

For Immediate Release: 7/10/2020

Winston-Salem Demonstrators Regarding the Arrest of 20 Peaceful Protesters

On the night of July 9th at 9pm, approximately forty demonstrators gathered outside the Forsyth County Public Safety Building (where the Forsyth County Sheriff's Office is housed) to demand that the Winston Salem Police Department stop criminalizing peaceful protests. This call was in direct response to the events of the previous night (July 8th) when five peaceful protesters, who were gathered with approximately 40 others to call for transparency in the investigation of the murder of John Neville, were arrested outside the same building. At around 11pm, demonstrators began to walk in groups of two or three into the street in an act of civil disobedience. WSPD officers arrested 15 civil disobedience demonstrators. The remaining demonstrators and jail support staff set up food, snacks, and supplies outside the Magistrate's Office and cheered each release. The final demonstrators were released shortly before 1:30am. This action was intentional, organized, and widely supported by members of the Winston Salem and Forsyth County community as a method of social justice protest with a long history in the U.S. and around the world.

In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored." Dr. King lived by these words, being arrested nearly 30 times for acts of civil disobedience. The need for civil disobedience in Winston Salem was a direct result of WSPD Chief Catrina Thompson's broken promise to protect peaceful protests. Forsyth County District Attorney Jim O'Neill held a press conference to announce the six involuntary manslaughter charges for the murder of John Neville in the Forsyth County Detention Center on December 2, 2019. He also used this platform to warn civilians that WSPD and the Forsyth County Sheriff's Department would prosecute any protesters not complying with law enforcement's newly outlined command to remain on sidewalks during any protest action. <https://www.cityofws.org/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=391>

Laws like the one used to criminalize peaceful protesters this week were written to intimidate those demanding transparency, accountability, and safety from law enforcement. In 2020, we stand in the street in an act of civil disobedience, an act of nonviolent direct action, because our brothers, sisters, and siblings are being murdered, mistreated, abused, and neglected in the county jail here in Winston Salem and in many places across the country.

On the night of July 8th, WSPD officers used intimidation tactics by blocking protesters in on the street outside the Public Safety Building, surrounding the area in unmarked vehicles, and by driving a gator-style cart holding a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD) sound cannon. LRAD sound cannons are military weapons used to broadcast pain-inducing tones, and they cause permanent hearing damage or hearing loss; they are often disguised as speakers and carried on vehicles such as the WSPD gator-style cart. In addition to hearing damage, a sound cannon, when deployed, causes hearing to be difficult to impossible when orders are subsequently given by police officers, thus putting civilians at higher risk of not abiding by legal notices to disperse. Sound cannons are commonly used by US police departments against Black Lives Matter protests. WSPD Officers E. Johnson, M. Dime, D. Battjes, J. Carter, and T. Taylor arrested five peaceful protesters for impeding traffic and later arrested one protester at their home with a warrant for impeding traffic; however, the streets were blocked by WSPD vehicles and officers standing in the street. The citation is N.C. Gen. Stat. 20-174.1, "Standing, sitting or lying upon highways or streets prohibited," a State Law used widely during the 1960s Civil Rights

Movement. The fifteen protesters arrested during their acts of civil disobedience on July 9th were also charged with impeding traffic.

We call for the dismissal of all charges against peaceful demonstrators in Winston Salem. We call for an end to the criminalization of peaceful protests in the future. We demand that WSPD no longer use intimidation tactics and tools of violence, such as the LRAD, against citizens exercising our Constitutional democratic rights. We will not be threatened into silence. We will not grow weary in this unprecedented movement for Black lives. We will continue to boldly demand justice.

For further information, please see @TriadAbolitionProject and @_theunitycoalition_ on Instagram.

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