New York City police attack Cindy Sheehan at antiwar rally

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New York City police officers broke up an antiwar rally Monday in the midst of a speech by Cindy Sheehan, whose son Casey was killed in Iraq in April 2004.

Cops stormed into the area in Manhattan's Union Square where a couple of hundred had gathered to hear Sheehan. The 48-year-old California woman has become a focus of antiwar sentiment since camping outside Bush's Crawford, Texas ranch last month to demand an explanation for why her son was sent to die.

Sheehan said that she was slightly injured in the melee as police grabbed away the microphone and seized sound equipment. "I was speaking and someone grabbed my backpack and pulled me back pretty roughly," she told the Associated Press. "I was shoved around."

Those in the audience angrily shouted "let her speak" and "shame, shame" as the cops broke up the gathering.

Police arrested one of the rally's organizers, Paul Zulkowitz, a Green Party activist, on charges of unauthorized use of a sound device and disorderly conduct.

The outdoor rally came between appearances by Sheehan at churches in Brooklyn Sunday and in Manhattan Monday night as part of her "Bring them home now" bus tour that has taken her and other family members of soldiers killed in Iraq to cities across the country.

Antiwar protesters set up a "Camp Casey NYC" at Union Square last month in solidarity with the 26-day protest action initiated by Sheehan in Texas. While the city's Parks Department had issued a permit for the group to be there, the protest has been subjected to relentless police harassment.

Organizers said that the attack in Union Square marked the first time that the "Bring them home now" campaign has been subjected to this kind of police repression. The tour has consisted of three buses carrying families of fallen soldiers, Iraq war veterans and veterans of other wars to 51 cities in 28 states.

The tour was launched on August 31, the last day of the nearly month-long vigil outside of Bush's Texas ranch. The three buses are converging on Washington for the September 24 antiwar demonstration there.

"I think that their use of force was pretty excessive for someone that didn't have a permit," Sheehan said.

Ironically, just moments before the police moved in, Sheehan had thanked the crowd for supporting her struggle and remarked that she would have liked to stay in New York longer, having heard that it was a "fun city."

The police attack on Sheehan and the "Bring them home now" campaign represents a blatant assault on constitutional freedoms of speech and assembly. The charge of violating regulations requiring permits for sound equipment is a pretext frequently used by the city's police department to suppress political protest. Permits are routinely denied or delayed, forcing organizers to either violate the arbitrary restriction or cancel their event.

This latest act of repression is part of a wholesale police crackdown on virtually all forms of political dissent in the city that has been escalating for more than a decade. The NYPD has employed increasingly repressive measures, particularly since the beginning of the protests against the war in Iraq.

Even at protests held with city permits, these measures have included the corralling of protesters in steel pens, illegal searches of demonstrators, photographing and videotaping those participating, unprovoked mass arrests and the interrogation of those

arrested about their political beliefs.

Smaller spontaneous rallies, such as the one in Union Square addressed by Sheehan, frequently provoke massive police deployments and arrests.

During her appearance in New York, Sheehan called for the immediate withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq. She directed her fire not only at Bush, but also at the state's Senator Hillary Clinton. The Democratic politician and former First Lady, she said, "knows the war is a lie," but supports it anyway to further her political ambitions.

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