

Los Angeles police attack protesters at Democratic convention

Jerry White
17 August 2000

A spokesperson for the American Civil Liberties Union has denounced Monday night's attack by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) on protesters and others outside the Democratic Party National Convention as "nothing less than an orchestrated police riot." In a letter to the city attorney, Daniel Tokaji, staff lawyer for the Southern California ACLU, said, "The LAPD has not merely failed to protect demonstrators' right to free speech, it has run roughshod over them."

On Monday evening, while President Bill Clinton was delivering his speech to party delegates inside the Staples Center, hundreds of riot police outside were firing rubber bullets and beating people with batons across the street in an area cordoned off for public protests.

As many as 10,000 people had gathered to listen to several music groups, including the Los Angeles-based band Rage Against the Machine. The concert followed a day of protests denouncing the corporate control of the Democratic Party. Band members have been the target of protests by police groups because of their defense of US political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal. Last week LAPD Chief Bernard Parks had expressed his opposition to the event, saying, "We shouldn't have a concert that inflames the crowd." The night before the show a police spokesman said, "We're gravely concerned."

The concert was held in a "Public Assembly Area" set up by city authorities after attorneys for various protest organizations won a legal battle against the attempt to prevent protests anywhere near the Staples Center. The area is surrounded by a 14 foot-high chain-link fence erected to separate protesters from the Democratic convention.

The concert attracted thousands of mostly young people, including college students involved in the protests and local working class youth, many who had simply come to hear the music. During the concert police helicopters circled overhead and riot-equipped police surrounded the event. In at least one incident, police, who were there in force, used pepper spray against a person they claimed tried to scale the fence.

At around 7:35 p.m., nearly an hour into the event, police swept into the area to shut down the concert and attack those present. Police officials later claimed that "anarchists" in the audience had thrown glass, concrete chunks and plastic bottles filled with "noxious agents" at them.

However protesters, civil liberties attorneys and other spectators rejected police claims. "There were a couple of dozen young people throwing rocks, bottles in the direction of the Staples Center," said James Lafferty, director of the National Lawyers Guild, who himself was struck twice by rubber bullets. "They could simply have taken care of them. But they made no effort to do that. Without notice, they shut off the electricity and then took the stage and said you have 15 minutes to disperse."

Shortly after 8 p.m., with the band Ozomatli playing, police shut down the lights on stage and LAPD Commander Gary Brennan declared the gathering an illegal assembly and ordered the audience to leave. Ten minutes later 400 police officers, most on motorcycles or horseback, began to wade into the crowd. Another group of police began firing "non-lethal munitions" into the crowd, including rubber bullets called stingers that police supposedly aim at ankles and legs, small bean bags fired from shotguns and pepper spray.

According to an account in the *Los Angeles Times*, police on Olympic Boulevard and Figueroa, two major downtown thoroughfares closed off by police, attacked people with batons as they left the assembly area. Several concert fans were pushed over or struck by rubber pellets during the attack. Many tried to flee west along Olympic Boulevard but they were chased by police firing rubber pellets and beanbags.

A crowd of about 400 was caught between pellet firing police on one side and mounted police on another. After a two-minute standoff the crowd was directed to move down Olympic, but before they were able to move, the police fired more rubber bullets at the crowd.

Protest leaders and lawyers said Tuesday that as many as 150 people were injured by police, either with batons, horses or rubber bullets. Among those sustaining head injuries were a news photographer, a civil rights attorney involved in a lawsuit against police harassment of protesters, and a well-known homeless advocate from Los Angeles. Police said no officers were injured.

Many of those attacked later complained that they were unable to disperse because crowds had to leave through a single entrance from the public assembly area. Police moved the crowds away from the Staples Center and into the poor, mostly immigrant neighborhood of Pico-Union and the LAPD Ramparts Division, made notorious by the recent revelations of police brutality and frame-ups.

In all, police said six people were arrested in the attack.

On Tuesday police arrested 95 people involved in various protests. This included 15 juveniles who were among 45 animal rights protesters arrested after entering a fur store. As of Wednesday afternoon the youths' parents were continuing to await word at the police precinct on the fate of their children, who police say were charged with felony offenses.

One parent told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We haven't been able to talk or see our children for 12 hours. Police officials have yelled at us, saying if we didn't sit down it would take even longer to see them. First they said our kids would be released at 3 a.m. , then they said at 8 in the morning. When they finally get out, they are going to be under house arrest and have to wear an electronic tether on their leg. My kids are working kids, they are going to lose their jobs because of this."

Another parent, who was downtown for a teachers' protest for higher pay, said, "They have the First Amendment right to freedom of speech. But there is a crackdown because of the DNC. They're labeling everybody anarchists and taking away our freedom."

On Wednesday thousands of demonstrators participated in protests against police brutality and the growing prison population. They were met at Staples Center by over one thousand police officers, motorcycle and bicycle contingents. The police were heavily armed with tear gas and other equipment. The marchers were forced to proceed across town through an eerie route passing by stores shuttered by orders of the police and each intersection blocked by helmeted officers. At the fenced-in public assembly area, protesters were literally herded in. Some who complained of being crushed were prodded with nightsticks,

as other police contingents methodically closed off the rear of the march, leaving only narrow escape routes.

Sarah, a 26-year-old white-collar worker from San Francisco who was shoved to the ground by police, told the WSW. "I am not an anarchist. In fact I was trying to cooperate with the police by asking others to step back. Just then I was hit by a nightstick from the back and flew to the ground. People panicked and began to run. All along the march the police were being provocative while my sister and I held up our hands in a peace sign. I oppose brutality, and a government that spends more on prisons than on schools."

It is likely that the police and other agencies have provocateurs among the protesters whose actions have provided a pretext for the police crackdown. At the same time, the middle class radicalism and political limitations of those involved in the protests provide fertile ground for such provocateurs.

For weeks, however, Los Angeles city and police authorities, as well as the news media, have sought to create the political atmosphere for a crackdown on democratic rights. LAPD officials are reportedly determined to show they are far more prepared to deal with civil unrest than in 1992, when they were sharply criticized for failing to prevent the massive riots that swept the city after the acquittal of police who beat black motorist Rodney King.

Police commanders are using new hi-tech equipment, including live video feeds from helicopters and rooftop cameras to make "real-time" decisions at the unified command center they share with the FBI and other police agencies.

City and police authorities have reviewed films of the police crackdown at the Republican convention in Philadelphia. LAPD Cmdr. Dave Kalish said the high-profile tactics of the police had two goals: to deter demonstrators and to offer a "calming effect" on delegates at the convention and city residents. While many Los Angeles residents have been disturbed and angered by the trampling of democratic rights, organizers of the Democratic convention and city officials were quick to defend the actions of the police.



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