

Repression & Resistance

From RNC 2000 to Trump

Eric Laursen

2018

a review of

Crashing the Party: Legacies and Lessons from the RNC 2000 by Kris Hermes. PM Press, 2015 pmpress.org

Crashing the Party was published three years ago, but it couldn't be more timely in the age of Trump and Sessions. Kris Hermes's book is an in-depth account of the legal saga that began with the repression and mass arrests of activists at the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia.

Much of the groundwork for the hyper-aggressive style of protest policing that's since become common practice, and that reached a new intensity with the outlandish charges against activists at the Trump inaugural, was laid in Philly that summer. Fortunately, it was answered by new techniques of response by arrestees and a renaissance of legal collectives that carry resistance from the streets and police wagons to the jails and courtrooms.

Hermes, who threw himself into the legal campaign for the Philly RNC arrestees as part of the R2K Legal Collective, is an excellent storyteller. He lucidly teases out the many volatile elements that made the convention a powder-keg: the city's extreme cop culture, the seething racial tensions encapsulated by the politically motivated incarceration of activist-journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal, the city's splurge of taxpayer dollars to accommodate the orgy of influence-peddling that was the RNC, and the systematic demonization of protesters labeled violent by a compliant mainstream media.

He details the preparations by activists for a national convergence opposing the convention, and the efforts of the city and the national security state to stop them, from illegal surveillance and infiltration to unprovoked raids, to an extraordinary, secretly negotiated insurance policy immunizing the city from liability for actions such as false arrest, libel, and malicious prosecution.

From the beginning, anarchists were specifically targeted. One affidavit submitted by the police listing organizations tagged for search and seizure included the blanket entry, "Anarchists."

Inside the convention, George W. Bush was anointed Republican presidential nominee. Outside, the city's insurance policy licensed police to engage in a free-for-all of beatings, preemptive arrests, harassment, and mass roundups—420 arrests in total.

While the Philadelphia Inquirer editorialized that protesters "acted as if they didn't realize that breaking the law meant you go to jail," much of the police tactics were blatantly illegal. Arrestees were detained sometimes for weeks and charged under a sealed affidavit that was later revealed to contain next to no evidence.

What those arrested in Philadelphia and their fellow activists had going for them was the grim experience gained during the vast mobilization in Seattle against the World Trade Organization a year earlier.

In some detention facilities in Seattle, Hermes notes, WTO arrestees were "dragged across the floor, sometimes through broken glass, doused with pepper spray, hogtied hand-to-ankle, and handcuffed tightly enough to cause bleeding." Some were beaten unconscious.

Later, reports of sexual abuse (six counts) and threats of rape surfaced. The lack of support shown by the ACLU in Seattle and the efforts of some attorneys to get individual defendants to break ranks are still distressing to read about today. In 2000, they convinced activists of the need to form a legal collective in Philadelphia that wasn't dependent on mainstream liberal organizations.

Also, many veterans of the Seattle actions who were arrested in Philadelphia were experienced at jail solidarity.

They and their comrades had good support from civil rights lawyers and their comrades on the outside were organized to provide support as long as a single activist was inside.

R2K Legal got busy raising bail, raising more funds, publicizing police and jail abuses, developing a media strategy, and building a movement to drop the charges. When the district attorney and mayor stood their ground, the collective and its attorneys worked to organize trial trainings and push for pretrial dismissals, some of which were obtained.

They researched and exposed the spectacularly biased judge who heard many of the cases and (unsuccessfully) tried to get him recused. "While it was a long-shot legal strategy," the recusal effort "became a political success story" by "giving the public a glimpse into the style of justice that gets meted out every day" in cities like Philadelphia, Hermes writes.

One felony arrestee, activist Kate Sorenson, was found to have been subjected to months of police surveillance and harassment prior to the RNC. She was acquitted. Ultimately, fewer than 20 of the over 400 arrestees were convicted, and none was sentenced to jail time.

The police abuses provoked a rash of civil lawsuits, resulting in settlements by the city amounting to \$18 million (disclosure: this writer was deposed in one of the civil cases.) The monetary awards aside, was it worth it?

Sometimes civil litigation exposes crimes by the authorities and results in some measure of reform; on the other hand, the process is long and exhausting and taxes the limited resources of legal collectives and their allies, surely one of the aims of the State.

Yet, activists refined their skills at jail and court solidarity and took them to other cities and street-level protests, including actions over the Iraq war and at later political conventions.

Crashing the Party is thorough—perhaps too exhaustive for many readers—but the record Hermes compiles is an indispensable part of our experience as activists against the State.

He doesn't neglect the vast expansion of surveillance by police, the FBI, joint terrorism task forces, and other agencies as a result of Seattle, the RNC, and other mass mobilizations, when law enforcement branded anarchists and "summit hoppers" the nucleus of a new domestic terrorism.

All that expanded vastly after 9/11 and the formulation of the War on Terror. But the State response to the RNC protests undoubtedly was a watershed in making the use of its resources to suppress dissent, often at the behest of private interests, commonplace. Recent example: the suppression of the Dakota Access Pipeline protest community at Standing Rock.

The great question since the RNC has remained much the same: how to join mass protests, often by white radicals, more firmly and productively with existing local activism in communities of color and among impoverished populations.

Hermes makes a strong case that the real legacy of R2K is the proliferation of legal collectives over the succeeding decade, from Midnight Special in Oakland to the People's Law Collective and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project in New York City.

These groups not only help arrestees to better leverage their position in the jails and courts, but to use those contexts to extend their activism and build ties to other victims of the system, something a more fragmented legal strategy, dictated by conventional defense attorneys, can't accomplish.

Donald Trump and Jeff Sessions, his attorney general, are embarked on a vast (and underreported) project to harden the criminal injustice system and heighten suppression of disfavored communities.

Protest, accordingly, is ratcheting up, but so is repression. "The likelihood of the state conceding to protester demands depends on the amount of political pressure that movements can muster," Hermes concludes.

A strategy for carrying activism onto the criminal injustice system's own turf is more important than ever. Kris Hermes's fine book shows us how legal collectives can continue to play a vital role.

Eric Laursen is an anarchist writer and activist living in Buckland, Mass. His most recent book is *The Duty to Stand Aside: Nineteen Eighty-Four and the Wartime Quarrel of George Orwell and Alex Comfort* (AK Press, 2018).

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Fifth Estate #401, Summer 2018

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