

Police raid protest headquarters as Republican National Convention opens

Ron Jorgenson in St. Paul, Minnesota
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Federal and local police forces carried out five raids over the weekend aimed at stifling and intimidating protesters preparing to take part in demonstrations during the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. Armed police used battering rams to break down doors, then cuffed and forced people to floors. They searched and seized property, including computers, political literature and a variety of household items alleged to be used as weapons to disrupt the RNC proceedings scheduled for the week of September 1-4.

The raids were spearheaded by the Ramsey County Sheriff's office and brought together the FBI and the police departments of St. Paul and the neighboring city of Minneapolis where three raids were conducted. Late on Friday, August 29, police raided an old St. Paul theatre near the downtown venue for the RNC. Dubbed the "convergence center", the building was being used by the protest group, "RNC Welcoming Committee," to provide meeting spaces for organizations planning demonstrations during the convention. Sammy Schutz, was in the building when the raid took place, along with her five-year-old son and husband, and told the St. Paul Pioneer Press, "I heard somebody saying, 'They're coming, they're coming!' And feet pounding on the back stairs, pounding on the door saying they had a search warrant. They busted through the door. They've got their guns cocked at people...."

Protesters were told that if they did not produce ID, and permit their pictures to be taken, they would be arrested. Ultimately, all were released and the building was boarded up and closed supposedly on the grounds of code violations.

In Minneapolis, three houses were raided and five arrests carried out against young people aged 18-23. Twenty five to fifty police officers, in each incident, followed a set procedure of surrounding the houses, breaking down doors, brandishing weapons, handcuffing occupants and forcing them to the floor. People reported that agents used nicknames such as "terminator" and "executioner."

The Ramsey County Sheriff department issued a press release providing names of the five arrestees and charging "probable cause conspiracy to riot, conspiracy to commit civil disorder and conspiracy to damage property." The department provided a list of items allegedly found on the location that included "assorted edged weapons, including a machete, hatchet and several throwing knives," a gas mask, empty glass bottles, rags, flammable liquids and an army helmet.

Right on the heels of the raids, Ramsey County Sheriff Robert Fletcher held a provocative and at times imperious press conference with a backdrop of items allegedly seized during the past hours. "Our investigation solely focuses on one group: The RNC Welcoming Committee. There are 35 members of this committee. Our targets are the leaders of this group.... As you look over the tools of the trade of this anarchist group, you will see these are not civil protesters."

Ramsey County Sheriff Fletcher declared there had been only four raids and that "we're not interested in other groups that are interested in protesting civilly in any way, shape or form. That is not our interest." However, a fifth raid took place in a St. Paul neighborhood where a local protester made part of his house available to I-Witness Video, a New York-based group that monitors police conduct during protests. Eileen Clancy, who was present at the house, said, "Essentially, they had this warrant. They stormed the house, they kicked down the door. They drew a gun on us. And they cuffed us. I have to say, it's just appalling. The fact that we were not arrested is evidence that we were doing nothing wrong. Our intentions are peaceful."

Members of the Lawyers Guild have debunked some of the seized items, such as "weaponized urine", which authorities charge was to be put in containers and thrown at police and RNC delegates. It turns out two of the three pails contained "gray water"—an environmental conservation technique in which water collected from bathtubs, showers and sink drains is contained and later used to flush toilets. The third bucket had been retrieved from a nearby garage where a man had been living illegally without plumbing for years and used the bucket to urinate in.

During the press conference, Fletcher had two deputies on each side of him hold ends of the tube from a bicycle tire while he placed a rock in the middle. Pulling back on the rock and stretching the tube, he demonstrated how it was supposed to be used at demonstrations, while barking, "Sending rocks! Rocks for the cops! One guy holds them. Next guy sends them."

Minneapolis lawyer Bruce Nester, who is representing 23-year-old arrestee Monica Bicking, spoke outside one of the raided houses. His comments, recorded in a video distributed by firedoglake.com, strongly denounced the raids as attacks on free speech. "I got here about 10-15 minutes after they started executing the warrant. Everyone was handcuffed and put on the floor. I saw one individual exit with a military helmet on, flak jacket, an assault rifle, and another with a pump action shotgun.

