

Philadelphia tense with preparations under way for Republican National Convention

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Activists preparing for demonstrations during the Republican National Convention, to be held in Philadelphia from July 31 through August 3, charge that they have been under constant surveillance by police in the past month. Unidentified men with cameras have reportedly openly watched and photographed organizing meetings.

The most blatant surveillance has been of meetings of the Philadelphia Direct Action Group (PDAG), an umbrella group of organizations planning protests. PDAG charges that on at least five occasions in the last month men have been on the roof of a building across the street from their office photographing people entering and leaving their meetings. PDAG also reported they have reason to suspect their meetings are being attended by police. PDAG's meetings are advertised on the Internet. They also said that members of their group reported "people dressed too well to be street people" had been rifling through trash in front of their West Philadelphia homes.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reports that when its reporter asked the two men taking pictures on June 29 to identify themselves they would not respond. The Philadelphia Police Department denies they are engaged in surveillance "because it would violate city law." This law does not restrict other police agencies. The local office of the FBI said they do not confirm or deny investigations. Other police agencies in the city for the convention include the Pennsylvania State Police, the US Capitol Police, and the US Secret Service.

Last month the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sent a letter to city officials reminding them of the 1987 directive by then Mayor Wilson Goode prohibiting any police surveillance or infiltration without the approval of the police chief and city's

managing director.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* also reported it received, on condition of anonymity, a tip-sheet sent to local security agencies in the last few weeks. It asked the agencies to notify the police department if there is "a significant increase in the population of predominantly young white males and females in a particular area, especially those who dress in rag-tag clothing and dye their hair in multi-colors."

The city's 7,000-member police force is being given a four-hour special training course in preparation for the convention. According to the *Inquirer*, the classroom and field sessions include the "three commandments: Be prepared. Be professional. And, most importantly, know thy enemy." Training includes proper pepper spray usage and use of a baton, including which "striking zones" to use under what circumstances.

Over 45,000 people, including 15,000 journalists, are expected to attend the Republican National Convention (RNC). Far more interest is already being shown, however, in what will be going on outside the convention rather than inside, where George W. Bush is expected to be named the party's presidential nominee.

The largest event is expected to be the Unity 2000 demonstration, in which 20,000 to 100,000 people are expected on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway on July 30. Unity 2000 is made up of 120 organizations representing a range of causes from welfare rights, to labor unions, to the fight for housing and education, to abortion rights, to the demand for a new trial for political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal.

The permit for the demonstration was granted in April only after Unity 2000 and the Ad Hoc Committee to Defend Healthcare went to court. The city claimed the RNC had been given the permits to all the desired areas. City officials hoped to keep demonstrations to a

7,600-square-foot “free-speech zone” across from the convention where organizations can sign up for a one-hour protest. Activists have labeled it the “censorship zone” and said they will not abide by the restrictions.

The Ad Hoc Committee to Defend Healthcare, which is affiliated with Physicians for Social Responsibility, will be holding their “Health Care for All, Not Profits for Some; A Call to Action Against Market-Driven Health Care” March on July 29. Flyers for the rally include slogans like “heal not steal,” “treat not cheat,” “health not wealth,” “choice not chains,” and “patients not profits.”

After the permits were granted the Philadelphia City Council passed a law which would impose a \$75 fine on masked individuals “intent to cause violence or property damage.” Larry Frankel, executive director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania, called the law “pre-convention hysteria.”

Another protest will be held by thousands of firefighters who will hold a march from the headquarters of the International Association of Firefighters Local 22 to the Liberty Bell on August 3. Some 400 fire departments from as far away as Florida and Massachusetts and members of the American Liver Foundation are expected to join them. In the past year, 150 of Philadelphia's 2,500 firefighters and paramedics have been diagnosed with hepatitis C and only half of the force has been tested. It is believed that emergency workers unknowingly caught the virus through contact with contaminated blood during rescue and medical calls. At least three city firefighters have died of the disease.

Groups denied permits to demonstrate during the convention include the Kensington Welfare Rights Organization (KWRO), which wanted to display photographs of homeless families and hold prayer vigils in a park across from the convention. They were also denied a permit to hold a “March for Economic Human Rights” of 5,000 people down Broad Street from City Hall to the convention on July 31.

KWRO leader Cheri Honkala vowed the group would march anyway. She said, “We cannot buy commercial spots, we cannot buy billboards, we cannot buy politicians and because of that, they have effectively, so far, silenced any kind of discussion of the issues of homelessness in the United States.” The group also intends to pitch tents in North Philadelphia for

hundreds of homeless and poor families to draw attention to the plight of the estimated 24,000 homeless in the city.

Supporters of Philadelphia political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal have announced they will participate in marches to publicize his pending hearing and have designated August 1 as “a special day to expose these executioners.” When Abu-Jamal filed his petition for a hearing for a new trial in October it was expected federal District Judge William Yohn would schedule the hearing in Philadelphia by May. Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, a leading contender for the vice-presidential nomination, has twice signed death warrants for Abu-Jamal.

Death penalty opponents will raise that Pennsylvania has the fourth largest death row in the United States, with 63 percent of these prisoners being African-American in a state that is only 10 percent African-American. They will also point out that of the 632 executions since the death penalty was reinstated in the US in 1976, 214 have taken place in Texas and that Governor George W. Bush, the presumed Republican presidential candidate, has presided over the executions of more people than any living governor, 25 this year alone.

The International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal has also charged that they are under surveillance by police. On June 8 vital financial files for Abu-Jamal's defense were stolen from their office. Eight leaders of Abu-Jamal's defense also received draconian sentences of one-year probation on April 23 in connection with arrests during a civil disobedience at Philadelphia's Liberty Bell on July 4, 1999. The probation includes constant surveillance and restrictions on travel to prevent organizing for Abu-Jamal's defense.



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