

NYC activists call for a day of civil disobedience 'The Streets Belong to Us'

by Sarah Ferguson

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A group of about 20 New York City activists today announced their plans for roiling the Republican convention this month.

Gathered at St. Mark's Church on the Bowery—a landmark parish that has long been a haven for political dissent—they called for a day of coordinated, nonviolent civil disobedience and direct action on August 31, or A31 in activist parlance.

"Two days before the Republicans renominate George Bush, we will turn the streets of New York City into stages of resistance and forums of debate," Tim Doody, a 30-year-old English tutor at Long Island University, told a bevy of news cameras, adding, "We will not be asking for permits to create these free-speech zones."

Starting early in the morning, Doody said, autonomous groups will target GOP events such as Bank of America's 9:30 a.m. finance roundtable at Tavern on the Green in Central Park. At 4 p.m., a wave of actions will swarm the midtown offices of multinational "war profiteers" such as the Carlyle Group, Chevron, the Rand Corporation, and Hummer of Manhattan.

Taking a more classic civil disobedience line, the War Resisters League is calling for a funeral procession from ground zero to Madison Square Garden, the convention site, where they will stage a mass die-in in the streets.

There will also be carnival-esque street blockades with music, free food, and dancing, along with banner drops, guerrilla street theater, and other forms of "culture jamming—culminating in a mass convergence at 7 p.m. outside Madison Square Garden, or as close as protesters can get.

Rather than attempt a Seattle-style action to shut down access to the convention, which activists concede would be impossible given the intense security, they intend to "reclaim the streets as zones of democracy."

Organizers have been frustrated at the city's refusal to permit rallies and marches near the convention site or in Central Park, instead relegating dissent to the edges of Manhattan. "The streets belong to us, not the Republicans," said Eric Laursen, a member of the Direct Action Network. "And we're going to be taking back what belongs to us on August 31."

When asked whether they were undermining the effectiveness of their actions by announcing targets ahead of time, the A31 organizers said transparency was part of their strategy. "We're not sneaking around," said David Graeber, an assistant

professor at Yale and longtime anarchist. "We want to be totally open about what we do."

Indeed, the protesters took pains to present A31 as more than just a bunch of pierced anarchists and professional agitators mucking it up in the streets. The press conference was moderated by Lex Lyrse, who hosts a hip-hop show on WKCR, and Elizabeth Broad, a 25-year-old graduate student at the New School, who came dressed more like a stand-in on *Sex & the City* than any seasoned rabble-rouser.

Also joining them was Nyack Mayor John Shields, who is currently suing the state of New York over the right to perform gay marriages. Although Shields said he himself would not be betting getting arrested, he endorsed A31 and the concept of taking direct action as both "constitutionally legal and justifiable," given the Bush administration's efforts to "exclude the LGBT community from their constitutional rights and use the [federal] marriage amendment to distract people from the crisis in Iraq."

Just how many people will be swarming the streets, Laursen said, is still "up in the air: It could be in the thousands, it could be many more."

Although A31 has no leaders, representatives from affinity groups have been attending "spokescouncils" at a Brooklyn loft for the past month, attracting up to 200 activists, including people from San Francisco, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Canada, with some European activists pledging to join in.

Laursen said the group would be reaching out to the tens of thousands who attend the United for Peace and Justice march on Sunday, August 29—many of whom will no doubt be frustrated by being hemmed in on the West Side Highway.

Organizers insisted they would act non-violently and assailed the tabloid hysteria about "lunatic anarchists" besieging the city to foil anti-terror defenses.

But they conceded that individual demonstrators will be acting autonomously, meaning there are no ground rules for what constitutes acceptable protest, and no plans to disavow property damage, should that occur. "As an organizer, I have not heard a mention of anyone planning violence against people or property," said Broad. "But if a window gets broken, we are not going to denounce that."

Overall, activists predict the mood on the streets will be more festive than confrontational. "Things won't get chaotic, unless the police use force to disperse us," predicts John Flanigan, a direct action trainer with the No RNC Clearinghouse. "People have verbalized concerns that any kind of chaos on the streets will detract from our message, and we want our outrage to be heard."