

# Police repress protesters at Democratic National Convention

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On Monday, police in riot gear used pepper spray, truncheons and rubber bullets on a peaceful demonstration of about 300 protesters about one mile from the Democratic National Convention in Denver. Around 100 demonstrators were arrested, charged with resisting a lawful order to disperse and obstruction of streets or public passageways.

At about 7 p.m. Monday, riot police fired pepper spray and pepper balls, which are delivered by guns, against the protesters, who had attempted to carry out a protest outside of the police-designated “free speech zone.” The free speech zone is a small area in a parking lot near the Pepsi Center, surrounded by two layers of steel fence and concrete barriers and topped by razor wire.

The confrontation began on a sidewalk near Denver’s Civic Center. SWAT police forced protesters backward, where a second phalanx of police was waiting, blocking their retreat. The police then completely surrounded the protesters, while reinforcements, including two armored vehicles, arrived. The protesters were held in this position for 90 minutes.

Twenty-one year old Joey Kenzie, a recent community college graduate, was among those surrounded by the riot police. “I’m a little in shock,” she told the *Denver Post*. “At one point we didn’t know what we were going to do, we were going to get arrested or maced. I haven’t been able to vote for a president yet, but this was an epiphany. My freedom of speech was suppressed.”

From among those pinned by the police, a protester was heard shouting, “This is not America. This is what a police state looks like. You’re worried about Beijing? This is repression.”

The Denver Police Department claims that the “crowd that had gathered near Civic Center Park

refused requests to disperse and suddenly rushed a police safety line about 7:15 p.m.,” and that protesters were “carrying rocks and other items that could be used to threaten public safety.”

A legal observer for the People’s Law Project and the National Lawyers Guild disputed the police account. He observed no rocks or other projectiles in the hands of the protesters, and noted that they were complying with police orders to “move back” when the police fired pepper spray into the crowd. No order to disperse was given, and when protesters attempted to leave of their own accord, the police blocked their route.

Footage of the protest and the police intervention can be viewed on YouTube.

Police interned the arrested protesters at a makeshift prison composed of wire cages reminiscent of the US detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Denver has set up special “DNC” kangaroo courts to process the arrested protesters. However, it was not until nearly midnight on Monday that the first five protesters were arraigned—without attorneys—at the court dubbed “DNC 2.” Four of the five protesters were brought into the court tied together in twos, and they were compelled to enter pleas before the judge, Doris Burd, still linked together. The judge offered the prisoners the choice of entering a plea agreement with the city attorney, or pleading either guilty or innocent on the spot. Burd levied a \$500 bond on the two protesters who pleaded not guilty.

Two men who had been arraigned and pleaded guilty—one of whom claimed to have been only a bystander—were interviewed in the courtroom by a reporter for the *Rocky Mountain News*. However, when the reporter tried to write their names down, a sheriff’s deputy ripped the reporter’s notebook out of his hands, removing the page with his notes, and threatened to

remove him from the court. “You are never to speak to prisoners,” the deputy said.

The arrested protesters have been effectively denied legal representation. On Monday, attorneys for the People’s Law Project received requests for legal representation, but they did not know where the prisoners were located or when they would appear in court.

The police and security build-up in the lead-up to the DNC vividly demonstrates the precarious state of basic democratic rights in the US. Because the Department of Homeland Security has declared the nominating conventions “national security events”—a hazy legal status created by executive order under President Bill Clinton—the police of Denver have been transformed into a de facto military force and placed under the direction of the executive branch of the federal government.

The size of this police force has been doubled by the infusion of cops from surrounding areas, while numerous federal and state agencies have been mobilized to assist with security, including the Secret Service, which directs security operations, the National Guard, the Coast Guard, the US Customs and Border Protection agency, the Transportation Security Administration, the North American Aerospace Defense Command and the Pentagon’s Northern Command.

The level of security would suggest that DNC was a colonial administration meeting in hostile territory, rather than the nominating convention of a mass political party in a functioning democracy.

Moreover, the magnitude and ferocity of the security operation is completely out of proportion to the size and nature of the protests, which have been rather small and self-consciously peaceful. Sunday’s protest included about 3,000 people, while the protest attacked by police on Monday included no more than 300.

The militarization of Denver and the police repression of basic civil rights, which no leading Democratic Party politician has denounced, is the hysterical response of a political system that can allow no political expression outside of the narrowest official channels. It is meant to serve as a warning to those who would attempt to challenge the status quo, and also as a trial run for the sort of repression the ruling elite intends to mete out to the working class in the coming period.



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