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Let The People Decide

[Disorderly Conduct: RNC Notes](#)By Thomas Good - June 1, 2006 | [NLN Archive](#)

“Hope you are out today. Good work!”

- Tom Hayden (email to the author)

“It’s like a flashback to the Sixties.”

- Police Lieutenant at Central Booking

August 31, 2004 - New York City. The weather report called for a day of non-violent civil disobedience outside the Republican National Convention. The A31 Action Coalition was geared up. Months of preparation were about to produce waves of direct action expressing the outrage of US citizens with their government.

The New York City Police Department (NYPD), pumped up on the promise of massive overtime and corporate media hype about impending “anarchy”, were omnipresent. By day’s end the promise of chaos would be fulfilled but the agency of the chaos would be the police themselves rather than the protesters. The police tactics were designed to trample free speech: negotiating in bad faith; pre-emptive arrests; indiscriminate arrests (“sweeps”); dangerous stunts by provocateurs (undercovers riding motorbikes directly into protesters); quasi-legal surveillance; dangerous conditions at the Pier 57 RNC Detention Center (“Guantanamo On The Hudson”), and; deliberate delays in processing prisoners.

Aug. 31, 12:30 P.M. - Columbus Park, Chinatown, opposite Central Booking (100 Centre Street). Leaders of a Free The Detainees event successfully negotiated terms for an unpermitted march and rally with cops on the scene. A small but spirited event resulted in only one arrest: a young man was arrested for climbing a tree (a clear and present danger, surely). The rally was MC’d by Greg Pason, National Secretary of the Socialist Party. SP members Sharin Chirazzo and Tariq Abdel-Muhti, (fiancee and son of Farouk Abdell Muhti, respectively) also spoke. Farouk, whose life was shortened by police brutality, lives on in the work of all who struggle to free political prisoners.

Aug. 31, 3:00 P.M. - Ground Zero (Church Street) in lower Manhattan. Mourners clad in white gathered for an unpermitted march sponsored by the War Resisters League (WRL), the Socialist Party and School of the Americas Watch. Other activists including Greens, Quakers, Catholics and war resisters of every type were present as were large numbers of bystanders, legal observers and the media. A one hour vigil was to precede a solemn procession from Ground Zero to Madison Square Garden - to mourn the war dead in Iraq and Afghanistan. During the vigil, WRL leaders negotiated with massing NYPD officers. An agreement was reached - a 2 abreast unpermitted march would not be interfered with by police.

Aug. 31, 4:00 P.M. - The WRL march stepped off, crossing Church Street and walking up Fulton towards Broadway. The marchers had traveled about half the one block length of Fulton when the

NYPD wrapped the column in orange plastic netting. Clearly the police had negotiated in bad faith, doing a “bait and switch” manoeuvre, and many marchers, press, legal observers and innocent bystanders were arrested in the police action. This duplicitous, pre-emptive arrest was designed to abort the march. It almost worked.

Aug. 31, 5:00 P.M. - The police, occupied with arresting those snared in their size XXXL dragnet, were apparently unaware or unconcerned with the fact that many more marchers remained in place at the Ground Zero side of Church Street. Quick discussions among the three as yet unarrested marshals (the SP affinity group leader, a WRL leader and an A31 leader) resulted in a decision to continue the march. Green Party affinity group leaders pitched in to replace the arrested marshals and the column began moving north on Church Street. Amazingly, the police did not respond immediately.

The main body of the march, proceeding north on Church, eventually crossed Canal Street and then headed north on West Broadway, with the marshals maintaining a two abreast formation so as to keep the sidewalks open to pedestrians. Our long column was joined by media of all types and flanked by the ubiquitous Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) drones, pushing shopping carts full of their newspaper. The adrenalin produced by the illegal arrests of our comrades and our sidestepping of the police trap propelled us forward. As we wound our way up West Broadway people came out of storefronts and leaned out of windows to shout words of encouragement, flash peace signs and raise fists in support.

Word filtered in that a feeder march at Union Square was completely surrounded by yet another police sweep of questionable legality. Once again WRL marchers and innocent bystanders were arrested without a dispersal order being given. The pre-emptive arrest methodology of the NYPD was becoming standard operating procedure. Marshals adapted on the fly and veered left skirting the western edge of Washington Square Park. A Quaker peace vigil in Washington Square flashed peace signs and smiles as we passed, heading north on MacDougal. We turned east on Waverly, then north onto Fifth Avenue. At this point the overhead police blimp filming us was joined by helicopters, bicycles and motor scooter units. The scooter cops looked oddly like shriners. NYPD vans paralleled us, videotaping the march. The police had recovered from their attention lapse at Ground Zero.

