

WHY WE SHOULD CAMP FOR PEACE:

When I hear the words 'London demo', I think of hours spent on a coach and a much shorter time marching round London with a banner and whistle. Substitute coach for train and the whole thing is a little less tiring perhaps, but I want to recommend a totally different, less exhausting and more inspiring way of demonstrating in London... with a tent.

The most powerful and memorable actions I have taken part in over the years are those where we've set up camp, even if only overnight. Camping allows time to sit, talk and be together, to share stories, to build trust and make new friends. The few times that I've done this, we have always been in the countryside - albeit spoiled by a military base - or at least in a field. The 'No More Fallujahs' peace camp was going to be in central London and I was sceptical beforehand about the desirability of camping in Parliament Square, which is essentially a large traffic island. However, the last time I stayed there overnight, to support Brian Haw's protest, I was in a bivi bag under a tarp, so maybe this was a step up...

The website www.rememberfallujah.org describes the background to the weekend of action, of which the 24-hour Peace Camp was just one part:

On 8 Nov 2004, after more than two months of aerial attacks, the US - with British support - began its second major assault on Fallujah, devastating it and killing hundreds of civilians. UK forces supported the attack, with hundreds of troops redeployed to form part of a 'ring of steel' around the city. The scale of the attack - and its effect on civilians - was unprecedented in the bloody history of the invasion and occupation, yet the crimes committed in Fallujah received little attention here and have quickly been forgotten. A year after the attack the New York Times described Fallujah as 'virtually a police state, with random checkpoints and frequent street patrols by marines and Iraqi soldiers'... and Sunday Times reporter Hala Jaber found it 'impossible not to be shocked by the devastation' with 'fields of rubble stretch[ing] for as far as the eye can see.' This July the rubble was still there and an estimated 50,000 people had yet to return to the city. Moreover, more recent US military offensives in Ramadi, Haditha, Qaim, Tal Afar and elsewhere, have killed many more civilians and created thousands more refugees.

'No More Fallujahs' was a three-day programme of non-violent civil disobedience in and around London to mark the second anniversary of the 2004 attack. The action called for an immediate end to the US/UK military occupation of Iraq, for reparations and debt cancellation to allow the Iraqi people to rebuild their country, and for the prosecution of all those responsible for war crimes in Iraq. Organisers of the weekend, the London Mass Action Group, did not seek authorisation for the camp, nor was authorisation sought for the 'Naming the Dead' ceremony, in defiance of the widely criticised and discredited Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, (SOCPA) which does not permit unauthorised demonstrations within 1 km of Parliament. As a result, those events which took place within this area during the weekend rendered all participants liable to prosecution under the Act. More information about SOCPA can be found in issue 18 of WPJN.



Naming the Dead at Northwood

The first part of the action took place at Northwood, Middlesex, the military control centre for all operations abroad. Police must have outnumbered protesters by about three to one. This unnecessarily large presence and their insistence on standing in the road caused a lot of traffic problems - people have been convicted of 'obstruction of the highway' for much less. Their persistent attempts to persuade us to enter a fenced 'pen' to earn the right to negotiate were gently rebuked and threats of a Section 14 order and arrests politely ignored. We held a remembrance ceremony on a grass verge opposite the base, reading out the names of the dead and pinning these onto a map of Iraq. People came forward to share their thoughts - an ex-US army serviceman, people from Voices and Justice Not Vengeance, someone who had spent time in Fallujah. In spite of their threats, the police stood by. When the ceremony was over, some people decided to stay and hold a longer vigil outside the main gates. The police really didn't want the rest of us to walk round the corner to meet the big red bus which would ferry us into central London; as we turned into the lane, we realised why - vanloads of police reinforcements were parked up along the road.

In contrast, there was not a single cop in sight at the US Embassy which was our next stop. More people spoke, a vigil was held and leaflets distributed to passers-by. Afterwards, we continued leafleting all the way along Oxford Street en route to the non-violent direct action training to prepare us for the peace camp.

After the training and a delicious, late-night vegan curry in Chapel Market, Islington, we headed for Wapping and a night in our 'pop-up' tents in the gym of a disused school. In the morning we packed up, took a stroll along the Thames in the autumn sunshine and arrived in Parliament Square at noon. The police did their best to disrupt the opening circle, handing out leaflets with SOCPA 'designated zone' maps on the back and arrest threats on the front while the 'Naming the Dead' remembrance ceremony was still going on, but their efforts were in vain. The occasion was more powerful than the strong arm of the law. After this, the tents were put up without incident and the camp established. The tents were decorated with artwork and placards, with a clear visual message for the TV cameras. By this time over 100 people had gathered. Later, while Amanda performed extracts from Jo Wilding's book 'Don't Shoot the

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Clowns', the police tried to leaflet again and were studiously ignored. A few arrests were made in the following hours, with the police very obviously choosing their targets - how is anybody's guess since everyone taking part in the camp was in breach of Section 132 of SOCPA.

