand why the same commitment to physically defend the space is absent here on Highway 1806.

Around midday, a line of police vehicles shows up blaring their sirens — but not on the highway. They are taking the access road beside the pipeline construction, where we have no defenses. People start parking their cars to block the access road and crowds start to gather. Word comes that the police are bringing in armored vehicles on the highway. We run to our posts at the second blockade and begin loading tires into the street. Just then, a truck pulls up and out steps a paid nonviolent consultant who is on his way to negotiate a mass arrest. He gathers the barricade crew in a circle and makes an impassioned plea for us to leave the road clear. "When people see the images of them arresting us and storming our teepees with guns, they will know our struggle is right."

Some people are convinced and begin removing the barbed wire. Our crew has a quick conversation. We aren't convinced by this guy, but we don't want to be the ones to disobey his orders — we don't want to make it easy for the police or media to deploy a narrative about "outside agitators," and we don't want to sabotage the possibility of other anarchists like us participating in this struggle. We decide we will check in with the Native guys we spent the night on the barricade with. When we ask about their reaction to the speech, we get a blunt response: "Fuck that guy." Our thoughts exactly.

As we're building the barricade, our new friends give us one rule: build it up as much as we want, but their elders say no fire. We agree to this. At this point, people are crowded up the hill at the first checkpoint; we begin to load our barricade materials into the street, leaving one lane open to enable our people to make it to the other side before the cops. We watch from a distance as the armored vehicles approach the crowd up ahead.

Then a blue car that had been up near the first checkpoint speeds down the hill toward us. It parks, blocking half the road. A Native woman gets out and stabs her own tires with a knife. A team removes her license plates, and soon another car blocks the other side of the road in similar

fashion. The cops are heading toward us, and word spreads that the other barricade is already on fire. People and horses are herded to our side of the blockade. Just then, the paid nonviolence consultant gets on top of one of the cars and attempts to deliver a speech to calm everyone down. He can barely get a word out before a Native kid gets up on the other car and starts chanting:

“BLACK SNAKE KILLAZ! BLACK SNAKE KILLAZ!”

As the crowd chants this over the guy who just negotiated a carefully orchestrated mass arrest with the cops, the barricade is lit and the fight is on. Bottles and stones are thrown at the police vehicles. But this only lasts for a moment before a line of elders and camp security forms to start pushing the combatants back from the barricade. Shouting matches and fistfights break out. There are Native folks of all ages on both sides of the long and disappointing struggle. Those opposing the physical confrontation succeed in pushing us back, enabling the police to form a line around the north side of the camp where the large crowds are gathered.

At this point, a truck is parked in the road with two people locked to the underside. Logs are piled up around the truck and two teepees are erected on either side of it. Some try to hold a line against the police, stretching teepee poles across a dozen people. Others hurl stones and logs at the cops and their vehicles. The chaos is overwhelming. A young warrior on horseback is tazed and falls to the ground. All around us, people are screaming from the effects of pepper spray. Flash-bang grenades are bursting in the air, mingling with rubber bullets and beanbag rounds. The screaming matches continue between those who want to fight back and those who want to be arrested while praying. The cops are already in the camp.

Over a painful hour, we are all pushed south of the only camp that blocked the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Over a hundred people are arrested, many of them charged with “conspiracy to endanger with fire” regardless of whether they were in any proximity to the flaming barricade. This seems calculated to drain our legal fund, since the bail is set at \$1500 each. Sacred Ground is lost.

Riot on the Prairie

As we ride south, smoke rises from a hill in the east. Some clever folks have taken advantage of the chaos to burn construction equipment. This gesture is greeted with cheers. In the other direction, smoke rises from a truck set aflame on the 134 Bridge. People are running to the top of a hill to the east. There we witness a chase: police in military gear pursuing two warriors on horses, who have apparently rallied a herd of buffalo at the police line back at camp. The cops shoot at the horses while trying to cut them off, as people scramble to remove a barbed wire fence for the horses to escape. They succeed with seconds to spare; the police ATVs turn back amid our curses.

