

Hundreds arrested during Republican convention remain in prison

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8 August 2000

In what one civil rights attorney, representing demonstrators arrested during the Republican National Convention, called “a civil rights catastrophe of the first order,” 341 protestors remain jailed in several Philadelphia city prisons. Most were arrested August 1, preparing or participating in non-violent civil disobedience to protest capital punishment.

Those released tell stories of activists being physically and verbally abused, sexually assaulted, punched, kicked, thrown against walls, bloodied and dragged naked across floors. The R2K legal network held a press conference Saturday charging police with torture through sleep deprivation by overnight handcuffing in awkward positions; the use of pepper spray to coerce arrestees into attending arraignments; stripping prisoners of clothing; beating; denial of essential medication; denial of food, water and access to the bathroom for extended periods. Bail is being set from \$15,000 to \$500,000—unprecedented for this type of arrest. Two protesters, whom Philadelphia District Attorney Lynne Abraham considers “ringleaders,” were being held on \$1 million bond (subsequently reduced to \$100,000 for one of the two), which means they must post the full amount to be released.

The protesters are practicing what they call jailhouse solidarity. This involves being non-cooperative in their arraignment and refusing to post bail until everyone is released together. Activists are concerned that if they are released, individuals the police perceive as leaders will be left behind, to face even more severe brutality. About 151 demonstrators chose to be released as of Saturday night.

Until Friday, many demonstrators were appealing to Democratic Mayor John Street to tour the prisons and check the condition of the prisoners. Any illusions in Street, however, were shattered Friday evening when the mayor held a press conference where he said the protestors would be fully prosecuted. There are three grades of misdemeanors in Pennsylvania. Those convicted of the lowest grade may receive up to a year in jail and up to a \$2,500 fine. The most serious misdemeanors can be punished by up to five years behind bars and up to a \$10,000 fine.

At the press conference, Police Commissioner Timoney called for a federal investigation to “take a look” at the groups involved in the protest. “We are the third or fourth city to

suffer,” Timoney said, mentioning recent demonstrations in Seattle and Washington. “I think that there is . . . a cadre, if you will, of criminal conspirators who are about the business of planning a conspiracy to really cause mayhem, to cause property damage, to cause violence,” in cities hosting major events, Timoney said. Six police received minor injuries during last Tuesday's protest and 30 police vehicles were damaged, most with broken windshields or slashed tires. Thirty-five demonstrators have been charged with felonies; 20 of the felonies resulted from the arrest of everyone on the block where a demonstrator got into a shoving match with Police Commissioner Timoney. One of those arrested, a nineteen year old college student, was charged with carrying a lethal weapon, a cell phone he was talking on at the time, and has \$500,000 bail.

At the press conference, Street displayed what he called a giant slingshot, kerosene-soaked rags tied to chains and devices designed to lock demonstrators together. Protesters at the press conference denied his charges, saying the kerosene-soaked rags were part of a juggler's act for fire twirling and what Street called a slingshot was a device for carrying a massive puppet. Four people were arrested, including two mothers of jailed demonstrators, when they staged a sit-in after the mayor's press conference.

The materials were taken from the Ministry of Puppetganda, a West Philadelphia warehouse where demonstrators had spent a week constructing huge puppets, signs and banners for use during the non-violent civil disobedience on August 1. The warehouse was raided by police, who claimed they had information protesters had weapons in the warehouse, hours before the civil disobedience began. The affidavit detailing the weapons charges which police used to get a search warrant was sealed by the judge at the request of the district attorney. About 70 protesters were arrested and remain in jail. No weapons were found, but police destroyed all of the materials in the warehouse.

Activists have stated that their organizations were heavily infiltrated by police agents and provocateurs. A report from the *Independent Media Center* told of individuals joining the demonstrators and taunting the police or encouraging acts of vandalism. One protester released Thursday told the WSWs he

was in a van with 17 people which left the West Philadelphia warehouse before the raid Tuesday afternoon. Their driver took a different route than the one expected and they ended up on a highway ramp boxed in by police cars in front and back and a helicopter overhead. The driver was quickly arrested and whisked away. He was seen with a group of plain clothes police monitoring a vigil at one of the prisons last Thursday morning. The cop had gone through the activists' civil disobedience training.

