New York City police crack down on World Economic Forum protests

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The protests at the recently concluded World Economic Forum in New York City became the occasion for an unprecedented mobilization of police power and official attacks on the rights of assembly and free speech.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly claimed afterwards that the five days of meetings and protests had shown that the new mayor and his administration had ensured that "people had the ability to demonstrate, people had the ability to say what they thought, and they did it generally without impinging on others' rights."

There would be something comical about this statement, if it were not so sinister. The protesters were given permits, but faced restrictions so draconian that no one could join them or hear their message. They were turned into virtual prisoners, hemmed in behind barricades or walls of police, with 4,000 cops deployed against numbers that reached a maximum of about 10,000 on Saturday afternoon.

As the *New York Times* acknowledged in its assessment of the events, "the police claimed the streets.... They surrounded the demonstrators, bracketing marchers on the streets, at one point with city buses and at another with police motorcycles, and monitored the protests with television cameras mounted high about the Waldorf and on a police helicopter."

The police preparations began several months ago. In the week before the beginning of the forum, police officials held several threatening news conferences. Police were deployed 38,000-strong in steady 12-hour shifts, with an additional 700 cops on hand if needed. The streets near the Waldorf-Astoria hotel were closed off at 5 a.m. on Wednesday, more than 24 hours before the scheduled start of activities.

Cops were stationed outside of Starbucks and Gap stores in midtown Manhattan and some other areas as well, adding to the atmosphere of an armed camp. The police also announced that they were invoking an 1845 law banning groups, which they defined as three or more people, from wearing masks or hoods in public, even though a Manhattan Criminal Court judge had ruled recently that the law could not be applied to peaceful rallies.

While paying lip service to free speech rights, the authorities at the same time made clear their view of the protesters as the "enemy within" and sought to use the events of September 11 to attack basic democratic rights. Michael P. O'Looney, the police department's deputy commissioner for public information, put it this way: "This is America. If people want to come to New York to protest in a peaceful manner, we welcome and respect their right to do so. But keep in mind that the citizens of this city have been through a lot in the last five months. We will not tolerate anyone breaking the law. If they do so, they will be dealt with swiftly and firmly."

The police quarantine of demonstrators is not a brand new tactic, and in fact has been increasingly used in the city, even before the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Never has its use been more brazen, however. In this case it was accompanied by a drumbeat of public statements designed to depict the protesters as alien outsiders. The language of the police official was quite conscious. By suggesting that people were "coming to New York to protest." he was declaring that no New Yorker could possibly associate himself with any protest after September 11. To make it even clearer, the police sent letters to office buildings and other businesses in midtown instructing office workers not to "associate" with the demonstrators!

These measures had the desired effect of discouraging

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thousands of people from turning out for the protests. The cops went looking for trouble among the smaller groups of demonstrators, and manufactured it when they felt it necessary.

At many of the smaller protests and meetings held over the five-day period, police outnumbered demonstrators. At the Fashion Institute of Technology at 27th Street and 7th Avenue in Manhattan, for instance, about 200 students arrived for a meeting in an indoor auditorium on Friday evening. They were met by rows of police officers stretching for two blocks on the sidewalk in front of the school, along with mounted police officers on horses and a police helicopter overhead.

Thirty-eight arrests were made on Saturday, about 150 more on Sunday and several more on Monday, for a total of 201 during the World Economic Forum. Most of the arrests on Saturday came after the police, apparently bent on justifying the massive deployment, waded into a crowd near 59th Street and Fifth Avenue and began hauling people out, charging them with unlawful assembly and disorderly conduct. The police commissioner claimed they had received a tip that some individuals who were carrying plastic shields and masks “were about to attack the police.” A lawyer for the National Lawyers Guild, Leslie Brody, later declared that the shields were plastic cafeteria trays that were being used as painted placards.

The longer-term implications of the police operation are suggested by other recent developments. Just weeks ago, the newly installed police commissioner announced the creation of two new top positions in the department, a deputy commissioner for counterterrorism and a deputy commissioner for intelligence. General Frank Libutti, a retired Marine Corps general, was named to the first position, and David Cohen, a veteran of the CIA, was named to the second. Each man had 35 years experience. Cohen’s most recent job, before he retired in 1997, was overseeing the CIA’s espionage operations around the world.

The new appointments are a clear indication that the September 11 attacks are being used to set in motion the revival of police spying on political dissidents. Police Commissioner Kelly said the new posts were created in the closest collaboration with the FBI.

Peaceful protesters at the World Economic Forum were hamstrung in the name of the fight against terrorism, and the authorities will seek to use the same methods against working people fighting unemployment and budget cuts in the immediate future.

The huge police operation against political protest indicates that the main worry of the political establishment is not the actions of terrorists, but the likelihood that workers and youth will take to the streets to protest growing unemployment, the corruption and criminality symbolized by Enron, and blatant attacks on democratic rights.

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