One by one the arrestees drifted back to the camp through the evening - no-one had been charged. Late on, after the tents had been rearranged into a tidy circle, there were still over 70 people taking part in workshops, talking, singing, drumming, dancing, and enjoying wonderful falafel and salad. Around 40 stayed overnight. Before we went to bed, we tied each tent to its neighbours using the guy ropes. We felt that there was every possibility that the police would attempt to break up the camp during the night, but having the tents linked in this way was more symbolic than practical and I tied my knots with a view to being able to undo them easily the next day. Nevertheless, it kept the FIT (Forward Intelligence Team) boys out of mischief while they studied and photographed the strings and knots in great detail. Maybe the cops were flummoxed by the intelligence on our knotcraft; in any event and against all the odds they let us be and we enjoyed as peaceful a night as it's possible to enjoy with a constant roar of traffic, Big Ben, and the rumbling of the Underground.

On Monday morning, in a continuation of the remembrance ceremony which had been so rudely interrupted by police a year before, leading to the convictions of Maya Evans and Milan Rai under SOCPA (see book review on page 13), I joined Maya and Mil outside Downing Street where, along with others from the camp, we read out the names of Iraqi civilians and British soldiers who had been killed in Iraq. The police tried to hand out more leaflets and then gave everyone ten minutes to reconsider their position. The name reading began at 9am - one name every 30 seconds - Iraqi people and British soldiers. So many lives lost. So little time spent remembering the things our government would have us forget. Ten minutes passed, then half an hour, then an hour. The name reading continued as the police looked on. A couple of people leaving the pen were arrested for refusing to give names and addresses, but released without charge almost instantly on arrival at the police station. No attempt was made to stop the name-reading. After three hours, the group returned to Parliament Square unchallenged by the police, although Maya and Mil were issued with letters requiring them to attend Charing Cross police station at a later date.

Some of those who'd stayed at the camp spent the morning leafleting outside the Houses of Parliament. The first group was approached by the police and two people were eventually arrested after some uncertainty on the cops' part: *Weren't you arrested yesterday? Should we arrest you again?* The second leafleting group which moved in to replace the first received a half-hearted warning and was then left to carry on in peace. Those arrested were released so quickly that they were back in the Square in time to help take down the tents. In the face of determined mass peaceful defiance of SOCPA, the police were looking increasingly embarrassed.*

For me, this weekend clarified a number of things: firstly, we must continue to find ways of remembering

the terrible human cost of our government's interventions in Iraq, in Afghanistan and elsewhere - we will not forget; secondly, we need to keep challenging these interventions, along with SOCPA and all the other repressive pieces of legislation designed to keep us quiet and frighten us into inaction - we need more camps, more actions, more civil disobedience; thirdly, we need to encourage others to join us.

'No More Fallujahs' was a moving, inspiring and empowering experience. Come along and take part next time.



Banner in Parliament Square

*This restraint on the part of the police contrasts sharply with the continued harassment of Barbara Tucker and Steve Jago, who have been repeatedly targeted and victimised by police for their actions in connection with Brian Haw's protest in Parliament Square. On November 22nd, the day after winning the right to have most of her SOCPA cases heard together - bad news for the police - Barbara was demonstrating peacefully with Steve when they were brutally attacked by a gang of police officers who inflicted a catalogue of injuries on the pair during a totally unnecessary and violent arrest.

Brian was in court from 11-14 December in the first test of the reasonableness of the conditions which police are allowed arbitrarily to impose under SOCPA. The police tied themselves in knots trying to justify the conditions on the grounds of the supposed security risk posed by Brian's display, while being forced to admit that they had never carried out a proper security search in over five years. It seems that Brian could be in breach for sleeping under a tarp, for allowing his supporters to bring bags along, or even for having a water bottle! The case has been adjourned until January 22nd to allow the judge to consider the defence submission that Brian has no case to answer.

Meanwhile, Maya Evans and Milan Rai were back at Charing Cross police station on 14 December, where they were both charged with organising and taking part in an 'unauthorised demonstration'. Maya and Mil, along with Aqil Shaer and Stephen Blum, have been awaiting the result of their High Court appeal against previous SOCPA convictions. On December 20th, the court dismissed the appeal. Maya said afterwards: *We are determined to continue resisting this unjust law, through the courts and through peaceful protest.*