Another barricade goes up where Route 134 meets Highway 1806. A crowd gathers at that intersection. It’s clear that this is the new front. As people are eating and planning their stand, shouts ring out: “STOP THE WHITE TRUCK!” We all run into the road to block a white pickup that is coming from the north. It turns off the road and tries to speed around us. Trucks from our side give chase, and the white truck is eventually rammed off the side of the road. The driver, a DAPL security guard who had pointed a gun at demonstrators up the hill, runs out of the truck carrying an AR-15 rifle. He is chased into a pond where an hour-long standoff ensues. Meanwhile,

his truck is looted, driven up the hill, and flipped onto the new barricade. It is set on fire, along with another car donated for the cause.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs police arrive from the south, disarm the DAPL security guard, and arrest him. They leave everyone else untouched and head back south. For us anarchists, this is a mind-boggling event. We'd heard the BIA police were "in support" of the protests, but we never expected them to treat the movement with such respect. Later, we hear a rumor that they actually turned away State Police from entering the reservation from the south, effectively preventing the police from kettling all of us.

As a cavalcade of armored vehicles and Hummers approach from the north, everyone falls back to a bridge on Highway 1806. This bridge is not on the reservation, but it is the only entrance from the north. Entire tree trunks are unloaded from trucks, constructing a substantial barricade. It includes a twelve-foot-tall solar-powered highway sign, the batteries from which are skillfully expropriated. The barricade catches fire. The police approach and hold a line.

For the following eight hours, America is over. Rocks and Molotov cocktails defend the barricade; a wall of plywood shields deflects rubber bullets and tear gas canisters. The partisans of nonviolence are gone, and the kind of combative energy that could have held Sacred Ground emerges in full force. The fight lasts into the early hours of the morning, when the police fire a large number of smoke grenades and use the cover to withdraw and retreat, leaving two military supply trucks blocking the road north of the bridge.

Those trucks too are set on fire, and the battle for the bridge is won.

Aftermath

After some sleep, we arrived at the bridge the next morning to find people holding a line north of the burnt military vehicles. The police and the National Guard were erecting concrete highway barriers about 50 feet north of the line — surrendering Highway 1806 as a functioning road, but also blocking those opposed to the pipeline from driving vehicles back toward the former site of the Sacred Ground camp.

It was just a couple dozen people holding the line with plywood shields; most of them were quite young. News media and other rubbernecks were milling about on the bridge, examining the burnt wreckage from the night before. After a while, an older Native man showed up, stepped out in front of the line, and spoke to us all: "I'm 78 years old. I'm an elder. I'm going to make a deal with the police to get you all off this bridge." Another older Native man, who had been holding a shield, shouted him down: "I'm 73 years old, and I am also an elder. And I'm saying we fight back! We hold our position!"

Soon camp "security" showed up with orders from their elders to clear the bridge and push us all back. They locked arms and formed a line to force us off the bridge. Tensions grew as those who wanted to hold it, both Native and non-Native, argued with each other. Once again, people who were "on our side," acting in the name of "the elders," did the work of the police for them.

"This is what they have always done to us!" the ones trying to hold the bridge told us. "They turn us against one another to pacify us!"

The people clearing us from the bridge didn't have arguments, just their bodies acting on behalf of "the elders," ignoring the contradiction that they were clearing elders, among others, from the bridge.

By the end of the day, not only was the bridge cleared, but the camp security had set up a line about a quarter of a mile up the road and wouldn't let anyone close to it. Tensions are high within the camp, as the partisans of physical resistance to the pipeline clash with those who believe that symbolic arrests will somehow stop it, and those who are solely focused on the historic gathering of Native tribes split by centuries of hostility.

