

In run-up to Republican convention: 24-hour surveillance of protest organizers

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The New York City Police Department (NYPD) has dispatched hundreds of cops around the country to put some 56 people under 24-hour surveillance in advance of the Republican National Convention (RNC). The convention, to be held at Madison Square Garden in Manhattan, opens Monday, August 30.

According to a report issued by WABC News in New York City, the subjects of this spying operation have been identified as “primary anarchists” by the NYPD. They are each being watched by teams of five detectives plus one supervisor, according to the television news report.

The surveillance teams are being sent as far away as California, North Carolina, Washington DC and Boston. Their assignment is to tail the targeted protest organizers and follow them on their trips to New York.

Another group of 20 police officers have been masquerading as anarchist protesters as part of a deep undercover operation. They “have been meeting with, traveling with, and secretly reporting on the activists’ plans” for nearly two years, WABC reported.

The WABC News account of this massive spying operation has not been reported in the New York or national press, and has been similarly suppressed by the broadcast media.

Along with the recent FBI visits, in which members of the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) have harassed dozens of individuals, the NYPD surveillance marks a chilling escalation in state attacks on the rights of free speech and assembly. Anyone labeled a troublemaker by the NYPD will now have police files that trace their every movement. No doubt the NYPD has coordinated its lists with the FBI and other government agencies such as the Homeland Security Department, which maintains “no fly” lists.

This mounting of a nationwide surveillance operation

by a city police department is virtually unprecedented. Even in the 1950s, when the infamous Red Squads were set up in every major metropolis to spy on socialists and communists, the reach of these agencies seldom extended beyond their own city limits.

In addition to its surveillance of those planning to come to New York to protest the RNC, the NYPD showed off to reporters last week some of the latest hardware it has developed to use against protesters. Devices include an Italian-made helicopter with a “night sun” floodlight, small handsaws that can cut through chains linking protesters, and a new 45-pound mega-megaphone that can be heard by demonstrators several blocks away.

Known as a “long range acoustic device,” the megaphone also can emit a piercing sound—like a smoke detector, only much louder—designed to break up crowds. Such devices were sent to Iraq for use by troops earlier this year.

While NYPD Commissioner Raymond Kelly assured reporters that the shrieking feature would not be used against RNC protesters, it is safe to assume that such crowd control devices—after being tested against the Iraqis and others—will eventually be used against demonstrators in the US as well.

NYPD officials also demonstrated other ways they would handle civil disobedience expected at the RNC. Police assigned to play the role of protesters were swarmed by cops—on foot, in police cars, on motorcycles and on bicycles—and the “protesters” were herded away.

Every bus carrying convention delegates will have a city policeman aboard, to ensure that no protesters interfere with the buses serving the 4,853 delegates and alternates as they go back and forth between Madison Square Garden and their midtown Manhattan hotels.

In all, the NYPD expects to maintain 10,000 cops 24 hours a day in the Madison Square Garden area. The entire city police force of some 36,000 is being placed on shifts of 12 hours or more for the convention.

Helmeted paramilitary police armed with assault rifles have already been deployed in nearby Pennsylvania Station and subways, along with National Guard troops, NYPD canine units and regular beat cops. Other police have mounted stepped-up street patrols. A week before the convention even begins, the repressive atmosphere in the area is overwhelming.

Meanwhile, city officials have still not reached agreement with organizers of protests set for the weekend preceding the opening of the RNC. The New York City Parks Department has denied permits for major rallies in Central Park on the pretext that they would endanger the grass. The same department has previously issued permits for concerts with turnouts approaching the size of the expected protests.

The anti-war coalition, United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), has repeatedly applied for permits to hold a rally in Central Park following a march by an anticipated 250,000 people that will flow past Madison Square Garden. Denying the permits, the city has attempted to relegate the rally to West Street, a long, narrow stretch of highway alongside the Hudson River.

On Monday, a federal judge denied an appeal by the National Council of Arab Americans and the ANSWER Coalition, which had applied for a permit for a much smaller demonstration in Central Park on Saturday, August 28.

Arguments in the court case dealing with what is expected to be a much larger demonstration organized by the UFPJ for August 29 were heard in state court on Tuesday, with a decision expected Thursday. The group has argued that the city's position violates the Constitution "by discriminating on the basis of content in allowing cultural but not political events."

UFPJ organizers have said that if the court does not rule in their favor, they will call off the rally that is scheduled to follow the march. This would leave a mass of humanity surging up 20 blocks from Manhattan's Union Square with no set destination once they passed the site of the convention. Both the march's organizers and the police anticipate that many protesters will form smaller groups and move on to the park.

By denying a permit for Central Park, the city administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the NYPD are inviting the kind of chaos and disruption they claim they are trying to prevent.

There have been suggestions that the Bush camp would welcome a scenario in which there were clashes between police and protesters. The Republicans would then brand the demonstrators as "terrorist sympathizers," while linking them to Kerry and the Democrats.

Given the acknowledged infiltration of protest groups by New York City police, the danger of violent confrontations sparked by agents provocateurs is very real.



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