Our several block long column crossed 23rd Street and bore left onto Broadway proper. The police escort grew in size. As we neared 28th Street, very close to the Garden, word spread down the line that arrest was probably imminent. We bid farewell to those marchers who were unable to risk arrest and thanked them for joining us on a truly inspiring march.

Aug. 31, 7:30 P.M. - The march was over. We had gone over 50 blocks. Surrounded by police, 47 of us laid down in the middle of Broadway, just before 28th Street - a symbolic death mirroring the deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan. We hoped by this act to increase awareness and encourage resistance to the endless corporate wars but wondered if our message would be heard. We had no idea our march had been followed in its entirety by Pacifica Radio and Indy Media. As I lay looking up at the skyline from an unusual perspective it occurred to me some would see this as an irrational act. As I saw the Iraq war. The cops left us in place for quite awhile. Some had video production tags and filmed us, others without tags filmed us quickly and left the scene. Apparently they had no desire to be seen filming after the mainstream media arrived.

Aug. 31, 8:30 P.M. - The arrests began. I heard a crowd of bystanders reciting the first amendment to the Constitution - it was an incredible scene. The arrests at 28th and Broadway were not marred by police violence, unlike other arrests in other actions that day. The presence of the media certainly had something to do with this for when I was cuffed and stood up by police I saw news crews from two local TV stations. As arrestee number 3 I was interviewed by NBC and police allowed me to respond.

“Protester, why are you doing this?”, asked the NBC reporter. I expressed our frustration with Bush exploiting 911, a tragedy he bears much responsibility for, and our outrage at the ongoing slaughter in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As I climbed into a waiting police wagon, I got a smile from my comrade Frida, still lying supine on the asphalt. It occurred to me I had no idea what her political persuasion was. This image of her smile is burnt into memory - as a lifelong socialist, I found great satisfaction in being arrested with Anarchists, Quakers and Catholics. I found hope in the level of commitment exhibited by the members of our common cause, all with very different backgrounds. It suddenly mattered far less to me how the corporate media portrayed my actions...honest observers would recognise an act of conscience.

We were taken to the now infamous Pier 57 and unloaded into a large bus depot. We stood on a very long, very slow moving queue while holding our personal effects behind our backs - plastic bags of personal items clutched in sweaty nylon cuffed hands. Multiple sets of polaroids were taken of us by police unfamiliar with the procedure. A young Latina officer assured us we were only being charged with Disorderly Conduct. “Don’t worry”, she said, “it’s nothing”.

After an extended period of standing on the queue, cuffs cutting into hands, we were taken to a table where any remaining personal effects were removed and stuffed into a new plastic bag which contained the old plastic bag as well. Recycling is not a concept embraced by the NYPD. Our plastic cuffs were cut off, we were searched, run through metal detectors and placed in a filthy holding pen.

Prisoners were separated by gender, with the majority of women prisoners on the far side of the building. Each time new prisoners arrived, the entire building would cheer and clap in time.

We were moved to a new pen after our effects were vouchered. The pen was cramped and had a bench designed to seat about a tenth of our number. The rest stood or sat, some slept on the floor. The floor was concrete and covered with some sort of petroleum waste that stained our clothes and hands. Some complained, tears streaming down their faces, presumably from an allergic response - they were openly mocked by the police. We had a water cooler just outside our pen - with a length of aquarium tubing fed thru the fence that surrounded us. The coolers had three spigots but our tubing was connected to warm water despite the existence of a cold water spigot. Not that it mattered, the cooler’s electrical cord was not plugged in. Police humour. The pen itself was surrounded by a very high chain link fence with concertina wire on top. It reminded me of a kennel. The food also reminded one of a kennel: periodically we received an allotment of plastic bags, each containing 4 slices of stale white bread and 2 slices of american cheese. Some got fast food containers of mayo, others mustard. After examining the “food”, many prisoners used the plastic bagged rations as pillows in order to keep their hair out of the oil waste on the floor. There was plenty of time for rest as the police were moving in slow motion - for many hours no one was processed. The police had pizza, donuts and bottled spring water, dripping wet. We had warm water and stale cheese sandwiches. No fans were directed our way which was probably a blessing as you could plainly see asbestos insulation falling out of the wall behind us.

In my pen, a young African-American prisoner asked the guard for a cold drink, offering money. He was ridiculed, “I ain’t buying you shit, Spike Lee”, and found himself in an extended argument with the guard. This gutsy prisoner told the guard: “You are just a patsy of Bloomberg, you’re doing his dirty work. And you aren’t getting a contract from this.” Rubbing his blue gloved forefinger and thumb together the guard said, “I’m getting \$50.00 an hour for this. What do you make, Spike Lee?” The guard repeated this personal mantra until finally the prisoner flung a stale sandwich high over the barbed wire

in response. It landed at the feet of the rotund, red faced officer who then threatened the prisoner. We began chanting: "Let Us Go!" The guard banged his hands on his table in time with our chants, mocking us but nonetheless appearing to be less in control of the situation than his charges were.

