

Civil Disobedience at WIPP in New Mexico

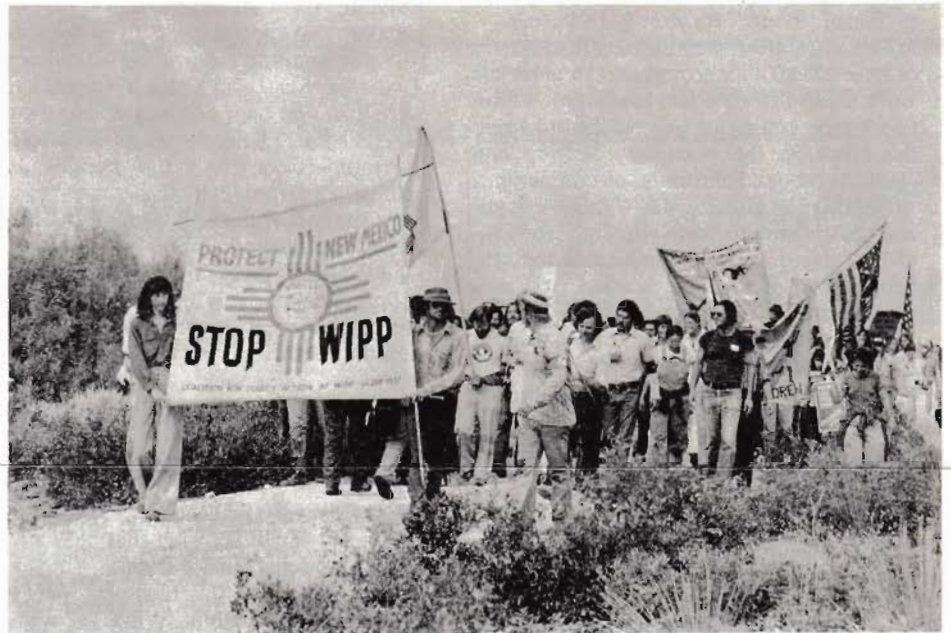
By Dorie Bunting

Protesters began to gather at Florencia, New Mexico, a small town south of Carlsbad, on Friday evening, September 4. The occasion was a long-planned civil disobedience action at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), a projected national nuclear waste repository on which work began in June. This action, a culmination of years of opposition by all legal modes, had first been set for August, but was delayed a month to give us more time and to allow the weather to cool a little. We had anticipated health problems from heat and dehydration. Instead, it was now pouring rain! It continued to rain Saturday, but stopped long enough for us to stage a spirited demonstration before the Department of Energy WIPP offices in Carlsbad, which is 35 miles northwest of the WIPP site. The demo included a simulated truckload of nuclear waste, a magnificent nuclear dragon, and other street theater figures.

At a Saturday night gathering in the community center of Florencia, graciously provided us by the Florencia Land Rights Council, a Chicano organization providing health and other services to the people of the town, we sat in a large circle, discussed and took heart at the widespread representation of communities in New Mexico. People had come from Raton on the Colorado border, from Ruidoso on the southwest side and from Carlsbad, nearby.

Continuing grey skies mercifully withheld their water on Sunday, so that we could leaflet in the town, do a work project of cleaning up a town park and erecting some play equipment, and meet outdoors under parachute tents to discuss and roll play our C.D. strategy. In the evening, we caravanned in cars the 15 miles to the WIPP site to do a balloon release. We pulled into a cleared space which DOE officials had said we could use. A few hundred yards away a huge drilling rig was roaring away as it relentlessly ground out huge holes 2000-feet down into the salt beds, the chosen repository stratum for the nuclear wastes. Large yellow on black signs on the sides of the roads warned, "Rattlesnake Area." Put there for us?

After blowing up the balloons printed with "Save Our Children," and affixing informative cards to them, we formed a huge circle, about 100 strong. The balloons were set loose and soon faded away above us. Just then, a plane flew down and landed on an adjacent road, cars racing after it. Police? DOE officials? No, CBS News. As we stood there, singing or in silence, a little girl with three balloons, walked to and fro



Walking towards the WIPP site in New Mexico.

Photo by Ken McCormack

in the center of our circle, releasing her balloons one after another. A more poignant and appropriate scene could hardly have been arranged with intention.

On Labor Day morning, September 7, the weather held out, overcast and cool. We again assembled at the cleared area to make final plans after seeing the dozen or so sheriff officers behind a simple long saw horse barricade. With 21 C.D.ers, we decided we would go under the barrier, seven at a time. When we reached the barricade, Andrés read a statement in Spanish, and Rosalie read it in English, stating the reasons for our action.

The first C.D. contingent passed easily under the barricade only to find that the guards and officers drew back some 300 yards to a second barrier. When we reached the middle of this buffer zone, an officer on the side began warning us with a bullhorn that if we advanced we would be arrested for trespassing. At the next barricade, the first seven of us sat down and were arrested; Likewise the following contingents. All but I went limp, and were hauled to vehicles. The two chicano men received obviously rougher treatment. Soon we were all speeding off in sheriffs' cars to Carlsbad to spend the night in the Eddy County Jail.

On Tuesday morning, at the arraignment, bail was set at \$500 each. A man and wife in the opposition group in Carlsbad put up their property for bond, and we were released on Tuesday afternoon. Craig Simpson, who pled "no contest," was sentenced to two days and \$50, but refused to pay the fine, so was sent to jail for a 10-day term.

The action received local and national publicity far beyond what we expected, in part because seven newsmen were arrested with us for following us into the forbidden zone to film the arrests. The local *Carlsbad Current Argus* carried a long story on the first two pages.

This being my first act of civil disobedience, I am most impressed with it as a means of jarring others to think by confronting them with acts contrary to usual or expected behavior. Channels of communication are opened with officials and people who are stimulated to see things in a new light. *Que viva la no-violencia!*

Update

On October 8, the 20 protestors who pled not guilty were found guilty and sentenced to 30 days and a \$250. fine. A local businessman posted bail for all of them, and they are out pending appeal.

James Peck—Portrait of a CO

The War Resisters League, in conjunction with Gallery 345 (a political art gallery) presented a retrospective in photographs, posters and slides, of non-violent resistance through the life of one radical activist for over 40 years. Opening night was October 10, just a few days after Jim Peck, the subject of show, was released from jail. He had spent five days at Rikers Island rather than pay a \$25 fine stemming from an arrest at a civil disobedience action against the neutron bomb in New York City last summer.

Dorie Bunting, a long-time activist, is on the WRL National Committee and is active with the Albuquerque WRL Local.