

# Over 200 Republican Convention protesters remain in Philadelphia jails

**Tom Bishop**  
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As of August 11, 228 demonstrators arrested during the Republican National Convention remained in Philadelphia jails. Those released continued to recount incidents of physical and psychological abuse, including hog-tying leading to bleeding and extreme pain, beatings, sexual abuse, withholding of medications, and overcrowded cells.

Over 150 of the imprisoned protesters have begun a hunger strike to demand that District Attorney Lynn Abraham meet and negotiate with their lawyers. Abraham responded by saying, "Get a life. It's not going to happen. They can remain guests of the commonwealth for as long as they wish."

Many of those being held continue to practice jail solidarity, meaning they will only identify themselves as John or Jane Doe. They are doing this because they do not want to leave behind individuals whom city officials consider leaders, for fear these prisoners will be isolated and brutalized.

Judges have said they will not release people who withhold their names and addresses. One demonstrator who was serving as a medic during the August 1 demonstration said he "repeatedly gave officers his name, but he was automatically tagged as a 'John Doe'" and not released until August 5.

At a press conference August 8th called by the R2K Legal Team, which provided legal observers during the demonstrations, leaders of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) and Philadelphia community activists denounced the prison abuse, excessive bail, and police tactics during the demonstrations as a politically motivated effort to suppress freedom of speech.

The NLG has put together a nationwide legal team of over 70 lawyers to litigate civil lawsuits for "each and every one of the 479 people arrested" during the Republican Convention. The NLG had over 100 legal

observers monitoring the large demonstration against the death penalty on August 1st in Center City Philadelphia, which included acts of civil disobedience.

Robert Meeks, president of the Philadelphia chapter of the NLG, said acts of vandalism by a small group of demonstrators prompted the Philadelphia police to move into "unprecedented territory in abusing and intimidating" demonstrators. He said that in the past misdemeanors for non-violent civil disobedience had been treated like a traffic ticket. He condemned the excessively high bails and the targeting of leaders of organizations for "conspiracy and terrorism." He also condemned the sealing of a search warrant that enabled police to raid a West Philadelphia warehouse hours before the demonstrations and destroy signs, banners, puppets and other art work meant to convey the demonstrators' message.

Cheri Honkala of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union said her organization's 3,000-strong march to the site of the Republican Convention on July 31st proceeded peacefully despite the lack of a permit from the city. She told the press conference, "There must be a deeper investigation into the different political people in the city of Philadelphia that coordinated and participated in infringing on people's First Amendment rights."

New York civil rights attorney Ron McGuire said the bails that have been set are "without precedent", including \$15,000 to \$30,000 bails for misdemeanors. He said, "We will not allow this country to go down the road of allowing warlords and thugs to set the law."

He said the male protesters were being held in 23-hour lockdown. They were not allowed to congregate or have visitors for over a week. McGuire charged that people at the highest levels were trying to not only "criminalize protest, but write protest out of

the Constitution.” He condemned Police Commissioner Timoney's call for the use of conspiracy and racketeering laws against demonstrators crossing state lines. McGuire said the same laws could have been used against Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement.

On August 10 bail was dropped from \$1 million to \$100,000 for Kathleen Sorenson, a leader of ACT UP/Philadelphia. Police testified that they did not observe Sorenson do anything illegal, but said that she was using a cell phone to direct protesters' activities as they moved through the city.

Sorenson's attorney, Lawrence Krasner, said his client was monitoring the protesters to keep peace. “This case is a joke and consists of a woman on a cell phone, pointing directions.”

The other activist held on \$1 million bail, John Seller, leader of the Ruckus Society, had his bail reduced to \$100,000. At an August 8 press conference, he said, “It wasn't very hard to tell who was smashing glass out here last Tuesday. If they wanted to arrest those people, they would have arrested those people. They chose to target nonviolent protesters, organizers, and folks who were standing in the street in acts of conscience.”

On August 9 three men were charged with attacking Police Commissioner Timoney and charged with a list of offenses that could give them jail sentences of up to 40 years. Each is being held on \$450,000 bail. At the preliminary hearing, the police claimed an officer had received a concussion over a melee involving a bicycle. This was not announced at the time of the three men's arrest.

Some of the male demonstrators who have put in the general prison population at the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility have issued a statement with eleven demands. They include the right to a speedy trial; the right to prompt medical care and decent food; an end to overcrowding; an end to abuse by guards; an end to arbitrary lockdowns; access to phones, showers, and visits; prompt credit of monies sent from outside; reasonable commissary prices; prompt response to sanitary problems; and real rehabilitation programs.

In a statement issued August 11 by nine men being held at the Detention Center, the prisoners said, “The Philadelphia police did not brutalize us in front of the cameras and have as a consequence been praised for their professionalism. Out of view the brutality began at

once. People in handcuffs were pepper sprayed. Others were hog-tied with plastic cuffs that cut off their circulation. Men were dragged and kicked in the genitals until they bled. These are only examples of some of the acts of cruelty and torture we have personally experienced.”

They continued, “We are confined to 2 person cells 23 hours a day. Our phones do not work and we have been denied visitors. In spite of this, we have been able to learn something of the unconscionable conditions of other prisoners.” They concluded, “The treatment we have received and the conditions we have been made aware of are inconsistent with a democratic or civil society. The time is overdue for public outrage at the crimes being committed in the name of criminal justice. It is time for a new civil rights movement for two million people, mainly black and Latino, locked up tonight. America's prisons are its new plantations.”



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