

Police repression escalates against Occupy protests

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New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg is defending the heavy-handed response of city police to the protests held Thursday to mark two months since the start of the anti-Wall Street occupation of Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan. An estimated 400 people were arrested, the majority of them in New York, as protesters took to the streets in cities across the US to show their solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street movement and the fight against social inequality.

The police response came two days after the Bloomberg administration oversaw a military-style raid on the New York occupation, in which hundreds of police in riot gear forcibly removed protesters in a raid early Tuesday morning. In recent days more than a dozen Occupy encampments have been shut down nationwide in a coordinated effort by city mayors and police departments, with behind-the-scenes support from the Obama administration.

Speaking to the media on Thursday, Bloomberg lashed out at the Occupy movement, stating, “Unfortunately, some protesters today have deliberately pursued violence.” The billionaire mayor claimed that in the face of what he termed demonstrators’ “antagonism” the police “maintained incredible restraint.”

In reality, it was the NYPD that employed violent methods on Thursday, dressed in riot gear, batons drawn, using teargas and “sonic cannon” crowd control weaponry to attack peaceful protesters and ride roughshod over the rights of free speech and assembly. New York police reported making 252 arrests during the daylong protest. Five protesters have been charged with felony assault.

About a dozen demonstrators were injured. One 19-year-old protester was photographed being taken away with blood dripping down his face, with a possible skull injury resulting from a baton strike to the head. Witnesses saw police push protesters to the ground and one young woman was reportedly dragged away by police by her hair.

The police reported seven officers injured, the most serious a hand injury requiring 20 stitches. After visiting this cop at the hospital, Mayor Bloomberg made clear that protesters should expect the repression to escalate, stating,

“If anyone’s actions cross the line and threaten the health and safety of others, including our first responders, we will respond accordingly.”

In his weekly radio address on Friday, Bloomberg defended the city’s decision to clear protesters from Zuccotti Park, calling it the “right thing at the right time.” Revealing his contempt for democratic rights, he commented cynically, “You have to give people time to express themselves. If you had tried to do it earlier, it’s not clear that the courts would have permitted it.”

In New York and other cities, authorities have claimed the camps pose health and safety dangers, utilizing such false claims as pretexts to move against protesters.

The violent repression against the Occupy Wall Street protesters has been mirrored in cities across the country. Early Thursday morning in Dallas police evicted protesters from their encampment at City Hall, making 18 arrests.

In Los Angeles, 72 demonstrators were arrested in several incidents on Thursday. While LA police originally stated that bail had been set at \$500 each, police spokesmen have now reported it being set at a punitive \$5,000 each.

In Portland, Oregon, police made 48 arrests, attacking a peaceful protest of thousands marching through the city’s downtown area. Police, including some on horseback, attacked demonstrators with batons and used teargas.

Also on Thursday, police in Las Vegas issued 21 misdemeanor citations when protesters staged a sit-in on Las Vegas Boulevard. In Chicago, 46 protesters were cited after taking over the La Salle Street Bridge for 35 minutes. Eight were arrested in Atlanta for blocking downtown traffic. About a dozen protesters were arrested in St. Louis, Missouri, during a march on a city bridge. In Houston, 13 were arrested for obstructing a roadway, a misdemeanor.

The district attorney’s office in Denver, Colorado announced on Thursday that it has filed charges against more than two-dozen Occupy Denver protesters. Three felony charges include inciting a riot and second-degree assault on an officer.

According to some tallies, an estimated 4,000 protesters

have been arrested in the course of two months of protests nationwide. Earlier this week in Seattle, police tear-gassed an 84-year-old woman and a pregnant teenager. In Oakland, California last month, Iraq War veteran Scott Olsen, 24, suffered a fractured skull when he was hit on the head by a projectile thrown or shot by police.

Accompanying this wave of repression, there has been a coordinated turn on the part of the media to both downplay the Occupy protests and the massive police repression and vilify the protesters. While the protest's focus on social inequality has struck a profound chord among broad segments of the population both in the US and internationally, coverage in the print and broadcast media is more and more openly slanted against the demonstrators.

When the protests are mentioned, the statements of police and city authorities claiming violence on the part of demonstrators are accepted uncritically, as are claims that the Occupy camps pose health or safety threats. A logo on CNN Friday morning read: "Occupy Wall Street 'Anarchy,'" implying that protesters are responsible for the violence.

A CBS News report headlined "OWS Protesters Call Police Tactics 'Excessive,'" states, "Experts on policing say departments have used necessary tactics to control unpredictable, sometimes violent protesters." The report quotes one Maki Haberfeld, a professor of police studies at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, who says: "I don't think they're rioting at Occupy Wall Street, not yet, but they are getting out of control."

This violent repression of Occupy protesters is being given tacit support by the Obama administration. While claiming to sympathize with the anti-Wall Street protest in its initial stages, Obama has remained silent on the escalation of police repression.

Following the raid on Zuccotti Park, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney told reporters that Obama was "aware" of the eviction, and that "The President's position is that obviously every municipality has to make its own decisions about how to handle these issues."

Carney added that the "long tradition of freedom of assembly and freedom of speech in this country" needed to be balanced with "the very important need to maintain law and order and health and safety standards, which was obviously a concern in this case."

Mayors in different cities have conspired in conference calls on how best to shut down encampments, on the grounds of such public safety issues. According to a number of reports, the evictions of protesters over the past 10 days has been coordinated at the highest levels of government, with assistance from the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI and other police agencies.

An unnamed Justice Department official who spoke to reporter Rick Ellis at *Examiner.com* said, "In several recent conference calls and briefings, local police agencies were advised to seek a legal reason to evict residents of tent cities, focusing on zoning laws and existing curfew rules."

According to Ellis, "Agencies were also advised to demonstrate a massive show of police force, including large numbers in riot gear." As further evidence of federal involvement in police repression of the protests, officers from Homeland Security's Federal Protective Service were sighted in Portland last month arresting a photographer.

The police repression being mobilized in an effort to shut down the Occupy movement is being aided by a deliberate attempt on the part of the trade unions and various middle-class "left" organizations to subordinate the movement to the Democratic Party. In the New York protests on Thursday, trade union officials played a critical role in this regard, with union-organized delegations promoting the Democratic Party. One of those arrested in a march to the Brooklyn Bridge was Mary Kay Henry, the president of the Service Employees International Union.

Just the day before, the SEIU endorsed Barack Obama's reelection campaign. While the Occupy protesters condemn Wall Street and the domination of the financial aristocracy over all aspects of social life, the unions seek to channel this discontent behind Obama and the Democratic Party, who are responsible for the bailout of the banks and have presided over a massive assault on the living conditions of the vast majority of ordinary Americans. (See: "Service Employees International Union endorses Obama in 2012".)

To be successful, however, the instinctively anti-capitalist aspirations of the Occupy movement and its supporters among broad layers of the population must be directed against the capitalist system—not behind its supporters. The struggle against social inequality requires the independent political mobilization of the working class.

Such a movement in defense of decent living standards and democratic rights must be based on a socialist program, in opposition to the two big-business parties that defend the dictatorship of the ruling elite which is responsible for the worsening social conditions that dominate social life, both in the US and internationally.



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