



## **Milwaukee 14 - 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

I went to Milwaukee in September 1967 to do graduate studies at Marquette. The Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-Vietnam-War Movement were in full swing nationally, and I was interested to find out what might be going on in this city. On one of the first days at Marquette, a new acquaintance asked me if I would like to go with him on an open housing demonstration. This was one of a regular series of demonstrations led by Fr Jim Groppi, Pastor at a mostly black Church on the north side of the city. Over the next few months, I would occasionally join these demonstrations alongside my studies.

As the academic year progressed, a group around Marquette began calling for a support programme for black students. In April 1968, soon after the assassination of Martin Luther King, this group initiated the Respond Movement on campus, which was successful in getting the University to launch a new programme for black students. At the same time, alongside this interest in civil rights, there was a growing opposition to the war in Vietnam. Some of this was centred at Casa Maria, a Catholic Worker House of Hospitality near Marquette.

We were all aware of the recent Action of the Catonsville Nine, in which the Berrigan brothers and seven others had broken into the Selective Service offices near Baltimore, stolen draft files, burned them and waited to be arrested. This was seen as a new form of non-violent resistance to the war, modelled on Gandhi and Martin Luther King, but involving the intentional destruction of property.

Nonetheless, I was surprised on 25 September 1968, when I opened the local paper in Milwaukee to see that a group of 14 men (including priests and religious) had broken into the Social Service Administration Offices, stolen thousands of draft files and burned them in a nearby green space. The protesters stood around singing and waiting to be arrested. The press had been alerted and were soon on the scene along with the police. All fourteen were arrested and charged with being party to burglary, theft and arson. The fourteen had prepared a statement explaining why they had taken the action. The Statement was given to the press and later distributed widely.

Soon after the Action took place, some of us who had not been involved came together to form a Milwaukee 14 Defence Committee. Our first task was to raise bail for the fourteen. This took some weeks, but by November they had been released on bail and were awaiting trial in the Spring. The funds to cover the substantial bail were raised from supporters who were willing to loan money to the Defence Committee for this purpose. Once they were out on bail, the 14 returned to their homes in Milwaukee, Boston and other parts of the country. They helped to raise awareness about the action in their home cities, and some of them travelled to other towns and cities to give talks and lead retreats for others who might wish to replicate the Action. Much of this was organised by the Defence Committee and Milwaukee remained a hub for anti-war activity for the next year. A number of those involved had been connected to the Catholic Worker movement in Milwaukee and other places.

Some of those involved in the Catonsville and Milwaukee Actions were in touch with Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day. It is said that Dorothy at first felt that this type of non-violent resistance was a step too far, but that she later came to support it.

In May 1969, the Milwaukee trial took place and lasted a month. William Kunstler led a small team of lawyers but in the end most of the 14 defended themselves. During the trial, each of the men involved in the Action was given about an hour to explain their reasons for participating. People from outside the city came and the courtroom was packed every day. The men were convicted and sentenced to two years in prison, but they were released after about a year on early parole.

Some months after the Milwaukee 14 Action, a similar Action took place in Chicago. Many other Actions followed.

We are now 50 years on from the Milwaukee 14, and some of us returned to Milwaukee on the weekend of 21-24 September 2018 to remember and reflect on the original Actions, the intervening years and the needs of our world today. More than 100 people came together for the weekend. There were talks and panels, a supper and a musical evening, as well as ample time to re-connect (with name tags for those of us who had not seen one another for fifty years).

For further information see the website - *Nonviolent Cow – the Milwaukee 14 Today* at: <http://www.nonviolentworm.org/Milwaukee14Today/HomePage>

Richard Zipfel  
26 September 2018