Police attack march against nonunion contractor

40,000 building workers halt rush hour traffic in Manhattan

Allan White
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To the surprise of the police, city officials and trade union leaders, a June 30th rally by New York City construction workers against the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's use of a non-union contractor surged out of control, blocking traffic for hours in midtown Manhattan.

An attempt by police in riot gear to block workers from marching to the MTA building site at 54th Street and Ninth Avenue resulted in a violent clash. Eighteen police and three civilians were reportedly injured, including a worker seriously hurt when he was kicked in the head by a police horse. Another 38 workers were arrested. Police used pepper spray and nightsticks on protesting workers.

An account of the protest in the *New York Times* described the following scene: 'From around 8 a.m. to noon, much of midtown Manhattan was crippled by the swirling crowds, as thousands of burly, often shouting construction workers roamed through the streets ... At the same time, police vehicles, sirens screaming, repeatedly crisscrossed midtown as they scrambled to maintain control.'

In response to a call by building trades officials, thousands of workers arrived at MTA headquarters at 44th Street and Madison Avenue at 8 a.m. The turnout far exceeded the expectation of union leaders, who had told the police and the mayor's office that no more than 10,000 workers would show up. Hundreds of construction sites were shut down as workers walked off their jobs to join the protest. They carried banners identifying themselves as carpenters, roofers, masons and other trades.

Around 9 a.m. thousands of workers spontaneously broke away from the official demonstration and began marching across town toward the nonunion construction site. Leaders of the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York attempted to get the workers to stop, without success.

Many shops and offices along the route of the march had to open late because of the crowds. In some cases police prevented employees from entering buildings. As the day progressed the number of police assigned to control the demonstration increased from 550 to over 1,000.

As workers approached the construction site, more than 100 police in riot gear blocked their path. Cops swung nightsticks and used pepper spray. Scores of police vans were on the scene and helicopters circled overhead.

Enraged, workers chanted, 'Police state.' Scuffling and some bottle throwing ensued. A number of workers were arrested and then pepper-sprayed before being herded into police vans. Afterwards the crowd dispersed into small groups and began heading back to MTA headquarters, where they were again confronted by police. More workers were arrested and beaten.

The march was the largest labor demonstration in New York in years. It followed by just weeks a protest by taxi drivers over new regulations being imposed by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

Giuliani angrily denounced the workers. 'Had the construction workers given the same advance notice as the taxi drivers gave, they'd have been dealt with the same way,' he declared, referring to a ban he imposed on a planned downtown protest by taxi drivers.

At a news conference Giuliani demanded compensation by the unions for damages and said he would seek an injunction barring the unions from

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organizing similar protests in the future. Union officials attempted to appease Giuliani by apologizing for alleged acts of 'vandalism and violence,' and offering to pay restitution for any property damage or personal injury claims. Building trades President Edward Malloy gave the mayor his personal apologies in a phone conversation. Union officials offered assurances that no more demonstrations were planned.

The protest was in response to the MTA's plan to build a new command center using a non-union construction firm, Roy Kay Inc. Earlier protests at the construction site had drawn several thousand workers.

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