

As Chicago prepares to suppress protests during Democratic National Convention

Chicago watchdog criticizes Mayor Johnson's failure to remove fascists from the police force

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Media reports indicate that the city of Chicago is expecting some 50,000 visitors and “massive protests” at next month’s Democratic National Convention. While initial announcements by the Chicago police department indicated that peaceful protests would be permitted, the administration of Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson, with the backing of the Biden White House and the Democratic Party as a whole, has announced that peaceful protesters will face arrest.

The convention, to be held August 19-22, will gather delegates from around the country, its main business traditionally being the naming of the party’s nominee for US president on its penultimate day. But because the state of Ohio requires the nominee to be named 90 days before election day, the Democrats’ nomination will take place virtually in July and the convention itself will reportedly unveil the party’s platform.

Days after the shift in the city’s policy on peaceful protest was announced, the city Inspector General’s office issued a rebuke to the Johnson administration for refusing to remove from the police force officers with ties to fascist organizations, including the Oath Keepers and the Ku Klux Klan.

“Make no mistake, we are ready,” Chicago Police Department (CPD) Superintendent Larry Snelling said at a media event, appearing alongside Secret Service Director Kimberly Cheatle.

Some 3,000 officers are receiving specialized training to “respond directly to civil unrest and the possibility of riots,” Snelling said. Multiple highlight videos showcasing CPD “readiness” have been aired on local media, with police officials emphasizing the deployment of officers to protect buildings.

The CPD and the Secret Service will be coordinating the efforts of 12 different agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

The DEA has announced its involvement with a video, clips of which were shown on local news programs, depicting military-style raids of homes and large buildings. The local FBI command center has been upgraded, reportedly to respond to terror events and establish high-level communication with the rest of federal law enforcement and the Chicago police.

Johnson reneges on peaceful protest pledge

In April, Snelling announced that protesters would be able to “exercise their First Amendment rights as long as they are doing it peacefully,” without “violence, looting or vandalism.”

But at a June press conference, Snelling declared the city’s policy had changed. He said:

Even if it’s not an act of violence, and it’s peaceful but it’s a violation of the law—blocking roadways, blocking venues, things of that nature, we will declare mass arrests in those situations and make those arrests. First Amendment protection is only there if you’re not committing a crime, and you can be acting out peacefully but still breaking the law.

What Snelling is referring to includes blocking the public way, which any significant gathering would be bound to do. In recent months, protests against the US-backed Israeli genocide of Palestinians have drawn upwards of 30,000 in the city. Democratic Party leaders—above all Joe Biden, who will have been formally endorsed by the DNC as its candidate prior to the August convention—have only become more unpopular since then.

Just one group of protesters, the “Poor People’s Army,” has been permitted, and the Democratic Party has made it clear it wishes to prevent its convention from becoming a forum for criticism of its policies.

Snelling’s announcement recalls the city’s response to the infamous 1968 convention in Chicago, when protest permits were denied to anti-war protesters. The few hundred who demonstrated were met infamously with overwhelming force by thousands of police, resulting in more than 800 injuries.

The argument that protests cause “disruption” and can therefore be suppressed by force is a justification used by every modern

dictatorship on the planet. Lately, it has been used by US authorities to justify the brutal suppression of protests against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. Police have broken up encampments on campuses across the country based on university administrators' claims of "disruption" of university business, including at the School of the Art Institute, the University of Chicago and DePaul University in Chicago.

Numerous organizations have announced plans to protest at the DNC. Yet, all but one have been denied a permit by the city of Chicago, creating a situation where the city threatens to meet the exercise of constitutionally protected freedoms of speech and association with mass arrests.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Illinois and the Coalition to March on DNC have filed federal lawsuits asserting the right to protest near convention locations after their protest permit applications were denied. The Coalition to March on DNC has pledged to march peacefully with or without permission.

US Palestinian Community Network leader Hatem Abudayyeh gave an update on the hearings in the suit on June 25 and emphasized the importance of protesting at the DNC. He said:

We will march with or without permits. It's the only way, the only way we are going to stop the genocide, and the now 40,000 Palestinians killed by the Israelis with our tax dollars and our weapons.

Fascists in the police force

For two months, the administration of Mayor Brandon Johnson has not responded to an 18-page letter from the Inspector General's office calling for the formation of a task force to investigate and remove the many CPD officers alleged or admitted to being involved in fascist and racist organizations, which the letter identifies as "an issue of profound importance and pressing public concern."

The letter, authored by Tobar Richardson, deputy inspector general for public safety, reads in part:

Any ongoing mishandling of the matter puts CPD's public legitimacy at critical risk, and profoundly undermines its effectiveness by damaging the very public trust that the city and the department are endeavoring to foster.

Richardson's letter notes that CPD officers are known to be affiliated with hate groups, including the Proud Boys, the Three Percenters and the Ku Klux Klan.

Based on a six-month investigation conducted by the CPD's Bureau of Internal Affairs, which mainly consisted of interviews

with eight CPD officers facing allegations, the department decided in April to clear all eight of allegations of involvement with the Oath Keepers. Most of the officers acknowledged that they had joined, but claimed they had no significant or recent engagement with the group.

On January 6, 2023, Johnson issued a letter demanding that then-Mayor Lori Lightfoot remove officers whose names appeared on the rolls of the Proud Boys, declaring "active involvement in domestic terrorist organizations should be grounds for immediate dismissal."

Now that he is in office, Johnson stands alongside Snelling and disregards officers' frank admission of their membership in the Oath Keepers, saying:

If there is no evidence that corroborates or substantiates someone's involvement as a member of one of these groups, there are very few courses of action that can be taken.

Last year, *Sun Times* reporters uncovered "at least 27 current and former Chicago police officials whose names appeared in leaked rosters for the Oath Keepers, an anti-government group that played a central role in the 2021 US Capitol riot and counts many cops, servicemen and first responders as members." The newspaper's investigation revealed that the officers named had professional records that included allegations of excessive force, "improper searches" and racist statements.

The CPD allowed officer Robert Bakker to remain on the force with a 120-day suspension after VICE uncovered chat logs on which he organized meetings of the Proud Boys.

Since the investigation, the CPD has established a list of groups of which officers may not be members, all 675 of which are reportedly street gangs. None of the fascist and hate groups are listed to which nearly 30 CPD officers have been found to be affiliated, including groups involved in the January 6, 2021 coup attempt.



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