

### **POG Says Controversy Overblown**

Ryan Williams spends his days (and nights) sitting on dirty comforters and unzipped sleeping bags. He's very hungry. Some say he's in the way. "Some people complain about us being out here," he said, sitting Indian style on the sidewalk. "Sometimes they yell at us at night, the drunks coming from the bars."

He's not a panhandler. Williams is a member of the Pittsburgh Organizing Group, an anti-war protest effort currently engaged in a 24-hour, month long sit-in and fast at the military recruitment center on Oakland's Forbes Avenue in order to, as their flyer says, "put a spotlight on one of the most grotesque symbols of militarism in our community."

The POG has been a center of controversy in the weeks since the demonstration began on September 4<sup>th</sup>, mainly due to their lack of a permit to protest in a public place. "We never intended this to be an illegal operation," claimed Williams. "We applied for a permit and at the last minute they didn't give it to us. So we basically did it anyway and they put the fence around us and we had cops. That was blocking off a lot more of the sidewalk."

Williams believes that the police presence was what caused all of the sidewalk-blocking complaints in the first place.

Since last week, when the group came to an agreement with police on the permit issue, the situation has loosened up considerably. There's no longer a fence or police nearby. The group's set-up takes up less than half the length of the sidewalk, leaving enough space for people to walk past, which, Williams said, is what the vast majority do.

Every so often an interested party might stop to ask what they're doing or about their ideas. It comes off as a quaint camp-out right in the middle of the city. During an average afternoon, no one seems a bit bothered. "Contrary to what it might seem like in the media," said Ryan, "the response has been overwhelmingly positive."

Yet a portion of the community still doesn't seem to want them there. "I don't really see the point [of the protest]," said Pitt student Greg Havliscac, 23. "I know a lot of people who say they hate to walk down that side of the street now. They don't want to have to squeeze by them. They're just taking up space and they're never doing anything. They seem lazy to me."

Williams claims that this perception is in part due to a scathing editorial recently published in the Pitt News, accusing the group of lack of enthusiasm and neglecting to pass out flyers. Williams contends that they have passed out thousands of flyers but aren't constantly doing so due to their hunger and exhaustion. Moreover, according to him, the author of the article neglected to interview any of them and, "obviously has no grasp of what's actually going on."

In the past, however, the POG has been accused of much more serious offenses than lethargy. Back in June city councilman Bill Peduto publically attributed acts of vandalism to the group, including broken windows and graffiti on businesses in East Liberty, Garfield and Shadyside. A group statement on their website states that, "The Pittsburgh Organizing Group did not organize the vandalism and the group had no involvement in any part of the action... We do not organize property destruction or actions involving physical harm... Bill Peduto made a declarative statement that our group was guilty of serious felony offences without contacting us beforehand and without producing any evidence as to why his declaration was more than mere speculation." Peduto was not available for comment.

Williams and, according to him, many others in the organization believe that the vandalism accusation, along with the hassle that occurred over the permit situation, are part of a politically motivated effort to smear them. "I think it's pretty

obvious,” he says. “They could have easily given us the permit but they didn’t. Or they could have told us we didn’t need the permit, which under the law we don’t. These things don’t happen to the anti-abortion protesters.”

Conspiracy or not, there are still quite a few people who support their right to be there. “I agree with them,” said another student, Dan Pezzimenti, 22. “I think they have every right to be there and they’re not hurting anyone. And I think the accusations that they’re inciting violence are pretty ridiculous.”

There have been no official accusations of violence, by police or otherwise, against the POG. But wherever these rumors started, there is some kernel of truth to them. Williams says that two weeks ago they were being bothered by someone whom they believed to be a neo-Nazi. He reportedly threatened them until two other men, well known to the protesters, came up to defend the group. “They started fighting and the Nazi threw the one guy on the ground and his head split open,” said Williams.

Williams went to great pains to point out that they in no way incited this act of violence and that no protesters participated in the fight.

Despite the problems, they seem to have an optimistic outlook. “I feel like we’ve accomplished a lot of our objectives,” said Ryan. “When they walk past and they see our signs at least they’re thinking about the situation and the war, which they might not have.”