The rest of them were with flak jackets and side arms and there were a number of undercover cops.

“They were charged with a conspiracy to commit riot which is about as thin a charge that you could possibly come up with. You can’t distinguish between that and a protest. It basically criminalizes political advocacy.

“In this country we are not having mass detentions of people like this yet. So it really is about sending a message to people who agree with some of the viewpoints of people who are organizing activity, and to say, ‘You know what, you can write an email, it’s okay to write a letter, vote, but don’t go out in the street, don’t organize public activities, because, do you want us bursting into your house, do you want to be associated with people who are getting arrested?’

At a rally, Saturday, in Minneapolis attended by some 300 people, Minneapolis attorney and chair of the National Lawyers Guild mass defense committee, Jordan Kushner, outlined some of the intent involved in the raids: “They [the detainees] can be held for 36 hours, not including weekends and holidays. And that’s the catch. It means that the Ramsey County Sheriff’s deputies can make these outrageous allegations saying they have probable cause to believe someone conspired to commit riot. And based on that, they can theoretically be held until Wednesday before they have to be charged or released. And so what they’re doing is to disable people from being able to participate in the protest at the convention. That’s what this is all about here.”

David Bicking, father of arrestee Monica Bicking and a Minneapolis resident and auto mechanic also addressed the rally: “In the last 24 hours, the police have not targeted criminals. They have targeted some of the best people in our society. My daughter, Monica, was arrested this morning on probable cause for conspiracy to riot, along with her boyfriend and housemate.

“I know my daughter well. And she was arrested for her commitment to peace, justice and equality. And she was arrested because she was active on those beliefs. She has been a leader and she has stood for her rights and the rights of all of us. And I hope that everyone will stand up for her rights and our rights in this coming week.”

His daughter’s attorney, Nester, also spoke about the convergence center that was raided the previous night in St. Paul. “The convergence center is a place where you can store your stuff, schedule meetings, child care and food are available. It’s a completely legal space. Everyone understands that there’s a potential for it to be targeted by the police. And other than a police provocateur putting something there, nobody associated with it would put or allow any sort of contraband or illegal activity because they know it’s high visibility.”

There is more than a bit of conjecture behind Nestor’s reference to police provocateurs. Back in May, the Twin Cities weekly Citipages ran an article entitled “Moles Wanted”. It outlined the experience of a University of Minnesota sophomore who had a previous involvement with the law. Three weeks later, the arresting sergeant contacted him and arranged a meeting with FBI Special Agent Maureen E. Mazzola, who tried to convince him to become an informant and spy on planning events for RNC demonstrations. “She told me that I had the perfect ‘look,’” the

student said. “And that I had the perfect personality—they kept saying I was friendly and personable—for what they were looking for.”

He was told he would be compensated for his work, but only if it produced an arrest. He would report his activities to the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force, a partnership between multiple federal agencies and state and local law enforcement. Ultimately, the student declined the offer.

The events over the weekend are a continuation of the suppression of democratic rights that took place in Denver at the Democratic National Convention. These conventions, supposedly used to showcase democracy in America to the world, are being used to test out the most far-ranging suppression of dissent and free speech.

The national news media has said little about the raids. Both Minneapolis and St. Paul have mayors elected under the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party label. Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak has said nothing, while St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman said that the RNC Welcoming Committee had planned to “engage in criminal behaviors, not just voice their disdain for the Bush administration.”

The Twin Cities local papers, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, and the St. Paul Pioneer Press, are running news articles about the raids, but have up until now remained silent within their editorial pages. The liberal Star Tribune in an editorial stated the RNC “provides the Twin Cities area with an unprecedented opportunity to sell itself to the rest of the country.... What will it take to pull off a successful convention—one that will help the area draw other major events and even bolster efforts to put the Twin Cities on the radar of more relocating businesses and talented young professionals?”

Without referring to the raids, the paper went on to list five necessary ingredients for success. One of them read: “Relative calm on the streets. Protests have been quieter than anticipated in Denver, and we hope for the same here. Law enforcement must maintain order but allow peaceful protests. A Seattle-like World Trade Organization fiasco would be devastating.”



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