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FROM ELLSWORTH TO PORTSMOUTH

Peace walk pauses for protest at BIW

BY DANEEM KIM
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MAINE PEACE WALK participant Katie Greenman holds up a sign during a protest at Bath Iron Works on Thursday afternoon.

DANEEM KIM / THE TIMES RECORD

Clad in bright yellow sweaters and equipped with signs and flags, participants of the annual Maine Peace Walk were hard to miss on Washington Street during a shift change at Bath Iron Works on Thursday afternoon.

The 175-mile walk that began in Ellsworth on Oct. 9 will end on Oct. 24 when peace walkers reach Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

On Thursday afternoon, the group stopped enroute in Bath to hold signs and messages that would encourage BIW to pursue peaceful and sustainable productions that would benefit the environment — especially the oceans.

“It’s really not in the workers’ hands. It’s in the hands of the government, and we’re really talking to the community more than anyone else,” said Bruce Gagnon, walk coordinator and Maine Veterans for Peace secretary.

Participant Katie Greenman said that they have received a fair share of good, negative and neutral responses from the community during their walk.

“One person asked me, ‘are you insane,’ and I’ve been thinking a lot about that,” she said. “Well, what is insanity? Is insanity walking with a group of committed people who would like to change the Earth for the better? Or is insanity building destroyers that contribute to destruction on the planet and (hurt) the wildlife?”

A loud noise — a revving car coming out of the BIW parking lot — interrupted her thoughts.

“See, things like that,” Greenman said with a laugh.

The group also hand delivered letters to both BIW President Frederick Harris and Local S6 President Jay Wadleigh on Thursday, which addressed the concerns of the Navy’s impact on the oceans.

An advanced copy of the letter to Harris provided by Gagnon raised concerns on the affects Naval sonar has on marine life.

“Pier-side testing of sonar occurs at Bath Iron Works (BIW) and at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery which results in significant fish kills. Navy off-shore weapons testing exercises put toxic chemicals and hazardous materials and waste into the marine environment. The Kennebec River that BIW fronts is often dredged in order to allow the deep-hulled destroyers built here to get into the ocean. Dredging takes a heavy toll on aquatic life,” the letter states, in part.

According to the letter, both BIW and Portsmouth “could nearly double their number of jobs by building rail or wind turbines,” as opposed to the construction of warships on Bath or submarines in Kittery.

BIW spokesman Matt Wickenheiser declined to comment on the letter on Thursday. Wadleigh was also unavailable for comment.

Greenman said that she and other protesters were “greeted graciously” at Local S6, and were promised that the letter would be delivered to Wadleigh.

“I think being right here in Bath, the message is that (BIW) could convert to sustainable industry ... doing something that is sustainable for the future rather than building destroyers,” Greenman said. “The problem is that the military is the highest contributor to toxins in the ocean. Sonar testing is damaging our marine mammals, and we’re just trying to protect the Earth, protect the oceans and work for a cleaner planet and a more peaceful planet — it has to start so

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