

The Merchants of Death

Bill Quigley

Using hammers and bolt cutters, peace activists repeatedly broke into weapon plants and damaged weapons in Sweden. Activists from the Swedish group OFOG/Avrusta admitted damaging twenty high explosive grenade launchers as well as internal parts to a Howitzer 77. Five people were arrested. Two remain in jail. Two activists who were arrested and released were re-arrested after they returned to the weapons plant to do more damage. A fifth person was arrested Saturday [October 18, '08] in another break in. All are facing trial on charges from criminal damage to trespass at places of national security.

Members of the Swedish peace and disarmament group OFOG/Avrusta say they have been preparing for more than a year to carry out the actions. OFOG, which loosely translates as the word mischief, is a network of activists working for a nuclear free and demilitarized world. Avrusta is Disarm in English. The group released information to the press announcing their actions and posted videos of their entry and damage on You Tube. [See : http://www.ofog.org/avrusta_aktionsvideo]

At about 2:30 a.m. Thursday [October 15, 2008] morning, activists approached the BAE Systems weapons facility in Karlskoga, Sweden, about 240 kilometers away from Stockholm. According to statements to the press, they used bolt cutters to cut open a hole in the security fence and entered. They left behind a banner welcoming others which said "The door is open –you are free to start disarming." The activists used hammers to damage internal parts like cooling aggregates and hydraulic cylinders for the Howitzer 77. A fully operational Howitzer 77 can fire 6 rounds every second for 20 minutes and has a firing range of 30 kilometers. Inside, media reports note that the duo managed to affix a poster to the door which said "In this factory are manufactured weapons that are used to wage wars–Disarma-ment is underway." Disarmament activists, Cattis Laska, 24, and Pelle Strinlund, 37, were arrested and charged with trespassing and criminal damage. Laska is a youth leader and Strinlund is a writer. Both remain in jail pending a hearing.

Simultaneously, other activists entered a weapons facility run by Saab in Eskilstuna, Sweden, about 135 kilometers away. According to OFOG/Avrusta, they damaged twenty grenade launchers with hammers and then alerted guards to their presence. Anna Andersson, 26, and Martin Smedjeback, 35, were arrested and charged with trespass, severe criminal damage, and entering a protected national security area. Andersson is a web developer. Smedjeback is a trainer in non-violence. Both were released from jail on Friday.

The weapons damaged in the Saab plant were described as Carl Gustav type grenade launchers. These are shoulder mounted anti-tank weapons which can fire high explosive rounds. The weapons were reportedly found in boxes labeled for delivery to "US" and "New Delhi." BAE has a long term contract with the Indian government for howitzers and grenade launchers, according to reports in the media.

After being released from jail, Andersson indicated she was glad to be going to trial. "I look forward to a chance to ethically and legally argue for our actions in court. I hope one day the arms manufacturers will be charged for the criminal damage that Swedish armaments cause in wars and conflicts around the world."

In a surprise move, Andersson and Smedjeback returned to the weapons plant where they were arrested again. They now remain in jail.

Also, a fifth member of the group, Annika Spalde, 39, cut her way through the fence around a weapons plant in Karlskoga and hung a banner encouraging more disarmament actions. She was later arrested. She is charged with severe criminal damage and trespass in a place of national security. Spalde, who was later released, is a deacon in the Swedish church, an author and peace activist.

BAE Systems, owner of the Karlskoga plant, describes itself on its website as "the premier global defence and aerospace company" with 100,000 employees world-wide and annual sales of \$31.4 billion. BAE authorities confirmed the break in. Curiously, BAE press people in the US reported "very minor" damage while the BAE security manager in Sweden told the press there that he estimated damage at 50,000 euros and was not certain whether the damage would create delays in scheduled deliveries of the weapons or not.

Saab, owner of the Eskilstuna plant, proclaims it serves the global market with products, services and solutions ranging from military defence to civil security. It says it has 13,700 employees and world-wide sales of \$2.5 billion. Lasse Jonsson, spokesperson for Saab, told the media, "They have scrapped a quantity of weapons' spare parts that awaited export. Only after the police investigation has been completed will we be able to calculate the exact extent of the damage caused."

Maja Backlund, spokesperson for OFOG, was quoted in the Hindu Times : "Civil disobedience and action are most vital parts of democratic development. Our colleagues who breached the Saab factory

managed to damage 25 grenade launchers of the Carl Gustav brand that are in extensive use in Kashmir and other war zones in India." OFOG also claims that some of the weapons damaged were of the same type as used by the US military in Iraq.

Members of OFOG claim Swedish weapons exports have risen 88 percent since the US invasion of Iraq. They further claim that the Swedish government is violating its policy of peace and neutrality by supplying warring countries with arms.

Deacon Spalde insisted these actions were necessary. "When your government supports an illegal war and sells arms to dictatorships, it's time for ordinary citizens like us to take action."

OFOG/Avrusta said "This action is the first disarmament campaign in the 21st century in Sweden." At this point, the campaign says it consists of activists willing to risk arrest and another fifty support people.

"Our activists have prepared themselves for more than a year for this campaign," said a group member who asked to remain anonymous. "They are ready to serve time in prison if Swedish society should fail to see that nonviolent civil disobedience to suspend the disastrous Swedish arms exports to wars and dictatorships is less of a breach of law than these amoral arms exports."

More disarmament actions, OFOG/Avrusta promises, will be forthcoming.

[Source : countercurrents.org]