

Hundreds detained during RNC protests

By Thomas R. Prince

[Back](#)

- Mostly peaceful protests were held throughout New York City during the four-day convention

NEW YORK—Lady Liberty's tears flowed into New York Harbor during the Republican National Convention (RNC) Aug. 30-Sept. 2. Hundreds of demonstrators and bystanders were detained without charge at Pier 57 for more than 60 hours. Reported arrests totaled 1,821 during the week of the RNC, most arrests occurring on Aug. 31.

Dozens of protests were held throughout New York City during the RNC, as well as sympathy demonstrations in cities worldwide, from one organized by labor unions in Chicago, to one in San Francisco, to the Olympics in Athens, Greece, where a banner was hung from the Parthenon.

Little violence occurred during the RNC. There's dispute as to who was responsible for the violence that erupted during the Aug. 30 Poor Peoples March from the United Nations. Several demonstrators were injured when a New York Police Department (NYPD) officer rammed his motorcycle into the crowd of 40,000 protesters. The officer was hurt as someone kicked him in the head. The alleged perpetrator, not a demonstrator but a resident of the impoverished neighborhood, was arrested days later when he was identified on a news videotape. The permitted march had been halted by the NYPD without explanation.

Aug. 31 commenced with gatherings across Manhattan, held in such places as the Bureau of Immigrant and Customs Enforcement, the offices of Haliburton, and Wall Street. The Associated Press reports interviewing a lone demonstrator in front of a Humvee dealership. The demonstrator was arrested for "blocking pedestrian traffic" during the interview.

The A-31 Action Coalition held a press conference at the Mohatma Ghandi statue in Union Square that symbolized the group's peaceful intentions. Washington, D.C., Attorney Shahid Buttar explained: "Throughout this week's coverage of the RNC, there has been a consistent depiction of this broad swath of America as anarchists. There could be nothing further from the truth. (We are) people who found ourselves moved to demonstrate our convictions, who agree that violence is neither an appropriate nor effective means of effecting social change. We train in the strategies and tactics employed by Ghandi and King."

Buttar referred to the infiltration of organizations that oppose Republican policies.

"In a democracy, citizens enjoy privacy and the government is supposed to be transparent," Buttar said. "What we've seen in the last four years is increasing secrecy over government operations and policies, and there's decreasing privacy."

Elizabeth Broad, a New Yorker wearing white as a sign of mourning for the dead of the World Trade Center and the war in Iraq, said: "We will rally at Ground Zero to honor those people who have died... Democracy cannot be forced with the barrel of a gun. I have faith in the police. They are in the middle of contract negotiations, but the rulers of the city are ignoring their rights, too."

Broad was among 64 white-robed people arrested while playing dead near Madison Square Garden in a "die in."

Arrests were made at Ground Zero. The police had negotiated with the 4,000 people gathered to allow them to walk down Fulton Avenue. Reaching the end of the block, police halted it and brought out orange netting, hemming in about 200 demonstrators.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's allegations that these were "anarchists: bent on disrupting the city was belied by the arrest of nuns, journalists, and lawyers from the National Lawyers Guild and ACLU. A witness, 74-year-old Judy Siegel, said: "They're making up the laws as they go along, saying a crime was committed, the block is frozen, the march is canceled. The order comes from the top. The police have canceled that right... I can't believe that they're doing this, it's so counterproductive.

"It's on my tax dollar," Siegel continued. "I own a home in NYC. I'm a nice middle-class lady. The Bush administration and what happened today, has sent me over the top. A police officer had given the announcement 'Go two by two, we'll have a nice calm march.' He was sort of putting his blessing on it."

NYC Councilman Bill Perkins said in a phone interview: "Clearly, there was a deception on the part of the police. They appeared to be available to escort the march. They were actually intending on having preemptive arrests, taking a page out of the Bush administration war strategy. People were sent to Pier 57, which was filthy...oil was all over the place. They were kept there past the legal time frame for arraignment. We are scheduling a hearing as of Sept. 15 to investigate what took place."

Thomas Good, with the War Resisters League, described conditions after his arrest. "We were nylon cuffed," Good said. "Anyone complaining of losing sensation or feeling pain was told 'you're acting' and their cuffs were tightened even further. You could plainly see asbestos insulation falling out of the wall behind us."

Hundreds, reciting the First Amendment, marched in pairs from the WTC to Madison Square Garden, where 10,000 people congregated. When attempting to reach them, an upset officer told The Rock River Times and a USA Today photographer: "I'm really sorry, but they specifically ordered us to not allow the media through here."

While California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger spoke to the convention delegates, 1,200 protestors were arrested.

Schwarzenegger said during the convention: "If you believe that government should be accountable to the people, not the people to the government...then you are a Republican!"

Calm returned on Sept. 1 as the Quaker, American Friends Service Committee, exhibited

“Eyes Wide Open,” a display of 978 pairs of combat boots, some given by families of dead soldiers, as well as hundreds of shoes to represent Iraqi civilians. Chairman John Sweeney spoke to 40,000 AFL-CIO members near Madison Square Garden.

At the Sept. 2 Veteran’s for Peace gathering, we interviewed Fernando Suarez del Solar, whose U.S. Marine son, Jesus, died in Iraq and whose wife has since been deported to Honduras.

“My son was among the first casualties in Iraq,” Fernando Suarez del Solar said. “He died on March 27, 2003. According to the Bush administration, my son died with a shot in the head from enemy fire, but that was just another lie. I found the truth and my son died when he stepped on an illegal American cluster bomb.”

Cluster bombs are banned by United Nations treaty.

Iraqi Vets Against the War veteran Michael Hoffman said: “We served our country and when we returned from Iraq, our consciences demanded we speak out against what we saw. We have been in New York City demonstrating every day, and I can guarantee you, none of us are anarchists.”

In Harlem, 3,000 marched to decry environmental racism, the cuts in social programs, and the 57 percent unemployment rate there.

About 40,000 people rallied on 8th Avenue, a designated protest zone. Fifty well-financed Republican operatives with slick signs arrived in an attempt to create friction and violence as they had been doing all week. The NYPD penned them in surrounded by the main gathering. The RNC and demonstrations ended peacefully with President George W. Bush accepting the nomination and protesters turning their backs to his visage on the live TV monitor outside Madison Square Garden.

Phone requests for interviews with House Speaker Rep. Dennis Hastert (R-Illinois), U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo (R-16), and U.S. Sen. Peter Fitzgerald went unreturned. E-mail requests for an interview with Illinois Republican Committee Chairman Judy Topinka and a fax to the NYPD Commissioner of Public Information Paul Browne also went unanswered.

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