When we return to our camp, we are pulled aside by a Native woman. She explains that she hears there are "agitators" in the camp and she's going to keep her eye on us. She is convinced that it wasn't Native folks who were fighting back the day before, but outsiders. A white comrade who has been here for months tells us that he was surrounded and threatened by four Native men, and was only saved by the fact that he knew all their names and could find Native warriors to vouch for him. Other contacts in Red Warrior communicate how delicate the situation is, explaining that the significance of the conversations taking place extends far beyond anything we can grasp as non-Native people. Any action we take autonomously could mess things up for everyone. We feel paralyzed, not knowing how to contribute to the efforts of those with whom we felt such intense affinity the night before.

Late that night, from the top of a hill in Sacred Stone camp, we watch as a two-mile-wide fire burns up the hillside from the main camp in the direction of the construction. We have no idea whether folks on our side set the fire as a sublime gesture of intimidation, or whether the forces of order have set it to scare people in the camp. We decide to believe the former, because we assume we'll never know the truth.

Considerations for Solidarity

The situation here is delicate. While the battle for Sacred Ground revealed that people involved in this struggle are willing and able to fight outside the restrictions of stage-managed civil disobedience, it is not clear how this could take place now that the strategic position blocking the path of the pipeline has been lost. Further, tensions are so high in the camps that it feels dangerous to reveal oneself as a partisan of the combatant energy expressed on Thursday.

Serious dilemmas confront non-Native anarchists who want to come to support the NoDAPL movement. On the one hand, this is a movement framed around indigenous rights and decolonial struggle. We can understand ourselves as allies or accomplices within this movement; if we assume that role, that means supporting the Native folks whose actions resonate with us while trying not to exacerbate conflicts within Native communities. While this approach may feel daunting in the current situation, more opportunities for support may open up soon.

On the other hand, this is a struggle against a pipeline and, like all struggles of our time, against the police who protect it. From this perspective, everyone who drinks water, understands the threat of climate change, and opposes the police has a stake in participating. From this perspective, carrying out autonomous actions seems justified. However, if we take that route, we should be careful not to ignore the decolonial significance of the movement, and not to burn bridges with indigenous people who might be our comrades in the movements to come.

Moreover, this struggle has received global attention thanks to the work done by people who have been here for months, including indigenous and non-indigenous warriors, some of whom are anarchist comrades. Anyone acting autonomously should consider the impact they will have on the plans and relationships these people have worked so hard to create.

For now, our plan is to inhabit this space, build relationships, and try to make ourselves useful to those who have chosen to struggle to stop this pipeline by means other than the law. We don't want to fully embrace the limitations of the "ally" role, nor do we want to act carelessly without an intimate knowledge of the situation in which we find ourselves, a situation we recognize that others have opened up.

For those who can come, particularly those with relevant skills: come. It is not clear what the next move is, but we will need all the help we can get when it occurs. If you do come, be prepared to spend time learning about the power dynamics at work in this space, and to have less agency than you might want until you have earned people's trust.

For those who cannot come, or who feel they would not be able to act with proper sensitivity to the significance of this moment for indigenous people: now is the time to spread the fight to other locations. We hope to see the whole range of tactics from the anti-police movements of recent years deployed against the infrastructure of extraction and the flows of capital in general. Actions of all sorts are encouraged, though not all of them will be helpful in this specific location.

This is a strategically crucial struggle in a pivotal moment. As our comrades have argued, if we don't act fast, we risk ceding the popular idea of resistance to the state to right wing forces that will recuperate our tactics and arguments to serve their own agenda. What has taken hold here in the struggle against the pipeline, and what burst into reality in the hours after the battle for Sacred Ground, has the potential to spread into a much wider resistance to extraction industries and ecocide. Let's make it spread — but let's do so with a sensitivity to the indigenous warriors and anarchist comrades who have thrown their lives into this struggle for months, who have shown the ability to organize and fight that has built the NoDAPL movement to this point.

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