

Justice Denied

By Gerald R. Lotierzo - PACNY

A dark day for justice and fairness in the Muscogee County Courthouse in Columbus, Georgia occurred on Saturday, November 20, 2010 at Ft. Benning Georgia. Columbus Recorder's Court Judge Michael Cielinski can only be described as a bully masquerading as a defender of blind justice.

On Friday, November 19th sixteen Central New Yorkers arrived in Columbus, Georgia once again to march in front of the gate at Fort Benning to protest the existence of the School of the Americas (aka Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation). Ever since the execution of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in El Salvador on November 16, 1989 by soldiers trained by Fort Benning military personnel, protesters have stood at the gate in mid November demanding the closure of this School of Assassins. Those six Jesuits had been outspoken advocates for the poor and critics of human rights abuses committed by the Salvadorian government. This notorious U.S. Army School's graduates continue to be linked to decades of documented human rights atrocities and massacres throughout Central and South America.

The protesters have always been committed to the philosophy of non-violence and those who wanted to commit acts of civil disobedience were prepared to accept the consequences. Since 1990, there have been close to 300 convictions of human rights activists who have served nearly 100 years of collective jail and prison time. The recent relationships marchers had with the Columbus police at times were cordial and respectful but not this year as the Federal, City and State authorities randomly accosted and arrested innocent bystanders. Twenty-four were arrested on city and state charges, including unlawful assembly, failure to disperse, and parading without a permit. Two were charged but not taken into custody. Some were blockading the highway leading into Fort Benning with a sign that read, "Stop: This is the End of the Road for the SOA" and intended to be arrested. But many of those arrested were not intending to risk arrest but were swept up as they walked back to their cars after they left the permitted protest following the vigil on Saturday. These included four credentialed journalists and a Columbus, Georgia barber, who came out of his barbershop to take a photo of the protest. A minister from Tennessee walking side by side with his wife was arrested walking to his bus in the parking lot but she was not.

What these arrests reminded me was how justice was meted out to African-Americans in the South and continues to be to this very day throughout the United States. Anti-war advocates are presently facing the same treatment in Minnesota and Chicago. Justice on Sunday, November 21st was not based on fact, evidence, or testimony but determined by Judge Michael Cielinski before he entered the courtroom. The judge listened to the stories of the Columbus police who testified that they warned the marchers several times to move but the marchers never heard any warning save the directive to move to the sidewalk. Yet they were apprehended as they did.

But never doubt our commitment because we will endure and never give up the struggle to shut down this killing facility for we know that peacemakers are blessed and they are called sons and daughters of God.