

Richmond highway blockade ups the ante in support for Palestine

written by Phil Wilayto

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Nine young supporters of Palestine chain themselves together and block I-95 in Richmond. (Photo taken after police moved the protesters to the side of the highway.) Photo by Phil Wilayto

RICHMOND, Va., March 11 - At about 6:45 this morning, a multiracial group of nine young people chained themselves together and blocked traffic on the southbound lanes of Interstate 95 in Richmond near the exit to Arthur Ashe Boulevard.

An anonymous statement emailed early this morning to several local media outlets stated that the blockade was meant to "disrupt the flow of 'business as usual' in the heart of the Commonwealth, demanding that the U.S. empire cease all funding for the genocidal, Israeli occupation of Palestine at once."

If the protesters' purpose was to draw attention to the mass slaughter taking place in the Palestinian Gaza Strip - a genocide enabled and funded by the U.S. government - they definitely succeeded. The action was covered by all three local network TV affiliates, the city's daily newspaper and NPR affiliate Virginia Public Media.

However, The Virginia Defender was the only media that managed to get close enough to the protesters to interview them.

The highway - one of the busiest in the country - is under the jurisdiction of the Virginia State Police, who arrived at the scene, declared it an unlawful assembly and physically moved the protesters to the side of the breakdown lane, allowing traffic to resume.

According to both the protesters and a spokesperson for the State Police, the blockade lasted at least a half-hour.

"For the protesters' safety and to expedite the reopening of the interstate lanes, the protesters were guided to the right, southbound shoulder of the interstate," a VSP media release stated.

That's one version of what happened.

Jasmine Cuellar, one of the protesters, gave the Defender a different one:

"The cops dragged us all the way across the interstate, hurt people, definitely down there (gesturing to other protesters lined up in the breakdown lane), threw them into the water and were like literally trying to shove us off the edge of this like, whatever this is called."

Two people at the scene said they saw one state trooper push one of the protesters halfway over the concrete barrier along the breakdown lane.

Three people said that one officer tore off a protester's COVID face mask, leaned in close and said, "I just want to see your face," causing another officer to intervene.

Several other people said a few protesters had been pushed down onto puddles of water, soaking their clothes in temperatures of around 40 degrees.

Asked about these allegations at an impromptu press conference held at the foot of the embankment leading up to the highway, VSP spokesperson Corinne Geller said she had no information about those alleged incidents, but said she had seen at least two protesters deliberately lying down in the puddles.

There were nine protesters in all. One told the Defender that two of their number were African-Americans, two were Arab-Americans, one was Latina and most were LGBTQ+. According to the VSP release, their ages ranged from 21 to 30.

A total of 10 people were arrested. (As of our press time, there was no information about why the 10th person was arrested.) All 10 were charged with stopping the vehicle of another, obstructing free passage of others, unlawful assembly, and being a pedestrian on the interstate.

The first three charges are Class 1 misdemeanors, each of which carry possible penalties of up to a year in jail and/or a fine of up to \$2,500. The fourth charge is a

traffic offense.

According to the State Police, all those arrested were taken to the city jail, where the normal procedure is for a magistrate to decide if and how they will be released.

As we go to press, opponents of the Israeli genocide are again attending the regular meeting of Richmond City Council, demanding that body pass a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

Among those scheduled to speak is Princess Blanding, sister of Marcus-David Peters, a young African-American high school teacher fatally shot by a Richmond police officer in 2018, a shooting that became a major focus of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in Richmond set off by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Update

March 12—The latest we have heard is that all protesters have been released. At this time, we don't know how the prosecutions will proceed. Updates will be posted on The Virginia Defender's Facebook page as they become available.

Videos

After being moved to the side of the highway, waiting to be taken away, protesters remain defiant.

https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipPIG5sggGu48E0LkKpwojfbH-FTTLzXVlwVV04f16b9RhB3ZzUUY_9OCY_XJoh9Kw?key=-LWNhTWpBUkgzTURORzJzZUJEdHgwdWkyazBsZV9B

Still chained together and to a ladder, protesters wait to be arrested. (VIDEO)

https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipOGAwdXirv27jtNPX_-

[UxVS2QfXMdKtZDvs0LQ15CC6ml0SRQqVrgIP7ajFWrR6YWw?key=-RHU3eUZZLTdKd2p1TEw1Yy1XX3U3NzYtcUFURnN3](https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipNimgU7gv6SgmyM--G94X6yteSann6Pvrz3MVGCY1nVGA5bck71I4Cq6xt5HPucjqA?key=-RHU3eUZZLTdKd2p1TEw1Yy1XX3U3NzYtcUFURnN3)

Complete press conference by VSP spokesperson Corinne Geller. (Note: The questions about allegations of police misconduct were raised by The Virginia Defender.)

<https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipNimgU7gv6SgmyM--G94X6yteSann6Pvrz3MVGCY1nVGA5bck71I4Cq6xt5HPucjqA?key=-S3pkcjdBzbjBvdXMwLXBpb1N5eUkyenp3YXI2cmZB>

Source: [The Virginia Defender](#)

