US authorities step up nationwide crackdown on Occupy protests

David Walsh
14 November 2011

City governments and police across the US have stepped up their attacks on Occupy movement encampments. Using a variety of pretexts—ordinances against sleeping in city parks, alleged health and sanitation violations, unrelated crimes, etc.—the authorities are attempting to criminalize the protests.

Occupy protests have broken out in hundreds of US cities and towns and more continue to be organized. Polls indicate widespread support for the general thrust of this movement: against social inequality, corporate control of the political system and a society in which the rich run everything.

Yet local governments, often headed by Democratic Party mayors, are attempting to suppress the protests and there is no outcry from any section of the political or media establishment. "Democracy" in America means democracy for big business politicians and their apologists in the media. When the population begins to voice its concerns, it faces police barricades, tear gas and truncheons.

The liberal moralizers who denounce human rights violations committed by any regime that stands in the way of Washington's global interests have no difficulty with repression in their own backyard. The AFL-CIO is predictably silent.

Over this past weekend, significant arrests or confrontations took place in Albany, New York; Portland, Oregon; Asheville, North Carolina; Gainesville, Florida; Springfield and St. Louis, Missouri; Fresno, California, Denver, Colorado; Salt Lake City, Utah; Atlanta, Georgia and other cities. A major showdown continues to loom between protesters and authorities in Oakland, California. Police violence against students last Wednesday, vividly captured on video, has angered many in and around the campus of the University of California in Berkeley.

One of the most serious confrontations took place in Portland Saturday night, when police prepared to close the Occupy Portland encampment. (See: "Police evict Occupy Portland protesters".)The unrest continued until Sunday morning, with hundreds of angry people massed on downtown city streets. Two people were arrested following a police order to disperse.

In Denver, police tore down tents and forced protesters out of Civic City Park Saturday night, claiming that their belongings were blocking city sidewalks. According to Occupy Denver, 21 protesters were arrested. Organizers reported: "Crowds were pepper sprayed, shot with pepper balls and rubber 'less-lethal' rounds, and beaten with batons and fists. Street medics treated many injuries (yet again) and our legal observers reported many gross attacks on individuals, some not even affiliated with the demonstrations."

When fellow protesters went to bail out those arrested, they were told that bond had been set but they were not allowed to free their comrades. The police stalled throughout the night, claiming at one point that the computer system had broken down.

Occupy Denver reported that Sunday morning, at a court hearing, "every single prisoner's bond was increased. Some prisoners saw their bonds increased by 3 to 5 times the amounts that they were at just hours ago. Felony assault charges were added to several of the arrestees, the ones (again, in an unsurprising move) who were the most injured or brutalized during their arrests."

In Albany, New York Saturday night state police jailed 24 protesters on the grounds that they were violating an 11 pm curfew in state-owned Lafayette Park. Attorney Robert Magee, a member of Occupy Albany's legal working group, told the media: "It's a tragedy that people in the state of New York cannot exercise their First Amendment rights in a public park." Protesters chanted "Shame on [Democratic Governor Andrew] Cuomo," as police made the arrests.

Anthropologist Bradley Russell, dressed in a Civil War uniform, was arrested earlier in the day in Albany for constructing a "freedom fort" in Lafayette Park "out of squares of foam board, packing tape, an image of the Bill of Rights and protest signs," according to the Albany Times Union. "Russell also had made a nearly life-size poster that

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said, ‘Take Your Picture with Emperor Cuomo’ printed across the top.”

Twenty-seven demonstrators were arrested Friday night in St. Louis, after authorities ordered Occupy St. Louis to leave its encampment in Kiener Park. Protesters have been living in the park since October 1.

One of the protesters, according to stltoday.com, is Don Waltman of Monroe, Louisiana. “Waltman never planned on being part of Occupy St. Louis. But the heavy equipment operator, who lost work after Hurricane Katrina, stopped here to visit the Arch, stumbled upon the protesters, identified with many of them, and stayed.”

Occupy St. Louis has gone to court against the city, arguing that the enforcement of the park curfew violates free speech rights. A US District judge denied a request for a temporary order against the ordinance. A federal court will hear the case on Tuesday.

In Salt Lake City Saturday night, according to an Occupy Salt Lake City press release, “scores of police from several different agencies occupied 400 South and 400 West outside of Pioneer Park to shut down the camping operations of Occupy SLC. Those wishing to remain steadfast in their belief in the meaning of occupying public space were arrested. Eighteen demonstrators were handcuffed and sent off to the county jail, while another demonstrator was released with a citation… Demonstrators from Occupy Park City, Occupy Ogden and Occupy Provo [all cities in Utah] were all present to support Occupy SLC as our camp was forced to shut down.”

As police moved in and used heavy equipment to raze the camp, protesters chanted, “This is what a police state looks like.”

The Occupy Salt Lake City press release further commented: “The police are in front of us in these situations. They are the arms that bar us, but we are aware that they serve as a tool in the hands of politicians who serve corporate interests.” The press release announced a rally Monday outside the City County building.

Nineteen people were arrested in Atlanta’s Woodruff Park Saturday night, including two for remaining after closing time and 17 others charged with “obstructing traffic” after the crowd poured onto nearby streets.

“A large Atlanta police force including motorcycles, mounted police, officers on foot, a SWAT team in riot gear and a helicopter moved in aggressively and faced off with the marchers,” Occupy Atlanta protest organizers explained in a statement. “Peace was maintained until a policeman on a motorcycle accelerated into a demonstrator.”

In Gainesville, Florida Friday night 20 people were issued notices to appear for trespassing after refusing to leave Bo Diddley Community Plaza. Three protesters were arrested and taken to jail. One of them, Annette Gilley, 58, said she was arrested for “being the public” in a public park.

On Friday, 6 more arrests in Fresno, California brought the week’s total to 54. Each night sheriff’s deputies arrest those who camp out at the courthouse park. A city ordinance mandates the closure of the park at midnight. The protesters have been in the park for 33 days.

The Fresno Bee reports, “Occupiers and deputies are on friendly terms during the day, occupiers said. But come nightfall, ‘the mood changes,’ said Michaela Oranda, 27. ‘We don’t agree we should be pushed out.’”

Numerous arrests have occurred in Asheville, North Carolina, including three more Friday at midnight, again on the specious grounds that protests were in violation of a curfew on city park property. The three jailed and released were all military veterans, aged 72, 25 and 41.

An employee of the Asheville Police Department used her web page to denounce the protest for wanting “to preach their ‘constitutional rights’ to me,” and an entry in a local blogger’s web site suggested lynching the Occupy Asheville protesters: “Some people just need a hug... around the neck... with a rope.”

In Nashville, Tennessee a local newspaper has revealed that state troopers and Metro police officers conducted undercover operations to infiltrate Occupy Nashville in the days leading up to the arrests of 30 people in late October. The pretext here was the presence of illegal drugs and “lewd behavior.” Tennessee Highway Patrol (THP) troopers dressed in street clothes and mingled among the crowd, according to the documents disclosed by the Tennessean.

One of the THP cops made the real purpose of such operations clear when he sent an email in mid-October: “If they start camping, I’m confident that a public health issue will soon develop. Then the Health Dept. can shut it down and we all look like the good guys.”

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