The two leaders who were being held on \$1 million bond are Kate Sorenson, a leader of ACT UP/Philadelphia, an AIDS activist organization, and John Seller, leader of the Ruckus Society. Sorenson has been charged with ten felonies. Seller was arrested August 2, the day after the civil disobedience.

Civil rights attorney John McGuire, who represents Seller, said the charges against him were phoney but city officials wanted to get him off the street not only during the Republican Convention, but also for the Democratic Convention in Los Angeles. On August 1, Mayor Richard Riordan of Los Angeles was seen walking around Philadelphia's City Hall area with police officials while demonstrators were being arrested. Seller's bond was reduced to \$100,000 on Monday, but Sorenson is awaiting a hearing.

On Friday, the National Lawyers Guild issued a press release calling for the immediate release of those arrested. The statement said, "The actions of the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office offend fundamental due process and First Amendment rights of hundreds of protestors. We urge District Attorney Abraham to immediately release remaining protestors and to handle any prosecutions fairly. Further, we seek her assurance that First Amendment activity will not continue to be unduly burdened and that no further harm will come to those individuals who were expressing their political views this week in Philadelphia."

A vigil of about 100 was held Sunday afternoon, August 6, across from the Roundhouse, the main police administration building, even though all of the prisoners have been moved several miles to prisons in Northeast Philadelphia. Most demonstrators who came for the Republican convention have left the city, although some came from New York City for the vigil. There were nearly as many police at the Roundhouse as there were demonstrators.

One woman being held was in solitary. Activists reported they screamed and chanted for her to be let out of solitary, and in retribution the cops stuck 9 more people in her cell.

Julie Davis of ACT UP/Philadelphia told the WSWs the brutal treatment was being meted out to all of the prisoners, regardless of whether or not they cooperated in their arraignment. She said, "We have the highest ever bails for misdemeanors in the history of the United States. Many of these people were just walking down the street talking on a cell phone."

Another demonstrator from New York City, who has been in Philadelphia for a week, told the WSWs, "You could just walk

down the sidewalk with a T-shirt and if they didn't like what it said, they came over and attacked you and then accused you of assaulting an officer. Bicycle messengers have been arrested. This is a state of siege. This is a total violation of Constitutional rights for everybody—for the people of Philadelphia, for the working people of Philadelphia—especially people of color. They are the ones getting attacked for nothing and they live here. It's disgusting."

A twenty-four-year old demonstrator from California was arrested last Tuesday evening and released Saturday afternoon. He told the WSWs, "They're torturing people in there. If people didn't want to give their fingerprints, they just started dragging them by the neck. I was in there for four days. We got cheese and bread and a little quart of iced tea for food."

He went on, "When I was arrested I was held in a squad car for over a half hour with my hands going numb. When I protested, the cops said they didn't carry real handcuffs, 'So you've got to deal with it.' I wasn't allowed a phone call the entire four days I was there. We weren't allowed to see a lawyer. They sent in a public defender and all he did was tell us that we had to give our names. He told us solidarity was not going to work. He reaffirmed that we did not have a right to a phone call, that we had to wait to be arraigned to make our first phone call. We were told complete lies.

"We were handcuffed ankle to wrist if we made too much noise. If we continued to make noise, they threatened to handcuff the other wrist to the other ankle. Not only were we handcuffed then, but we were handcuffed outside the cell and then rolled into our cells face first. We had six to seven and sometimes eight people in a one-person cell the entire time I was there.

"Anything they wanted to do they said they had the right to do. They called us 'bitches' and 'punks.' They said if we wanted to protest we were going to take it like the people in Alabama [during the civil rights protests]. When we asked if they would be treating Martin Luther King like this, they said they would beat us just like they were beaten then. They went as far as to tell us we wouldn't be arraigned until the following Tuesday."



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