

Crackdown on anti-Bush protests

Thousands arrested in New York City

By Bill Van Auken
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The New York City Police Department (NYPD) has launched a harsh crackdown against anti-Bush protesters, arresting between 1,500 and 2,000 since demonstrations against the Republican National Convention began last Friday.

Cops carried out arbitrary mass arrests in different parts of the city on Tuesday, corralling hundreds in orange plastic netting—the latest police tool for suppressing the right to assembly—before handcuffing and loading them into jail buses.

Massed ranks of helmeted riot police swept down on various protests Monday. While nearby at Madison Square Garden the Republicans praised each other for their “compassionate conservatism,” in separate instances of police brutality, cops beat teenagers, threw an elderly man to the ground and tackled women on concrete sidewalks.

Those taken into custody have been taken to a makeshift detention center set up in a dilapidated pier on the Hudson River that had been used as bus garage. They have been held there under abysmal conditions—in some cases for 24 hours or more—in chain-link cages topped with razor wire.

The opening of the convention saw a sharp shift in tactics by the NYPD from what had been a relatively flexible approach to the main protest march on Sunday. The participation of approximately half a million people in the march through Manhattan made a police crackdown politically and tactically inadvisable.

Faced with smaller numbers on the streets and acts of civil disobedience on Monday, the police carried out measures that appeared designed to silence Bush’s political opponents and jail as many protesters as possible in order to curtail further demonstrations. In most cases, the cops brought to bear by the 36,000-member NYPD have outnumbered the protesters by at least 2-to-1.

The New York Civil Liberties Union issued a statement saying it was “concerned about the change in tone and tactics by the NYPD,” and accusing police of making “sweeping arrests that did not distinguish between lawful protest and unlawful protest.”

Much of Manhattan remains under what approximates a state of siege, with the blocks around the Garden barricaded and filled with cops, the constant roar of police helicopters hovering overhead and columns of police in vans and on motorcycles racing continuously through the city’s streets.

The city’s billionaire Republican mayor, Michael Bloomberg, boasted of the mass arrests. In a televised interview on Tuesday, Bloomberg declared, “Yesterday you saw a bunch of people who said they were going to bring the city to its knees, and they didn’t. They wanted to ruin people’s time when they were here, and they didn’t do it.”

In one of the most blatant acts of unprovoked repression Monday, police arrested some 200 pacifist demonstrators who had set off from Ground Zero at the former World Trade Center site in lower Manhattan in a march to Madison Square Garden.

Like most of the protests on Monday, the several hundred marchers, organized by the War Resisters’ League and the School of Americas Watch, had no permit. However, they negotiated a route and ground rules with the police, agreeing to stay on the sidewalk, stop for traffic lights and march two-abreast.

No sooner had the marchers stepped off the sidewalk to cross the street, then the police swept in with a sheet of orange netting, trapping some 200 people, including news reporters and bystanders. Five busloads of protesters were carted away from the site.

Christopher Dunn, of the New York Civil Liberties Union, helped to negotiate the agreement with the cops. “They walked and they arrested them,” Dunn told the press. “I can’t imagine what happened.” While police officials claimed the demonstrators violated the deal by walking in the street, Dunn insisted that the only ones stepping off the sidewalk were reporters and the police themselves.

A similar mass arrest took place later in the evening, when police confronted a group calling itself “No RNC Street Party,” which was marching down the sidewalk near Manhattan’s Union Square. Police swept in and forced them onto a blocked-off side street, where they were trapped.

Swept up in the arrest was an entire marching band and a street theater group known as “Missile Dick Chicks.”

Another demonstration, organized by welfare advocacy groups under the umbrella of Poor People’s Economic Human Rights, attracted several thousand people to a rally at the United Nations, on Manhattan’s East Side. Again, protest organizers negotiated with the police, agreeing on a march route to Madison Square Garden.

When the march came within two blocks of the convention, entering a designated protest zone, the police suddenly intervened, wading into the crowd with night sticks and metal barricades, separating off the end of the march, beating people and pushing them down the block.

In the midst of the chaos a flying squad of plainclothes cops rode their scooters wildly into the crowd, hitting a number of marchers. One of the cops fell, or was knocked off of his bike, as people tried to get out of the way, and was repeatedly kicked by a protester. Police later arrested a 19-year-old man from East Harlem Tuesday, charging him with assaulting a police officer.

Another confrontation took place in the early evening outside the New York Public Library near Bryant Park. Police warned a group standing on the library steps that they would be arrested if they attempted to hang a banner they were carrying on the library. When, instead, they unfurled it dozens of cops swarmed over the protesters, knocking them to the ground and arresting several. As in the incident near Ground Zero, police moved in with the orange netting in what began as another attempt to trap hundreds of people for arrest, but backed off after the crowd left the scene.

In one of the oddest and least defensible arrests, cops collared Georgi Page, a 34-year-old web producer from Harlem, who staged a one-woman protest outside the Hummer showroom on 11th Avenue in Manhattan, wearing a cardboard box fashioned to look like the bulky vehicle.

When a police officer asked her to leave, she refused, saying that she was not obstructing traffic or violating the law. She was thrown into a police van and charged with disorderly conduct and “parading without a permit.”

The conditions under which the thousands of arrestees are being held sparked another protest on Tuesday morning outside Pier 57 at 15th Street on the West Side Highway. The facility has been turned into a mass detention center that protesters have dubbed “Guantánamo on the Hudson.”

Lawyers for the jailed protesters have reported that their clients were brought to court covered with grime after being forced to sleep on the concrete floors covered with oil and chemicals from the buses that are normally parked in the three-story structure. One woman had to be rushed to a hospital after the chemicals caused her to break out in rashes all over her body.

Transit union officials have confirmed reports that the facility was contaminated with asbestos as well as dangerous chemicals.

Those arrested are housed 100 each in separate pens, with just two portable toilets in each of these cages. They have reportedly been subjected to verbal abuse by guards and denied food.

The National Lawyers Guild called a press conference to denounce the conditions at the detention center as a violation of basic democratic rights. The organization cited the case of a pregnant woman who had been held overnight and given no food and of a woman with a broken foot who was denied medical treatment. Other prisoners have been denied medications needed for chronic illnesses.

The police have also held the protesters incommunicado, denying them the right to speak with lawyers or to make phone calls. Attorneys have reported that even when they have given the names of people who are detained, they have been refused access to them.

Some of those arrested have been held for more than 30 hours, violating a long-existing standard in the city that anyone detained must be produced within 24 hours or less. For the most part, the protesters have been issued desk appearance tickets—akin to a ticket for a traffic violation—and released, but only after being held overnight or longer.

The transparent aim of the police is to instill fear in the protesters and intimidate them from continuing to stage street demonstrations.

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