

Two weeks before Republican convention:

New York City denies demonstrators' new bid for park permit

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16 August 2004

New York City officials have rejected a fresh request for a permit allowing an anticipated quarter of a million demonstrators to rally in Central Park August 29, on the eve of the Republican National Convention.

The administration of billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg denied the application virtually as soon as it was submitted. This leaves the massive march that is slated to surge up Seventh Avenue past the convention site at Madison Square Garden with no final destination, raising the prospect of chaos in the streets of Manhattan.

Last month, United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), the organization that is principally responsible for organizing the demonstration, caved in to the city's first denial of a permit for the Central Park rally. After months of stonewalling by the New York City Police Department, the UFPJ accepted a site that the Bloomberg administration selected with the express aim of marginalizing the mass protest—the West Side Highway, a barren strip of roadway on the edge of Manhattan.

The protest's organizers then made a fruitless attempt to convince the city to provide assistance, including shuttle buses, drinking water and sanitary facilities. The city, which is spending tens of millions of dollars on the Republican convention, countered that it is not responsible for facilitating protests.

In announcing last week that it was rescinding its agreement to accept the West Side Highway rally site, UFPJ organizers said that relegating the mass protest to a sun-baked 40-block stretch of highway without any shade or access to water would pose a significant health risk.

It also cited recent polls showing that more than 80

percent of New Yorkers back their right to rally in the park. There is overwhelming hostility to the Republican convention among city residents, who see the gathering as a massive disruption as well as a shameless attempt to politically exploit the nearly 3,000 deaths suffered here in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

This effort to exploit September 11 and wrap the Republican Party in the mantle of its 400 fallen emergency service workers has been somewhat marred by the ongoing contract dispute between the city and its police and firefighters. A city hall spokesman accused those whom the Republicans laud as “heroes” in their campaign propaganda of “acting like thugs” for refusing to rule out work stoppages or sick outs during the convention.

The principal reason for the organizers' backing off their acceptance of the NYPD's ultimatum was the overwhelming hostility of those who intend to demonstrate. Many of them told UFPJ that they had no intention of going to the West Side Highway and would converge on the park, no matter what the permit said. Many also have denounced the city's plan as a blatant abrogation of basic rights. It allows the right to assemble only where protesters cannot be seen or heard.

The Bloomberg administration has responded contemptuously to the protest group's reversal, telling it to “stop the theatrics.” From the beginning it has used the absurd pretext that protesters would harm the grass in Central Park. Last week Bloomberg threw in the claim that the city was concerned about its ability to provide ambulance service there.

Underlying the controversy are unresolved political contradictions within the protest movement itself. The

march is being held under the slogan “No to the Bush Agenda,” and its principal organizers have sought to orient the antiwar movement to the Democratic Party’s presidential campaign.

During the Democratic National Convention in Boston last month, UFPJ addressed an open letter to Kerry, calling on him to “show the same courage now that you did in 1971,” when, as a returning veteran, he denounced the Vietnam War. This, despite Kerry’s repeated assurances that he will continue the occupation of Iraq for years, in an attempt to consolidate a US puppet regime there.

Democratic politicians have issued stern warnings that demonstrators must avoid any kind of confrontation in New York, for fear that it would only facilitate Republican efforts to whip up their right-wing base. Clearly, however, large sections of those opposed to the war are unwilling to renounce basic democratic rights to accommodate the Democrats’ electoral calculations. The heavy-handed tactics of the city administration are seen by many as reason enough to protest.

The danger of confrontation is real. An army of some 20,000 police and security forces are being mobilized round-the-clock to secure the convention, which will be held inside a “frozen zone” in the center of Manhattan. The city is already under the extreme security measures imposed as part of the “code orange” terrorist alert declared by the Homeland Security Department. During the convention, a 13-block swath of the city will be closed off to most of the public.

Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge has designated the convention as a “national security special event,” and the entire security operation is being run by the US Secret Service, an agency that has taken a “zero tolerance” approach to virtually any protest activity in the vicinity of President Bush.

It is estimated that the cost of the security operation will reach \$79 million, with the federal government providing \$50 million in aid to the city’s police department for this one event.

Not only New York cops, but also agents of the Federal Protective Service, which is normally assigned to guarding federal facilities, are undergoing intensive riot training. National Guard units have also been placed on alert for possible call-up. Crowd control units are being armed with “non-lethal” weapons, including

plastic bullets, pepper spray and electric taser guns.

Meanwhile, New York’s daily *Newsday* quoted police sources as saying that agents posing as anti-Bush protesters have been infiltrated into organizations planning demonstrations during the convention. The paper added that “the department also made extensive preparations for processing large numbers of arrests they anticipate.”

Ominously, the same newspaper reported Friday that a 35-page booklet issued by the NYPD entitled “Legal guidelines for the Republican National Convention” contains a warning that protesters may impersonate cops and beat up other demonstrators for the purpose of “faking” incidents of police brutality.



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