All night long trucks, vans and buses brought more prisoners. The police moved in slow or stop motion. When we demanded movement our guard said: "Oh sure, we will get you out of here. We want you back on the streets protesting, man!" The snide tone said it all. We were in for a long stay.

Late that night we saw a new prisoner's shoe fall off as he was searched - this happened right outside our pen. Clearly the man was only trying to pick up his shoe when four cops jumped on him and flattened him onto a nearby table. The cops seemed edgy. None of us slept much that night.

Sept. 1, 10:00 A.M. - We were moved into one very large pen at the rear of the building. White shirted police ordered us to sit on the filthy floor. One or two refused and were threatened. At this, we all stood and began chanting "Law Suit". The police, frustrated in their efforts to bully us, gave up. Outside our pen were signs warning that various sorts of protective gear should be worn in this area which was apparently once used to store chemicals. We were issued only paper cups for the water cooler outside our pen. One young comrade tore open several paper cups and spelled out "The Spirit Has No Cage" on the floor. Prisoners filtered over and began applauding and cheering.

Eventually names were called one by one and those called were led into new nylon cuffs, this time applied extra snug. Anyone complaining of losing sensation or feeling pain was told "you're acting" and their cuffs were tightened even further.

As we stood on line for the bus, a female African American officer said: "I salute you for what you are doing." Meanwhile white male officers made sexual comments about women prisoners in earshot of them, the female guards and us. The female prisoners began to cheer us as we were led away.

Eventually, we were shoehorned into a corrections bus. As we pulled out of the Pier we heard shouting. There were protesters opposite the Pier demanding our release! The cuffs seemed to hurt a bit less. Soon we arrived at Central Booking where our nylon cuffs were exchanged for shackles. We were paraded, shackled together five in a row, through a wide variety of cages, pens and cells. We were fingerprinted where another sympathetic Black female officer assured us we wouldn't have a criminal record. We were stuffed into what seemed to be an interview room for about ten people. There were forty of us. Soon, we were escorted to have mug shots taken by a tall, handsome Black officer with a wry grin. He informed us: "What you did was for a good cause, but y'all were raising hell". We nodded and followed him down the hall. A white Lieutenant with greased black hair and a bad chip on his shoulder came walking down the hall. He ordered us to move faster which was very tough as one of our number was in his 70s. The lieutenant shoved me and another comrade into the wall saying: "Your funtime is over." This cop took us off the mug shot line and put us in a basement cell for two hours. After we were given wheat flakes and milk we were returned to the mug shot room by a new guardian, and finally had our photos done. When this long charade was ended we were taken up to the 12th floor and locked up in what would be our home until release.

In that beige cell with grey bars we began to talk about politics. Anarchists, Greens, Quakers and this Socialist. We talked about how it was a shame that the police would obviously break the law, with work slowdowns to delay processing, dubious arrests and so on, all to serve the policies of a mayor that refused them a contract. We talked about how the police did not see themselves as working class nor us

as human. We were called skels, perps, bodies and “RNCs”. As euphemisms, our suffering had less meaning I suppose. We talked about how interesting it was that the white cops, mostly male, were so macho while the people of colour were able to see beyond their uniform and offer words of encouragement. But we noted that they still wore the uniform, propping up a corrupt system. Finally we laughed about our charges, disorderly conduct - what about the police conduct?

24 hours after arrest my name was called one last time and I was released with a desk appearance ticket. I hugged my comrades in that cell and was shackled for one last time as I stumbled down the hall. I signed my DAT, was unshackled and staggered towards the exit with two other prisoners to be freed alongside me, one of whom had been a bystander swept up the police fury.

As the two escorts opened the prison gate they made snide comments about “the greeters” outside the gate waiting for us. I had no idea what they meant...one cop, a Latino male, made a peace sign and said derisively, “we can do this too”. I wondered why he was so angry until I saw the protesters waiting for our release. I blinked from the glare of the streetlights and walked out of the Tombs. Protesters gathered in Columbus Park, opposite Central Booking, applauded and cheered. I swallowed hard and shook the hand of the National Lawyer’s Guild representative who asked what he could do to help me.



Thomas Good at 28th and Broadway - Photo (c) 2004, Nigel French

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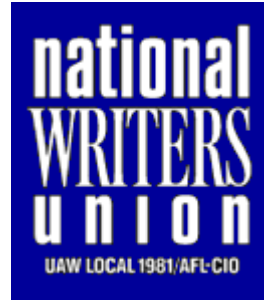
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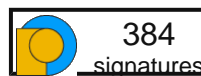


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