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USA

Eyewitness at Standing Rock

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REBECCA KEMBLE IS an alder (representative) on the Madison, Wisconsin Common Council. She organized the Council to pass a unanimous resolution on September 20, 2016 expressing solidarity with the Indigenous resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Rebecca and her husband travelled to deliver the petition to Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Chairman David Archambault II. They were at Standing Rock for three days. She spoke with David Finkel from the ATC editorial board on November 23 about what she witnessed and experienced. Thanks to Ann Finkel for assistance with transcribing the interview; photos by Rebecca Kemble.[ATC]

Against the Current: Please describe what you saw, especially how the protectors were organized, and what happened.

Rebecca Kemble: We arrived there on Sunday, October 9th, and slept in the car with our dog. Early next morning October 10 – Indigenous Peoples' Day – there was a sunrise prayer ceremony organized at the camp. My friend Patricia Hammel, an attorney on the legal support team, and I attended a prayer ceremony, along with 300 people from camp. There were Lakota pipe carriers, mostly grandmothers, and also singers and drummers as part of the ceremony.

After the ceremony there was an announcement that there would be another ceremony based on the Eagle and Condor prophecy [an ancient Amazon people's prophecy – ed.] that would take place on the pipeline site a couple miles away. At the ceremony there would be Indigenous youth from Argentina representing the south, and Indigenous people representing the North. Patricia and I, in a convoy of 60-100 vehicles) drove to the pipeline site.

There was a teepee structure erected on the site with 16 poles and prayer ties wrapped all around it, and that's where the dancing and ceremony happened. As I was getting out of the car, Patricia put on a green National Lawyers Guild observer's hat. I said that I had legal training and had my camera, so I also got a green hat. I went there not to participate in the ceremony, but to keep my eyes and my camera on the police.

As the ceremony concluded, the master of ceremonies announced that the police were moving in. I saw and filmed the police moving in. He said: If you are not ready to risk arrest, go back up to the cars. Sixteen people were prepared to engage in civil disobedience by sitting peacefully under the teepee structure.

ATC: So they sat under the teepee?

RK: Yes, in a circle. Grandmother Theresa Black Owl, a Lakota grandmother, a pipe carrier, was among them, and she began conducting another prayer ceremony with the pipes.

Now as people were trying to leave the site, which was maybe 100 to 150 yards off the road, many dozens and dozens of police in military formation came into the area in different groups, blocking people's ability to leave.

No "no trespassing" signs were posted, and I didn't hear any "disperse" order from the police. What I saw in one of the first lines was all Wisconsin State patrol – Dane County Sheriff's deputies, from my county – who formed a line close to the road, kettled people in and stopped them trying to leave even though they were trying to leave.

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Another line was formed by North Dakota officers from local counties. There were also some from Marathon County, Wisconsin in that line. So we were blocked.

My thought process was that I was going to document arrests of people in the teepee. I stayed back from the police, but close enough to see people in the teepee. All of a sudden from that line of police an officer with a megaphone, who I later found out was from Cass County, North Dakota said: "If we touch you, you are under arrest" — just this shocking statement.

I was trying to back up but was hemmed in by pipes that weren't installed yet — very large — with two lines of police hemming us in on the other side.

Next thing I knew, the officer with the megaphone, whose name I know now is Jesse Jahner, a Cass County Sheriff's deputy, ran at me, accosted me, grabbed my arm with my camera in it and dragged me back toward the teepee.

He was putting my arms behind my back. I was trying to protect my camera and close the view finder and turn it off. He yelled at me: "Now I'm arresting you for destruction of evidence."

So I'm facing four charges: destruction of evidence, criminal trespass, engaging in a riot, and resisting arrest. Those are state charges, with a penalty of up to two years in jail.

ATC: How long were you held?

RK: I stayed overnight in jail. I was strip searched, many of us were barefoot; we were not given socks or shoes; we got no blankets or food until late in the night.

One of the Morton County deputies said, when we kept asking for things: This jail was only built for 40 people and there are 80 people now. So they clearly weren't prepared to handle us.

ATC: Is there a trial date?

RK: Yes, January 12th. My attorney is going to file motions to dismiss, within the next week or two, so we'll see how that goes.

ATC: Obviously you've been following this since then, as things have become even more intense. How would you describe the situation now with what's going on and what's at stake?

RK: I would describe it as war: The state is at war against the Standing Rock tribe and all of their allies who are peacefully attempting to protect the water, which they see as threatened by this pipeline that is going to go under the Missouri River, and is already going over 200 streams and tributaries, and threatens the drinking water of 17 million people downstream.

What was alarming and new about attacks this past Sunday night (November 20) was that the police did not seem to be interested in making any arrests or in controlling the situation. What they seemed to be interested in doing was hurting people — that's what they wanted to do.

The vicious attacks went on for seven hours, using chemical weapons, tear gas, concussion grenades, pepper spray, and water cannons, in below freezing 20-degree weather.

The state of North Dakota is not even pretending to protect the rights of people; they are protecting the financial investments of the global elite in the Dakota access pipeline and they are prepared to injure, maim and possibly even kill people to protect that investment.

ATC: What has the Obama administration done in this escalating crisis?

RK: Nothing “effectively nothing. They have “requested” the pipeline people to slow down construction, but with no enforcement, and the companies doing the construction have ignored that request.

Obama said he would give it a few weeks “for things to play out” “a crass, heartless statement to make, when people are under attack by state forces. How many more people have to get hurt, and do people have to die, in this “playing out”?

ATC: If people want to go, what should they prepare for?

RK: I would tell them to prepare to do several things:

• Be humble, and accept the guidance of the elders at camp.

• Go there ready to work.

• Bring everything you need to be self-sufficient; don't strain the resources of camp for the people who are living there.

• The came is steeped in prayer and ceremony, so be respectful of what is happening; participate if you can, and if you can't, be respectful and allow other people to do their prayer and ceremony.

The historical resonances of this struggle are strong. These are the descendants of people who dealt the U.S. army its only defeat on U.S. soil, who vanquished Custer and the 17th Cavalry in the Battle of Greasy Grass or the Little Big Horn.

This is the place where the U.S. army set up the forward operating bases to conduct the Indian wars, which have never stopped and are now coming back full circle. They changed from military assaults to economic, to cultural (boarding schools), now back to full-scale military assault on the Indigenous people of this land.

Standing Rock people understand this, and so do their tribal and non-tribal allies. Many are prepared to die to protect land and water. This needs to be understood by North Dakota, by the federal government, and by anyone who would go there to support them.

POSTSCRIPT: Following the December 4 Army Corps of Engineers announcement denying the final pipeline permit, ATC asked Rebecca what had happened with the Dane County personnel at Standing Rock, and how she sees the new situation.

RK: Dane County Sheriff Mahoney recalled his 13 officers after they had been deployed for one week, due to community pressure.

Energy Transfer Partners don't care about the law or legal orders, as evidenced by their press release today?. They just care about not alienating investors and creditors. That's what their recent merger with Sunoco Logistics was all about – spreading the really bad risk that DAPL has become.

The only real hope for stopping DAPL has been to delay the completion long enough so that the investors pull out and creditors start calling in their debts. If the Army Corps is unwilling to physically force them to remove the drilling rig and dismantle the military compound around it in order to enforce this decision, DAPL construction will continue.

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