

Police violence at Miami FTAA protest

Mayor says repression was a “model for homeland security”

By Jennifer Van Bergen
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Tens of thousands of demonstrators who came to Miami last week to protest the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) ministerial meetings met with police harassment, provocation, and brutality. More than 100 protesters were treated for injuries, 12 were hospitalized and an estimated 250 were arrested. The Bush administration provided \$8.5 million to back up local police against protesters.

Miami Activists Defense (MAD), a rapidly assembled group of attorneys from the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) and legal workers from Midnight Special, a mass demonstration support group that arose out of the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, along with other groups, assembled in Miami a week or so before the ministerial meetings to provide demonstrators with legal support. MAD members field phone calls, provide referrals for legal representation, attend bail and court hearings, and post helpful information on the Internet.

Expressing alarm over the police tactics, Laura Raymond, the NLG student organizer on the Miami protest who is working with MAD, cited “brutality, beatings and such—tasers, wooden and rubber bullets, many cops beating one person, concussion grenades, electrical shields, etc.—so it seems as though arrest numbers are down but the intensity of the arrest and the complexity of defending all these cases is high.”

Another MAD worker inside the demonstration zone stated that there have been “thousands of militarized police, in full riot gear, including electrified shields, tanks, automatic and semi-automatic weapons, tear gas, rubber bullets and bean bags, violently arresting peaceful demonstrators.” The MAD worker pointed out that while “similar means have been used, of course, in response to global justice movement actions in the past... [W]hat makes Miami different, more frightening,

is that all of these tactics were [now being] used in the absence of direct action” by demonstrators. MAD even received multiple reports of people being held at gunpoint without explanation or cause.

Public remarks of Miami police chief John Timoney support MAD reports. Papers quoted him saying: “We’re locking them up, piecemeal. We’ll try to do as many arrests as we can. If we don’t lock ‘em up tonight, we’ll lock ‘em up tomorrow.”

Michael Avery, president of the NLG, wrote a letter to Miami mayor Manuel A. Diaz, condemning the actions of the Miami police and demanding “a full-scale, independent investigation into the police officers’ alarming behavior, with the results to be made public.” Avery wrote Diaz: “Such paramilitary tactics are ill-conceived and self-defeating and have no place in a democratic society.” Two other advocacy groups—the Citizens Trade Campaign and Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch—also sent letters Friday to the Miami police.

Miami public defenders report that bonds as high as \$20,000 have been set for such infractions as riding a bike late at night or carrying an open can of beer.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) attempted to negotiate with police for many weeks before the demonstrations to ensure that protesters’ First Amendment rights would be protected. An ordinance was passed by the Miami Commission just the week prior to the demonstrations, restricting items demonstrators could carry and giving the ACLU and NLG little time to respond with legal action.

“We think the Fourth Amendment was completely suspended this week, and we’re very frustrated with that,” said Lida Rodriguez-Taseff, president of the Miami chapter of the ACLU. Both the ACLU and the NLG are considering legal action against Miami

officials.

“Police chief Timoney claimed officers acted with restraint,” said Marc Steier, an attorney with MAD. “This assessment goes against the eye-witness reports of hundreds of people on the streets,” continued Kris Hermes, MAD spokesperson. “Mayor Diaz even had the gall to say that Miami was a ‘model for homeland security.’ He should know that his so-called ‘security,’ accomplished through assault and denial of rights for hundreds of people will be met with appropriate legal action.”

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