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### Civil Disobedience: The Working Class' Key to a Brighter Future



From the beginning of the quarter, I aimed for the focus of my civic engagement project to be Civil Disobedience. The textbook “Attenuated Democracy” by David Hubert defines civil disobedience as “a public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law, usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government.” (Hubert, 374). I participated in two protests during the course of my project; I attended the May Day march for worker’s rights with the Silicon Valley Democratic Socialists of America and I visited the Palestine encampment at San Jose State University on my own. I chose civil disobedience as my focus because I feel authority must be challenged in a meaningful way in order to bring about change.

The May Day march began with a collection of 11 speakers with speeches lasting 3-5 minutes each. Member’s of the Ohlone tribe opened with a full land acknowledgement, followed by a member of Stanford’s Graduate Student Union speaking about the importance of strong unions, and lastly, a teacher and palestinian immigrant spoke about the current atrocities being committed in Gaza. After the last speech concluded, the march began. The San Jose police department had deployed around 30 motorbike-mounted officers and 5-10 squad cars to work crowd control. Notably, about halfway through the march, a shirtless man in his early



twenties approached the march and began acting erratically. Consequently, a few members of the Brown Berets began to yell at him and told him very aggressively that he wasn't allowed to march with us. The situation continued to escalate until a member of SVDSA brought him into our block of the march and told him he belonged. Simply speaking to this man like a human being rather than a threat deescalated the situation. As we talked to him, we learned that he's a construction worker working a non-unionized job and that he had been struggling with his mental health. Just observing this interaction demonstrated how powerful deescalation can be in keeping the peace. This idea also applies to the police department. They strictly did their job controlling the crowd, which resulted in the protest remaining peaceful. It taught me that it is most often those with a position of power who are responsible for whether a situation escalates or deescalates.

Unlike the May Day protest, my time at the SJSU encampment was uneventful other than listening to speeches and music made by the occupying students. However, things escalated after I left. According to the Spartan Daily, SJSU's student run newspaper, the university turned on the sprinkler system in the encampment, thus drenching the encampment. In an interview with the paper, SJSU faculty Sang Hea Kil claimed that "the university was using "dirty water tactics" on students, because the water was endangering students, especially those who have health vulnerabilities because the water is not approved for contact with eyes, mouths, noses or open cuts and is not potable." (Fredrickson). This method of disruption is easily explained away as routine procedure by the university and is an example of an institution using their power to try to stamp out the dissenting opinions of their student body. The next day, @sjsu on Instagram posted a statement, claiming that Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the two men depicted in the Victory Salute Statue that the encampment is based around, conveyed their "disappointment and

disapproval of the statue being improperly used as part of the encampment on campus.” (@sjsu, Instagram). Neither individual has confirmed or denied this statement, however Tommie Smith’s Instagram account (@tommiesmith68) has liked numerous posts that would suggest that he supports the encampment. Using unverifiable claims to undermine the credibility of the student protesters in another way that SJSU has used their power to combat these protests. Watching the manner in which SJSU has responded to the protests and encampment has taught me that the establishment will use any tricks they can in order to maintain the status quo and discourage dissent.

Participating in these acts of civil disobedience has taught me a lot about the political process. One important thing I learned is that fighting for real, meaningful change will often be illegal so long as the establishment has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. My experiences at the May Day demonstration and the events that transpired at the SJSU encampment showed me the different ways in which the establishment can fight protests. This matches what we have talked about in class regarding how those in power rig the system to maintain their wealth and influence. The most important thing I’ve taken away from these experiences is that civil disobedience is one of the most powerful tools the working class has to affect change in their societies. It allows large institutions to be challenged by groups of individuals, often at great personal risk to participants. However, it can also lead to an increase in public support, which massively increases the chances that a law will change. This experience reinforced my belief in the importance of civil disobedience and showed me what fighting for meaningful change looks like.

I want to live in a world where our economic, social, and political systems are equal and just for everyone. I want to live in a world where everyone has food, water, shelter, education,

healthcare, good employment, entertainment, and the means to live a fulfilling life. I want to live in a world where people from all different backgrounds are treated equally and equitably. I want to live in a world where our political system truly reflects the will of the people. I plan to stay involved with the political process by voting, continuing to protest, and supporting grassroots movements. The fight for progress is a war of attrition, so I plan to continue to use civil disobedience to fight unjust laws and push for meaningful change.

### Works Cited

“Attenuated Democracy”, David Hubert, <https://slcc.pressbooks.pub/attenuateddemocracy/>

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