

Los Angeles authorities harass Democratic Convention protesters

John Andrews
14 August 2000

The political authorities in Los Angeles, with the support of the media, are gearing up to suppress the First Amendment rights of protesters at the Democratic National Convention (DNC), which opens August 14 at the city's Staples Center.

Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan made a special trip to Philadelphia to consult with the authorities who carried out mass arrests of demonstrators at the Republican National Convention. The Philadelphia Police Department raided the protesters' headquarters, seized leaflets and puppets, and preemptively arrested organizers. Scores of demonstrators are still behind bars in Philadelphia and a series of federal civil rights lawsuits have been filed in their behalf.

The *Los Angeles Times* has helped prepare the groundwork for police repression by publishing a provocative column by Edwin Locke of the Ayn Rand Institute, calling the DNC demonstrators "enemies of freedom."

Normally, one can drive right up to the front of Staples Center, but in advance of the convention nearby streets, including major thoroughfares, have been closed to create a 185-acre "secured area" ringed by concrete barricades and 14-foot-high metal fences. Additional barricades have been placed around the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) headquarters at Parker Center.

Many businesses located in the adjacent downtown district and even the federal bankruptcy court will be closed during the convention. City officials have created an atmosphere of fear, suggesting that clashes between police and protesters could ignite the sort of rioting that engulfed Los Angeles in 1992 and 1965.

Police have been stationed at every downtown exit ramp on the major highways and police helicopters are circling over much of the city. All officers have been assigned 12-hour shifts, putting hundreds of additional police on the streets.

LAPD Police Chief Bernard Parks has assigned Commander Tom Lorenzen to coordinate security. Lorenzen has the appropriate resume. His previous assignments include chief investigator for the Internal Affairs Division, which specializes in whitewashing complaints of misconduct, and head of the Special Weapons Team (SWAT). Lorenzen's first act was to show the Los Angeles City Council a propaganda videotape assembled from scenes of last year's demonstrations at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle.

The weekend before the convention the California Highway Patrol, which spends almost all its time patrolling freeways, made a particularly visible showing around Staples Center. A special procedure has been established to facilitate booking demonstrators into Los Angeles County's notorious "twin towers," the largest jail facility in the United States.

When media representatives questioned the extent of police activity, Lorenzen replied, "How do you ever prepare for a riot? You can't do that." He promised that the LAPD would arrest "all of these [protesters] who truly need to be arrested." He has already provided officers with a handbook blaming "anarchists" for disrupting the WTO meeting and describing mass arrest procedures, and given city employees instructions on tear gas exposure.

The LAPD, like other police agencies, is focusing on the large, colorful puppets that have become a staple of the protesters. LAPD Deputy Chief Maurice Moore claims the puppets are used to disguise weapons. Philadelphia police confiscated and destroyed puppets at a protest center last month, and Washington DC police did the same before the International Monetary Fund meeting last April.

Much police activity so far has focused on the so-called "Convergence Center," a large warehouse located several blocks from the Staples Center. A coalition of groups leased the building as a headquarters for protest activities.

On July 15, shortly after it opened, 11 LAPD officers entered the warehouse without a search warrant and refused to leave, claiming they were investigating trespassers. An attorney for the City of Los Angeles later claimed the warrantless search was justified because cars with out-of-state license plates were parked outside.

Since then police officers have staked out the Convergence Center, photographing people as they come and go and writing down license plate numbers. Police helicopters have repeatedly circled at low elevations, shining spotlights at night. People leaving the center have been cited for trivial or nonexistent infractions.

On the night of August 9, a police cruiser followed two women walking out of the Convergence Center. They were stopped, searched, handcuffed and arrested. Police read and confiscated their political literature.

The local American Civil Liberties Union chapter has already successfully filed two separate federal civil rights lawsuits, in each instance obtaining an injunction to prevent further rights violations. In the first case, United States District Judge Gary Feess ruled that protesters could not lawfully be confined to a small “official demonstration site” 260 yards from the Staples Center front door, and could not be kept out of the “secured zone.” In the second case, United States District Judge Dean Pregerson ordered the LAPD not to seize puppets or written materials, and not to enter the Convergence Center without first obtaining an order from him. He refused, however, to stop LAPD surveillance of the protest headquarters.

In another federal lawsuit, filed Friday, three protesters arrested last week while unfurling a huge banner from the roof of a nearby hotel allege that police nearly killed two of them by cutting lines as they rappelled down the side of the building.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact