

New York City officials muzzle anti-Republican protests

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Negotiations between New York City officials and organizers of protests planned for next month's Republican Party convention have reached an impasse, with the city rejecting all demands for an accessible public rally. Instead, the administration of billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg is insisting that protesters be relegated to an isolated strip of highway far from the convention site.

Over a year ago, the antiwar protest coalition United for Peace and Justice requested a permit to have a march and rally during the Republican convention, which is to take place between August 30 and September 2. With the convention little more than a month away, a permit has still not been issued.

The city estimates that it will spend \$76 million for security alone for the convention. It plans to close around 30 blocks surrounding Madison Square Garden, including long stretches of 7th and 8th Avenues. In addition, it is retooling its 311 telephone hotline—set up to field citizen complaints and service requests to city agencies—to provide advice about dining and entertainment to the thousands of Republican delegates descending on the city.

Despite these expensive accommodations doled out for Mayor Bloomberg's party, the city claims there is no room for the hundreds of thousands of protesters expected to attend. Organizers have predicted crowds ranging from a quarter-million to 400,000.

Negotiations between the city government and the protest organizers increasingly foundered, as Bloomberg attempted to marginalize the protest. The group originally sought to protest at the Great Lawn in Central Park, but the Parks Department claimed this would damage the grass and threaten other recent renovations. Newspapers of all political stripes called this claim as ridiculous on its face, as huge free

concerts of over 135,000 people have been staged this summer on the Great Lawn. In addition, the city denied a number of other locations commonly used for large gatherings: the Northern Meadow of Central Park, 3rd Avenue, and Times Square.

Police commissioner Raymond Kelly has demanded the group accept the police department's choice for a rally location—the West Side Highway—or take the issue to court. This would confine the hundreds of thousands of protesters to a miles-long strip of road, divided into pens and harassed by mounted cops. The rally would be far away, not only from the convention, but also from everyone else in the city. Access would be greatly hindered, and movement in and out of the rally extremely difficult, while for the majority, hearing the speakers at the platform would be impossible.

Associate Legal Director Christopher Dunn and Executive Director Donna Lieberman of the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) wrote in *Newsday*, "While the convention at Madison Square Garden may be a political event for some, for many it will serve as a key gauge of the extent to which 9/11 security concerns have eroded America's commitment to civil liberties."

The NYCLU won an extremely limited legal victory with a July 19 Manhattan federal district court ruling that dealt with some of the NYPD's most repressive tactics against public demonstrations. The suit stemmed from the massive antiwar protest held on February 15, 2003, when tens of thousands were blocked from even joining the protests and those who attended were herded into block-long pens, in some cases barred from leaving. The heavy-handed tactics resulted in sporadic clashes between protesters and police and numerous arrests.

In the lead-up to last year's protest, the city invoked 9/11-related security concerns and refused to allow

protestors to march, an unprecedented restriction that was backed up by federal courts. (See: Judge upholds New York police ban on anti-war march) In the aftermath of the February 2003 protest and the police response, the New York Civil Liberties Union filed over 300 complaints alleging police abuse of protesters. The court backing of the restrictions set a precedent that may allow the police again to argue before the courts that unspecified “security concerns” trump the right to peacefully assemble.

Judge Robert Sweet’s decision this week will not change this pattern. He himself described the impact of his ruling as “fairly minimal.” It states merely that the police must make “reasonable efforts” to provide access to demonstrations after blocking off streets, and they must make “reasonable accommodations” allowing people to enter and exit the metal-barricaded pens. It also requires that the police invoke a “specific threat” before carrying out wholesale bag searches at demonstrations. He denied the NYCLU’s request to limit the use of mounted cops. Finally, the judge said that the court would exercise no oversight regarding police tactics, declaring the NYPD “best equipped to decide how to achieve the objectives.”

Bloomberg’s stonewalling of the protest organizers, sowing of confusion around the legality of the protest, and open use of police intimidation are aimed at squelching any mass public display of popular anger against the political establishment. This tactic was spelled out by the *New York Sun*, a daily newspaper whose politics are aligned with the Republican Party, in the lead up to last year’s February 15th protests. The paper editorialized: “The longer they delay in granting the protesters a permit, the less time the organizers have to get their turnout organized and the smaller the crowd is likely to be. And ... the smaller the crowd, the more likely that President Bush will proceed with his plans to liberate Iraq.”

In addition, small isolated crowds set the stage for police provocations and perhaps the use of overwhelming force and mass arrests to stifle protest and intimidate the public from engaging in future mass demonstrations.

Similar impediments are being placed in the way of those planning demonstrations next week outside the Democratic convention in Boston, where a judge reported recently that preparations have been made for

as many as 2,500 arrests.

While these anti-democratic measures are being carried out under the pretext of combating terrorist threats, they are an expression of the political isolation of both major parties from the vast majority of the American people. Both conventions are set to endorse the continued US military occupation of Iraq and a set of social and economic policies geared to the interests of the country’s financial elite.

The conventions are an empty façade, in which decisions have already been taken behind the scenes by the powerful interests that control both parties. To preserve the pretense that they somehow express the will of the people, both big business parties are determined to prevent not only any opposition at the conventions themselves, but any visible expression of protest anywhere near them.

The exclusion of political views from public debate logically extends into the openly violent suppression of public actions based upon those views. The bipartisan unity on war and social reaction finds its finished expression in the crowd-control measures of the police.



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