

September 11, 2008

Congresswoman Betty McCollum  
400 Selby Avenue, Suite I  
St. Paul, MN 55102

Congressman Keith Ellison  
2100 Plymouth Avenue North  
Minneapolis, MN 55411

Dear Representatives McCollum and Ellison,

We are writing to express our concern over the events that transpired before and during the recent Republican National Convention (RNC) in St. Paul and Minneapolis. We are very troubled by the pattern of disproportionate, preemptive, and even violent law enforcement response to peaceful protests before and during this event, and urge you to call for an independent investigation. In addition to concerns about abuse and First Amendment violations, we are concerned about how the RNC's insurance policy and the federal government's grant to the St. Paul police department might have eroded police restraint and contributed to their use of preemptive and aggressive tactics.

Some Convention-related episodes involved systematic harassment. On the Friday night preceding the RNC, a public meeting space meant to coordinate transportation, housing and food for protesters coming to the Twin Cities was subject to a preemptive raid by the police. During this raid, dozens of people were detained, only to be released later with no charges. Perhaps even more disturbing, on Saturday, August 30, law enforcement officers with assault rifles raided several homes; detained and arrested people; and seized computers, household items, and boxes of pamphlets, flyers, signs and banners. Additionally, officers effectively chilled freedom of the press throughout this period by targeting journalists not affiliated with major networks.

These actions were undertaken singly, and in coordinated efforts, by the Ramsey County Sheriff, the Hennepin County Sheriff, the St. Paul Police Department, the Minneapolis Police Department, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the FBI. Preemptive harassment should concern both citizens and politicians because it not only discourages and disrupts peaceful processes protected by law, but it undermines community trust in law enforcement.

Although the Ramsey County Sheriff's office held a press conference the next day to highlight confiscated weapons material, much of this material was such household items as twine, tape, nails, paint, road maps, and fishing line – none of which provided any credible basis for the subsequent police violence. In the following days of the convention, police used tear gas, pepper spray, concussion grenades, rubber bullets, and even tasers on non-violent demonstrators, media personnel, legal observers, medics, and bystanders. These examples were accompanied by police harassment and arrests at several public places where activists were known to gather, including neighborhood bars, fundraisers and concerts. Attorneys visiting the jailed protesters reported that officers had intentionally crashed their bicycles into demonstrators and injured them. These generally unprovoked and aggressive tactics were widespread and indiscriminate, harming hundreds of people in the Twin Cities.

We worry that the federal grant of \$50 million contributed more to aggressive tactics than to policing operations that conform to international standards. We are concerned that the RNC's \$10 million insurance policy for damages and legal costs resulting from police brutality and misconduct claims may have played a significant role in prompting the use of weapons on non-violent protesters in violation of legal protections. Despite police claims of protester violence, it appears that criminal activity was limited to minor amounts of petty vandalism disconnected from the violent police response to demonstrations.

What makes the need for a comprehensive investigation particularly urgent, however, are reports from both Ramsey and Hennepin Counties that after being jailed, people were subjected to abuse. Some peaceful protesters, such as Elliot Hughes, were reportedly beaten and required hospitalization. Hughes became the visible face of this brutality, but there were instances of other types of abuse. Numerous detainees claim that critical medical attention and prescription drugs were delayed or denied, as were food and access to attorneys. Additionally, ICE agents entered Ramsey County Jail where they profiled and interrogated detainees based on their names and physical appearance. These claims alone demand investigation.

Amnesty International has called publicly for a prompt inquiry into reported police misconduct, and we concur. A comprehensive review of the origins and use of federal funds is necessary for local accountability and effective congressional oversight. A review of police tactics and actions is necessary to make sure future policing actions are disciplined, measured, and reflect the high standards of our community. A review of detention practices is necessary to ensure safe and humane practices. Findings and recommendations should be thorough, impartial, prompt and public. Consequently, we the undersigned would appreciate your full support for public independent investigations.

Sincerely,

American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota  
Anti-War Committee  
AFSCME, Local 3800  
Centro Campesino  
Coalition to March on the RNC & Stop the War  
Coldsnap Legal Collective  
Communities United Against Police Brutality  
Free Speech TV  
Minneapolis Commission on Civil Rights  
Minnesota Immigrant Rights Action Coalition  
National Lawyers Guild  
National Lawyers Guild, Minnesota Chapter  
Welfare Rights Committee

Cc: Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson