

Political dissent as terrorism: “Minnesota Patriot Act” charges filed against RNC Eight

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The charges of terrorism leveled against the eight youth who had sought to organize protests and civil disobedience against the Republican National Convention (RNC) in Minnesota last week sound an alarm that political opposition in the US is on its way toward being criminalized.

In what may be the first case of its kind, American citizens have been arrested and charged as terrorists for no other act than *planning* to protest and obstruct a political event. In this case the occasion was the nominating convention of a party chiefly responsible for policies detested by the majority of Americans, including the war in Iraq and the enrichment of a tiny layer of the enormously wealthy.

Even a casual review of the case reveals that the charges are a baseless frame-up, carried out in the name of constitutionally dubious “anti-terrorist” legislation enacted since 2002.

More alarming than the case itself, however, is the fact that it has gone virtually unnoted by the national news media. This reporter could also find no mention of the case on the web sites of left-liberal publications such as the *Nation*, the *Progressive*, or *In These Times*. No major politician from either party has commented on the case, including Minnesota’s Democratic Senator Amy Klobuchar. Attempts to contact the campaign and Senate office of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama revealed that the nominee has no media contact phone number and that he had not released a statement on the arrests.

This silence on the case is no indication of its lack of importance. In essence, the terrorism charges against the RNC 8 show what the *World Socialist Web Site* has long warned: that anti-terrorism laws like the Patriot Act—enthusiastically supported by both major parties—have never been about protecting the American people from terrorism. They were put into place to create

the legal framework for the suppression of basic constitutional and democratic rights of the population.

The eight members of the anarchist group Republican National Convention Welcoming Committee (RNCWC) were arrested the weekend before the RNC began and charged with the felony “conspiracy to commit riot in the second degree in furtherance of terrorism.” They have since been released on \$10,000 bail. If convicted at trial, the RNC Eight could each face five years in prison plus a \$10,000 fine. A ninth individual has been named in the police complaint, but has yet to be charged.

Bruce Nestor, president of the Minnesota chapter of the National Lawyers Guild and attorney for Monica Bicking, one of the eight defendants, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the authorities have shown no indication that the charges will be dropped.

The charges are predicated on an a priori assumption of guilt; not on what actually happened, but *what might have happened* had no arrest been made.

Furthermore, the charges are almost entirely based upon the evidence of two confidential paid informants.

Nestor pointed out in an earlier interview with the *Minnesota Independent* that “the most outrageous allegations made by the authorities are not supported by any evidence other than the statement of the confidential informants. They’re not supported by the evidence seized.”

The physical evidence gathered by law enforcement was even more threadbare than the purchased testimony of informants. “We have the sheriff displaying a single plastic item that he claims was a shield,” Nestor said, “as if one shield was going to protect demonstrators from 3,500 armed riot police who have projectile-tear-gas weapons.” In addition, police seized a rusty hatchet, nails, lighters and other common household items as evidence, and rather ludicrously reported discovering “weaponized urine.”

This is the same method the Federal Bureau of Investigation has used in its attacks on Muslim organizations and other “terrorism” suspects. In such scenarios, anonymous police infiltrators enter an organization, create a provocation or even a crime itself, and then turn over uncorroborated testimony, thereby implicating an entire group of people

Lawyers for the RNCWC members have also pointed to the climate of fear created surrounding their clients by the very charge of terrorism. “All they do is they label people as terrorists and anarchists, and at that point what people are actually saying and the content of their views has no meaning anymore,” said attorney Jordan Kushner.

Nestor told the WWSWS that the arrests are “part of an overall law enforcement strategy to intimidate people from exercising political rights in the streets and to intimidate people from political organizations, to put citizens outside of the realm of acceptable behavior, to limit acceptable protest to voting and writing letters, and anything else is dangerous and potentially criminal.”

The arrests are based on a 2002 law enacted with overwhelming bipartisan support in response to 9/11 and the adoption of the national USA Patriot Act. According to Nestor the Minnesota law is a version of the latter. According to the law, “a crime is committed to ‘further terrorism’ if the crime is a felony and is a premeditated act involving violence to persons or property that is intended to: (1) terrorize, *intimidate, or coerce a considerable number of members of the public* in addition to the direct victims of the act; and (2) significantly *disrupt or interfere with the lawful exercise, operation, or conduct of government, lawful commerce, or the right of lawful assembly*” (emphasis added).

In other words, the statute lays out a legal framework for the categorization of protest as “furthering terrorism.” Police could quite easily determine that a protest aims to “coerce” “members of the public” or “interfere with” the operations of government, industry and meetings. In a broad sense, that is precisely what public demonstrations have always aimed to do.

The passing of the 2002 legislation was not the only, or most recent, preparation made by the government for the repression that has unfolded in St. Paul.

It has been revealed that the city government of St. Paul and the Host Committee of the Republican National Convention—which organized the event and solicited corporate donors—worked out a bargain whereby the Host Committee would assume the first \$10 million in liability resulting from lawsuits civilians might launch against the

city’s police. This agreement gave a signal to police that financial liability need not serve as a deterrent to police repression of protests.

Police preparation in the Twin Cities was elaborate. Because the RNC, like the Democratic National Convention, was declared a “National Security Event,” the local police were placed under the supervision of the federal government through the Secret Service and combined with numerous other state and federal police and military agencies.

It has also become clear that the media, especially independent media, were targeted for harassment and arrest during the convention. This included the unlawful search and seizure of filming equipment, computers, and cell phones.

As the scope of the arrests and police brutality has begun to take shape—multiple reports have emerged of police beatings, gassings, denial of medical treatment, and use of mace and taser guns on protesters and those already detained or arrested—it appears increasingly unlikely that this was simply an overreaction, as some liberal commentators have claimed.

The goal of this repression—which most assuredly would be a central preoccupation of the mainstream media had it taken place in, for instance, Russia—was only secondarily aimed at intimidating or squelching the RNC protests. Instead these measures were cut from the same cloth as the sort of massive repression carried out in third world police states. The massive police operation’s primary aim was to benumb, intimidate and silence the population as a whole.

It also provided the opportunity for a trial run of large-scale repression against the mass opposition to war and social immiseration that will inevitably emerge in the coming months and years.



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