

Chicago blocking protests at Democratic National Convention in August

Alexander Fangmann
12 February 2024

The administration of Mayor Brandon Johnson has denied two permit applications from groups seeking to march and protest the Democratic National Convention (DNC), scheduled to occur in Chicago from August 19 through August 22.

Although one group of protesters, “Poor People’s Army,” has been given a permit, the Democratic Party has made it clear that it is intent on preventing the DNC from becoming a forum for criticism or opposition to their policies. By denying most permits for protesters, the Johnson administration, like that of Richard J. Daley in 1968, is creating the conditions for those protesting the party’s policy of war to be violently attacked by police.

The Poor People’s Army group was reportedly granted a permit by an administrative law judge for the city after the city supposedly failed to respond to the permit application within its own 10-day deadline. The Poor People’s Army, based in Philadelphia, has for decades protested at the Republican and Democratic conventions to bring the attention of delegates to poverty and housing issues.

Cheri Honkala, a spokeswoman for Poor People’s Army and a long-time housing activist in Philadelphia, said, “We’ve always organized the largest marches, and they’ve always been peaceful. They’ve always said, ‘You can’t do that.’ And we’ve always done it.”

She added, “Since we may be the only group given access and proximity to the DNC like this, we welcome other groups and coalitions to join us and make this the biggest march of poor and working people the Democrats have ever seen.”

The permit application allows the marchers from the Poor People’s Army to march up to the sidewalk of United Center, the sports arena where many of the events of the convention are to take place. However, a city spokesperson left open the possibility that the protest could be severely curtailed, saying, “The City has agreed to accept the original permit application not withstanding any modifications required under federal law. The permits issued by [the city’s Department of Transportation] do not account for any

federal restrictions that may be implemented during the DNC.”

The two groups denied permits are the Coalition to March on the DNC and Bodies Outside of Unjust Laws. The city’s denials claimed the marches and protests would disrupt traffic and that there would not be enough on-duty police, and instead suggested they march miles away from the locations listed in their permit applications, a clear violation of Chicago’s city code, which requires “comparable public visibility, and a similar route, location and date to that of the proposed public assembly.”

Bodies Outside of Unjust Laws is a coalition of groups demanding federal protections against bigoted laws targeting the LGBTQ+ community and for abortion and reproductive rights. Although the group appealed the denial of their permit, an administrative law judge for the city upheld the city’s decision on February 1. The group plans to appeal the decision by the administrative law judge, and Kristi Keorkunian-Rivers, co-founder of Stop Trans Genocide Chicago, one of the coalition groups, said, “We are marching regardless and we all have various action plans to try to get the DNC to listen. It’s important for us to get our message across to the people who are supposed to represent us.”

Andy Thayer, a co-founder of Bodies Outside of Unjust Laws, said, “It’s disappointing that Mayor Johnson, who is supposedly a progressive mayor, is allowing his police department to behave the way that Rahm Emanuel’s police department and Richard M. Daley’s police before him behaved. This kind of blanket denials of permit applications, and so forth, is something that we expected from those administrations.”

The Coalition to March on the DNC is an umbrella for a number of groups, including the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, the US Palestinian Community Network, the International League of People’s Struggles and Black Lives Matter Chicago.

Joe Iosbaker, labor co-chair of the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, said about the

permit, “Who's really in charge of denying this to us? It's three agencies. It's the Secret Service, it's the Department of Homeland Security, and it's the FBI, and this is what they do.”

Iosbaker, a leading member of the Maoist Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO)/Fight Back, along with others in his organization, were subject to FBI raids on their homes in 2010 due to the group's political support for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The FBI claimed it was looking for evidence of “material support for terrorism,” although no charges were ever filed.

Documents unsealed in 2014 revealed that the FBI placed an informant in FRSO during the time that the group was organizing protests at the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis-St. Paul in 2008.

The WSWS warned at the time that the raids “are an ominous warning that the US government, unable to convince the American people to support the imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a predatory foreign policy around the world, is moving to criminalize open political opposition.”

Ten years on, this process is now far advanced. The DNC as a whole is being carefully coordinated and scripted at the highest levels to exclude as far as possible any expressions of dissent against the warmongering policies of the Democratic Party. Logistics for the event have been closely coordinated by Mayor Johnson, Illinois Democratic Governor JB Pritzker, the Democratic National Committee, as well as the trade unions.

In July of last year, just a few months after the selection of Chicago as the host city, Johnson and Pritzker announced they had concluded a “labor peace agreement” with the city's unions, which for the first time includes the workers at the official convention hotels, the Marriott Marquis Chicago and the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place. Notably, Pritzker is a billionaire heir of the Hyatt hotels fortune.

The promise not to strike during the convention was signed by Chicago Federation of Labor President Bob Reiter, as well as the heads of the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE), International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 134, International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 399, the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council, Machinery Movers and Machinery Erectors Local 136, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1, Teamsters Local 727, UNITE HERE Local 1, and United Steelworkers Local 17U Decorators Union.

The unions, which have pulled out all the stops to contain and block strikes in the recent period, are backing the Biden administration to the hilt in its war plans. In serving this aim

they are prepared to go even further in smothering the class struggle. Notably, UAW President Shawn Fain appeared in a Biden campaign video last week, calling on Biden to “go to war and put the power of the membership behind you.”

Mayor Brandon Johnson himself has not made any public comments about the permits. Asked about the Poor People's Army being granted a permit, Johnson's press secretary, Ronnie Reese, claimed to be unaware of the issue. The mayor has been trying to walk a political tightrope, loyally supporting the Biden administration without completely alienating a section of his supporters, who largely oppose Biden's right-wing policies, above all the Israeli genocide.

In November, Johnson's chief of staff, Rich Guidice, told *Politico* that in preparing for the DNC in relation to Gaza, “We have to anticipate that there's a lot of tension and very passionate positions,” and further added, “There's ongoing training already taking place, specifically in de-escalation training.”

On February 7, Johnson voted to break a tie in the city council, allowing the passage of a resolution calling for a cease-fire in Gaza by a 24-23 margin. Alderman Debra Silverstein, who led the opposition to the resolution, appealed to the city's status as host of the DNC saying in a letter, “Chicago, of all the cities within this nation, ought to be perceived as a stronghold of support and fortitude for President Biden and Vice President Harris.”

Though Johnson supported the cease-fire resolution, on October 13 he joined the city council in condemning the attack by Hamas on October 7. In response to verbal opposition from members of the public who responded to Silverstein's repetition of lies about supposed atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7, Johnson cleared the protesters from the chamber and banished them to a third floor gallery behind a glass partition.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact