



## First Report from Bridewell

By Frank Cordaro

October 14, 2007

It's All About the \$.

*"I want you to know it was a great privilege to act with those young people stand against the unjust, immoral, and illegal war. Any time I serve in jail will only add to that honor and privilege."*

I addressed Judge Moisan with these words just before she sentenced me to thirty days in jail for my criminal trespass charge from the September 21 high school occupation of Senator Grassley's Des Moines offices.

Though they are noble words, and I stand by them and the truth they state about the U.S. war in Iraq and the courage of the young people with whom I was arrested. These young people had nothing to do with the severity of the sentence I was given. Sending me to jail was all about the money I owe Polk County.

Since the year 2000, when I was protesting the Iowa National Guard's and the F-16's participation in the U.S.-enforced "No-Fly Zones" over Iraq, to the beginning of the Iraq invasion in

March of 2003, to today; I've been convicted eight times for criminal trespass in Polk County. For most of these convictions, I have refused to pay any of the fines and court costs that resulted from these convictions. Added to these fees are additional fees assessed for time spend in jail at the rate of \$48/day for an incarceration in December, 2004. If I add to these my per diem fees for my current incarceration, I estimate that I will owe Polk County between \$4,000 to \$5,000 by the time I am released on November 3<sup>rd</sup>.

It used to be—when I first began getting arrested—that we could tell the judge up-front that we refused to pay any fines, and the judge would send us to jail in lieu of the fines and court costs. You did your time, and that was the end of it.

Today, if you are found guilty, the judge must assess a mandatory minimum fine, court costs, arrest fees and/or any number of potential surcharges in addition to imposing incarceration time. Now however, a

criminal trespass conviction carries a minimum \$65 fine, court costs, arrest fees, and surcharges that bring the total minimum bill for the crime to \$300. There are fees for every institutional contact in the process, even including fees for time spent in community service.

Obviously these "pay as you go" policies are an egregiously unfair burden on the poor. Nowhere is this unjust tax more clearly demonstrated than the \$48-a-day fee for being an inmate in

*On October 5, 2007, peace-maker Frank Cordaro was sentenced to 30 days in jail for the criminal trespass charge that came from his participation in an occupation of Senator Charles Grassley's office on September 21. He joined an effort led by Iowa high school students who are members of the group, Students beyond War.*

*After being taken into custody, Cordaro was transferred to the Bridewell Detention Center in Bethany, Missouri, where he is serving his sentence. This is his first report from there.*

the Polk County Jail system. The outrageously potential outcome is that a poor person could be held in jail indefinitely from the inability to pay these accumulating costs.

My biggest concern is that my sentence will serve as a deterrent to others considering joining us in the Iowa Occupation Project. So far those arrested in IOP actions have only received fines and the added charges for their convictions. Whether or not, some judges will begin to impose jail time is unlikely.

However, the impact of good citizens putting their personal liberty on the line has clearly swayed public opinion toward a desire to end the war, and we know that these efforts, as expensive as they may become, are ultimately saving lives. How much is a human life worth?

Since the financial liability is not affordable for many of those willing to risk arrest, saving those lives requires more help from those with the resources to do so. Now, more than ever, the larger peace community needs to step up and support those willing and able to take this risk.

I don't know what I am going to do about my own growing debt. I plan to continue refusing to pay it as a principled position of solidarity with the poor who are disproportionately burdened with these unfair and unjust taxes of the criminal system and by the war itself. Should the day come that paying the debt becomes more prudent than not paying it, I trust that God's providence will supply me with what I need.

This I know. What I lack in money is more than compensated in my richness in friends and family. My most valued asset is my membership in the Des Moines Catholic Worker community. I

am abundantly blessed to part of a community of people committed to lives of material poverty and dedicated to their service to the poor. It is a community that values the peace-making and affords me the luxury of being in jail while they continue our work of hospitality and the other works of mercy for which Catholic Workers are so widely known.

I am reminded of something M. Gandhi once said, "It takes a lot of rich people to keep me in poverty."

This is certainly true for those of us who live and work in the Des Moines Catholic Worker community, and for this we remain constantly grateful.

In my next reflection, I intend to share more about life here in the Bridewell Detention Facility in Bethany, Missouri. Please know that I am doing well and stay busy with the challenges placed before me each day in this confined space.

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You can donate to a fund for fees for those arrested through the Iowa Peace Network at the link below:

[www.iowapeaceenetwork.org](http://www.iowapeaceenetwork.org)

Or you can make donations to the Des Moines Catholic Worker at:

[www.desmoinescatholicworker.org](http://www.desmoinescatholicworker.org)

Updates on the Iowa Occupation Project can be found on the web page:

[www.schoolformoralcourage.com/iowaoccupationproject.html](http://www.schoolformoralcourage.com/iowaoccupationproject.html)

Information about SODaPOP:

[www.desmoinescatholicworker.org/sodapop.html](http://www.desmoinescatholicworker.org/sodapop.html)