

Hundreds, including journalists, charged with rioting in wake of inauguration protest

By Genevieve Leigh
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Two hundred and thirty-five people were arrested by police last Friday morning during protests in Washington D.C. at the inauguration of Donald Trump. The protests were described by participants as both “anti-capitalist” and “anti-fascist.” Those arrested, composed largely of politically unaffiliated individuals, were first surrounded and indiscriminately detained at the intersection of 11th and K Street. There riot police surrounded them for about an hour. During this time police and higher officials apparently deliberated among themselves before carrying out mass arrests.

Rather than facing more typical misdemeanor charges, all of those arrested have been charged with felony rioting that carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and a \$25,000 fine. Among those arrested were six individuals who were observing the protest in various media capacities. All six claim to have had proper and visible identification and have denounced the charges.

The journalists include Vocativ reporter Evan Engel, RT America’s Alex Rubinstein and documentary producer Jack Keller, as well as independent journalists Matt Hopard, Shay Horse and Aaron Cantú. Also reported among

the arrested were a number of lawyers and medics.

Significantly, reporters and journalists from select media outfits, including two from a local NBC station and one from US News, were allowed to leave the corralled group. The NBC journalists were told that their names had been provided to a lieutenant’s superior during the hour of deliberation, while the group was detained on the street.

According to an MPD statement, the arrests were prompted by, “preliminary information” that they were members of an “organized group” which was “acting in a concerted effort engaged in acts of vandalism and

several instances of destruction of property.” There has been no evidence provided to back up this claim, outside of the action to protest the inauguration of Donald Trump. Nor has there been any indication that these individuals were affiliated with a particular organization, or were ever associated with one another prior to the demonstration.

Attorney Jeffrey Light initiated a civil lawsuit against police officials the day of the incident over the alleged “indiscriminate” mass arrests of lawyers, legal observers, journalists and medics. Light has also accused officers of using “excessive force” against the protesters including volleys of tear gas, and stun grenades.

Noting the lack of evidence provided by the police, Light told Al Jazeera news, “Everybody has been charged with felony rioting and they (the police) have not given a reason. They arrested everyone in a particular area. Police have reported that unspecified people threw objects, but have not accused specific individuals of throwing objects.” The charging documents for those arrested cited over \$100,000 in property damage, including a limo fire that occurred Friday afternoon in a different location and after the mass arrests took place.

The city’s interim police chief, Peter Newsham, who ordered the arrest, has a recent history in the DC area. As assistant police chief in 2002, he ordered a similar action against protesters in Pershing Park following anti-World Bank demonstrations, which ended in millions of dollars being paid out to settle claims of about 400 protesters and journalists. After the payouts in 2002, and others in 2000, the department had seemingly adopted a less extreme approach to such arrests, usually issuing only misdemeanor charges.

Light has speculated that the extreme charges were

applied as leverage to extract plea deals from the defendants. However, the attacks on the protesters and also excessive undemocratic measures taken against the protesters and against select media outfits also must be seen in light of the political atmosphere being cultivated by the Trump administration.

Throughout his campaign Trump showed an unprecedented open contempt for basic democratic principles. His animosity toward the media was on full display as well, and also more recently, in refusing to take questions from a CNN reporter at a press conference and in making ominous threats against online publication “BuzzFeed.”

Just one day after the Inauguration Day arrests, in an address to the Central Intelligence Agency community, Trump used the bulk of his time to once again attack the media. As the WSWS wrote in relation to the speech:

“Trump’s anger is directed in the first instance against an utterly corrupt and subservient corporate-controlled press, which is rightly held in contempt by broad sections of the population because of its role as a purveyor of government lies and propaganda.

“The new government, a direct instrument of the financial oligarchy, is nevertheless out to further muzzle the media in order to carry through a violent attack on the democratic rights and social conditions of the working class and prepare bigger and bloodier wars internationally.”

Trump has combined his attack on democratic rights with exaltation of the police, the military and intelligence community--in a word, all instruments of state repression.

The police who under the Obama administration were shielded from prosecution despite mass protests over a string of brutal police killings, starting with events in Ferguson three years ago, have been given further encouragement by the Trump administration for even more ruthless attacks on the working class.

Last Friday’s attack on anti-Trump protesters and the media should be taken as a warning. While the US war machine is being readied for aggression all over the world, the forces of repression are being readied for use against the working class in the United States.

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