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## Day One of the RNC

BY ELIZABETH DINOVELLA, SEPTEMBER 1, 2008



Even though it was blazing hot, the day seemed promising at first. While driving on 494 from the hotel in the 'burbs, I saw dozens of people holding huge peace signs on several bridges over the highway.

Then I pulled into the empty downtown of St. Paul and saw lots of large groups of cops with white plastic handcuffs dangling from their belts. Not a good sign I thought.

Little happened inside the Xcel Center on the first day of the Republican National Convention. Most official events were cancelled Sunday night due to lingering worries about Hurricane Gustav. (As of Monday night, the RNC still hadn't released a schedule for Tuesday.)

Outside the GOP Green Zone, it was a different story. Tens of thousands of people rallied outside the Capitol building in St. Paul then marched toward the Xcel Center.

Former FBI agent and whistleblower Coleen Rowley was there holding a peace sign. I asked her why she was there. "Where do I start?" she said.

"9/11, and the big mistakes afterwards," she began her list of grievances. She was particularly incensed by the Bush Administration's abuses of the law. "They are using 9/11 as a pretext to launch unjustified wars, among a whole host of illegal actions. We are hoping that the thousands of people here can turn it around."

Rowley came with member of her local peace group. They were the ones who were holding those huge antiwar signs on the bridge overpasses.

Tracy Ellingboe is a teacher from Minneapolis who came to the rally to demonstrate her belief in peace and justice. "Also, I want to be eyes and ears," she said.

She had become concerned over the frequency of police arresting activists in the Twin Cities. She told me about the Critical Mass ride last year where nineteen people got nabbed by the police. The cops released the riders due to video footage taken at the scene. "So I'm here to see what happens," she said.

Last week, the police raided houses and arrested activists before the RNC even started. More troubling is that the Minneapolis Joint Terrorist Task Force was recruiting people back in May to infiltrate activist groups in advance of the RNC convention.

I didn't have a chance to speak with Ellingboe after the march, but her hunch was right on: police did arrest many people, including some who were just trying to get to a Labor Day concert across the Wabasha Bridge. Police arrested journalist Amy Goodman and two producers from Democracy Now. Video shot by Rick Rowley of Big Noise Films shows Goodman was simply asking the police about her already-detained producers when she was arrested.

Amongst all the aggression, there was some humor and beauty.

The brilliant Yes Men delivered the humor. Their latest incarnation: Lobbyists for McCain. "Obama has student loans, McCain has seven homes—who you gonna go with?" Phil T. Rich asked. Check out their website now.

The beauty happened across the river at Harriet Park where SEIU organized a Take Back Labor Day concert with Billy Bragg, Allison Moore, Steve Earle, Tom Morello, Mos Def, and the Pharcyde. 15,000 people—mainly young people—rocked it in the funkier Labor Day party I have ever scene. I even enjoyed the folk music.

"It's a crime for the Republicans to take Labor Day, with their history of union busting," said Tom Morello. "That's why I'm here—to take it back."

I spoke to Billy Bragg and he was pretty psyched about the possibility of Obama becoming President. "America doesn't wield its power in a responsible way," he said. "It's the Hancock

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Syndrome.” (A reference to the movie that I haven’t seen yet, but essentially, the U.S. needs a new superhero suit and to fly right.)

Bragg had earlier told the crowd “in November, you have a chance to change the perception of the United States in the rest of the world.”

I would like to believe that sentiment but my travels in the Middle East in May proved otherwise. No one I talked to was excited about Obama. Several people noted there wasn’t much difference in U.S. policy in the region between the Dems and GOP.

“A lot of people have given up trusting America,” Bragg said. “They don’t realize there are just as many people pissed off here.”

“The enemy of all of us who want a better world is cynicism, not capitalism or conservatism,” Bragg went on to say. “And that’s as much true for America and its role in the world as for those of us who want a fairer society. Cynical people make it all the more difficult.”

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