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Activists Arrested During GOP Convention Testify Against City, Police

by [Catriona Stuart](#) ([bio](#))

New York City , Sep 19 - At a September 15 City Council hearing, a group of lawyers, scholars and activists testified to a pattern of indiscriminate, pre-emptive and mass arrests that happened across Manhattan during the Republican National Convention. They charged that police broke the law when they illegally swept up hundreds of demonstrators and bystanders and held arrestees long past the legal 24-hour limit in what activists say was a deliberate attempt to keep them off the streets until the convention was over.

Noting that no officials representing the mayor's office were on hand to testify before the Council, an angry Deputy Majority Leader Bill Perkins threatened to subpoena them.

Speaking with reporters, Perkins, who attended many of the protests himself, accused city leaders of making a "giant mistake for civil rights and civil liberties."

While a permitted August 29 march drew hundreds of thousands of citizens through New York City's streets almost without incident in the largest demonstration at a political convention in US history, the week of protest and civil disobedience that followed saw over 1,800 people detained by police.

According to New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) Executive Director Donna Lieberman, twenty percent of those arrested were not even protesters, and among those who were demonstrating, many were following police orders at the time of their arrests. The NYCLU and another legal organization, the National Lawyers Guild, had dozens of "legal observers" deployed throughout the city to monitor police conduct and who witnessed many of the arrests.

Police arrested one man who had just purchased a pastrami sandwich at the Second Avenue Deli, holding him for 27 hours, testified civil rights attorney Norman Siegal. And a National Lawyers Guild representative, Simone Levine, said police arrested fifteen legal observers, easily identified by their trademark neon-green hats. In the process, Levine reported, police hit one legal observer with a baton and threw another to the ground.

"People should not be treated like criminals when all they want to do is express their political opinions," said Udi Ofer, Director of the New York Bill of Rights Defense Campaign, a project of the NYCLU.

In an interview with *The New Standard*, Ofer described the police during the RNC as "a Jekyll and Hyde police department." He asserted that the New York Police Department acted inconsistently -- protecting protesters' rights at many permitted and even some non-permitted protests, and other times illegally arresting hundreds of law-abiding demonstrators en masse using orange netting or protest pens.

Even established protest regulars like the 80 year-old peace organization, War Resisters League, well known for its commitment to total nonviolence, were not immune.

In the A.J. Muste room of the East Village's "Peace Pentagon," more than twenty members of the League gathered on a rain-soaked Thursday night to swap stories about their arrests during the Convention. As part of the August 31 day of civil disobedience, the mostly graying peace activists had planned a somber march from Ground Zero to Madison Square Garden culminating in a "die-in" performance.

But most of them never made it that far.

Though they had advertised their plans in the *New York Times*, the group of nearly 1,000 that gathered with the League did not have a parade permit. According to group member Ed Hedemann, after brokering a sidewalk march route with police, officers allowed protesters to proceed double-file for half a block until cops suddenly stopped the procession.

Told that they were "blocking the sidewalk," two hundred demonstrators at the head of the League's line found themselves herded together with orange plastic netting and arrested, with several bystanders and a reporter from Channel 2 News caught in the round-up.

As they worked their way around the room, the War Resisters each told their own story of police inconsistency.

An elderly woman named Ruth described how she negotiated with one officer to let her out of the nets. "I didn't think that physically I could survive the detention," she said.

Thomas Good, an organizer with the Socialist Party who escaped the initial round of arrests at Ground Zero said that a delegate to the RNC was also caught in the second mass arrest, but that he later saw a Secret Service officer negotiate the man's release from the detention center at Pier 57.

During the die-in, Good and several others noticed a woman in an expensive lime-green suit lie down in mockery of their protest. As arrests were happening, he recalled, police gave the woman the option to leave. Good believes this action exposed the political motivation behind the League's arrests. "We were both blocking the street, and I don't remember anyone giving me the option to leave."

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