

A sharp contrast in US policy: clubs and pepper spray for IMF protesters, cringing before Cuban anticommunists

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It is worth contrasting the violent repression meted out by US authorities against anti-IMF protesters in Washington, DC this weekend with the conciliatory treatment of the right-wing Cuban exiles in Miami who have defied government orders to turn over six-year-old Elian Gonzalez to his father.

The Clinton administration has avoided any direct confrontation with the Cuban-American anticommunists who have held the child for nearly five months. Instead the authorities have rewarded every act of defiance by abandoning deadlines, granting concessions and issuing more temporizing statements. This culminated last week when Attorney General Janet Reno—who had come to Miami to plead with the relatives to obey the law—announced that she would not enforce the April 13 deadline for the boy's release. Shortly afterwards, the 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta issued a temporary stay barring any federal action to remove Elian from the territory of the United States.

This has only emboldened the cabal of right-wingers and outright fascists in Little Havana who have surrounded the house where Gonzalez is currently staying, daring federal agents to seize the boy. The government's appeasement has also encouraged the Miami relatives to press ahead with their legal case to strip Elian's father of the custody of his child.

The government's retreat before the Cuban rightists has nothing to do with humanitarian concerns or considerations for Elian Gonzalez's safety. It is abundantly clear that the relatives and their supporters are cruelly exploiting this child to further their reactionary political agenda.

This fact was underscored Monday when the

Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) released a letter from a pediatrician working on the case which urged that Elian be removed from the Miami relatives as soon as possible because he was being “horrendously exploited.” Dr. Irwin Redlener, president of community pediatrics at Children's Hospital at Montefiore in New York, wrote, “Elian Gonzalez is now in a state of imminent danger to his physical and emotional well-being in a home that I consider to be psychologically abusive.”

The Clinton administration has bowed before these right-wing elements because they exert considerable influence in America politics. For years, both the Democrats and Republicans have cultivated anticommunists in Miami and elsewhere as a base of political support and Clinton is terrified of alienating them. In deference to these forces, the authorities have refused to enforce Elian's father's legal rights and have created the conditions where he may lose his child.

No such considerations were involved in the treatment of the anti-corporate and left-wing demonstrators who protested against the World Bank and IMF in Washington, DC. Although protesters were involved in acts of peaceful civil disobedience, police, US Marshals on horseback and national guardsmen attacked them with batons, clubs, tear gas and pepper spray. Over 1,300 were thrown in jail and scores were injured, including at least one demonstrator who was hit by a police vehicle.

The nation's capital had the eerie feeling of a city under military siege. The streets were virtually deserted as police banned traffic from 90 downtown blocks surrounding the World Bank and IMF headquarters and told non-emergency personnel not to report to work. In

the areas where the protests occurred, police helicopters circled overhead, while armored cars and mounted police and US Marshals patrolled the streets. Hundreds of police officers in full body armor and shields, and armed with long batons, manned steel barricades. National Guard troops were deployed in the streets at the request of Mayor Anthony Williams.

On Saturday night, on the eve of a planned rally and protests at the IMF meeting, the police carried out a pre-emptive strike by arresting 637 protesters. Demonstrators and tourists said that police did not give any instructions to disperse and prevented those who wanted to leave from doing so. A double line of riot-helmeted police, pumping batons across their chests and stamping their feet rhythmically, blocked off both ends of the street and moved in on the crowd. The protesters were dragged into buses, handcuffed behind their backs, and hauled off to jail. Many were held 20 hours or more, most of the time still in handcuffs. They were denied access to a phone, had little or no food and were shuttled from one jail to another during the night. They were not released until they paid a \$50 fine for “parading without a permit.”

While carrying out the mass arrests the police had little regard to who was caught in their snare. Among those injured or arrested were reporters and photographers from the Associated Press and the *Washington Post*. A consultant to the World Bank who was arguing with demonstrators was also arrested when the police moved in. When the consultant, a Bolivian citizen, protested to the US Marshal that his rights were being violated, he was violently slammed into a wall. The US Marshal screamed in his ear: “Down here there is no democracy. This place is a dictatorship and I am God. If you open your mouth again I will kick your ass ‘til you are sorry.”

After the arrests on Saturday, DC Mayor Anthony A. Williams acknowledged that police had tested the “boundary line” of constitutional rights in dealing with the protesters but said the city was determined to “prevent a replication of what happened out in Seattle.”

When it comes to accommodating right-wing anticommunists the government refuses to enforce its own laws. For those protesting against key institutions of US and world capitalism, however, there is no such temporizing.



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