

RNC Update Number 9: An Incredible Day

by Starhawk

Three quarters of a million people marched today in New York City. That's NPR's estimate. The New York Times estimated 500,000, but called it "The biggest protest ever at a political convention, the most emphatic ever, the biggest protest NYC has seen in decades, and rivaling the 1982 rally in Central Park."

It was an amazing day, long and hot and sweaty and with moments of tension, but overall just wonderful. I started early meeting with other trainers at Union Square, doing a mini-training for trainers to get teams prepared to do trainings for contingents while waiting for the march to set off. My team wasn't terribly successful at that as every time we found a contingent that was interested, they began marching. There were so many contingents forming up on side streets over such a large area that it was impossible to sense how big it was. We finally went back to the Pagan Cluster, formed up with our giant banners that were gifted to us by the new York artists, and marched behind the big green dragon our old friends from Washington DC brought up, together with a contingent marching under black umbrellas and crowded into a V-shaped banner, and the Rhythm Workers Union who have a big cart with drums on it that can be wheeled through the streets so people can play big Jimbes and not have to carry them for miles.

We waited a long time to get going, but finally squeezed into the main mass of marchers on 7th Avenue. In a march this big, you only ever see a small fragment of what is happening. If you were in San Francisco watching on CNN, you had a clearer overview than we did. We had no idea how many people were there, except that it was a lot, but when we had made our way up to about 23rd "St. I got a text message on our new high tech text messaging list serve saying that the head of the march had already reached Union Square and most people still hadn't left the assembly point. And I felt such a rush of joy. We'd done it! We'd overcome all the propaganda and the campaign of intimidation and the fear mongering, and people really had come out in the streets, unafraid, and it was beautiful! Masses and masses of people, some in T shirts or with banners of organizations, some with dreadlocks and wild tattoos, but most just ordinary looking New Yorkers of every color and age and kind, in such numbers that the march just crawled along for hours.

I was working hard to keep our contingent together, and in its position at the back of the dragon's tail—not always easy when the streets were so, so crowded. I must have been pretty seriously focused because my own brother turned up, offered his services as a mandolin player, and marched alongside me for about fifteen minutes before I recognized him. Of course, in my mind he's my baby brother, slim, curly haired, dark, and about thirteen years old—not some big, gray-haired, middle-aged old coot. How did he get that way?

I saw lots of old friends and old political comrades—from all different eras and strands of my life, The sun was blazing hot and the pace was very, very slow—the march stopping often and then resuming its slow crawl. Meanwhile text messages were coming in about the police harassing and arresting bicyclists. Apparently there is something especially menacing about these two-wheeled, human-powered vehicles and those who ride them, at any rate, the NYPD seems to be running a campaign to clear the streets of these moving threats to public safety. Aside from that, police presence was mostly light and unobtrusive, except for barricades that appeared near Madison Square Garden separating the street from the sidewalk, making it hard to duck out for a bottle of water and get back in. By the time we approached MSG, so many people were on the sidewalk they formed dual companion marches of their own, moving at a swifter pace than the march in the street like flanking streams with swifter currents.

Our friends with the dragon had offered to help us if we wanted to do a spiral dance in front of the Garden, so as we got near I began drawing the cluster together, speaking to our friends in the Rhythm Workers' Union to coordinate some drumming of a rhythm we could chant to, looking for an open space. We found it, around 33rd St. We dropped back behind the dragon, because the sound system inside it was too loud for our ears. The police are rumored to have a sound weapon that will disperse crowds with painful levels of noise, but this was friendly fire that drove us back. Where the crowd thinned just slightly, we grabbed the opportunity, formed our circle and began to spiral in, chanting,

Or army can hold back a thought, No fence can chain the sea, The earth cannot be sold or bought, All life shall be free.

The spiral stopped the already slow march, and I felt guilty about that, but the march had been stopping anyway for hours and we felt another five minutes or so wouldn't kill anyone. Then some energy roared through me like a freight train, and I stopped feeling anything else. Some of it was horrible, nauseating energy that needed to be released and cleansed. Some of it was powerful, earth energy, a kind of raw life force that pulsed and thundered and rose up into a great, focused cone of power. Someone told me to look behind, and in the relatively empty space between us and the line of cops at 34th St., the dragon was burning.

The flames rose up and in that moment, it seemed a perfect icon of our magic, a powerful spell, although I can't rationally explain why. Later Delight said the dragon is luck and the Republicans' luck was burning. Of course, it had tactical repercussions.

The cops grabbed some people and arrested them. A few people threw bottles back at the cops from the middle of the crowd. The police drew a line at 33rd Street and pushed us off down the street, blocking the main march again. We moved off, down to the Herald Square Avenue, regrouped and caught our breath.

We were tired, and felt that we had done our magical work, so we decided to make our separate ways up to Central Park, where masses of people were gathering on the Great Lawn despite the city's refusal to permit a rally there. More and more people came until the whole area was thronged with thousands and thousands of people, relaxing on the grass, playing music, pounding drums, doing street theater for each other. We did

some impromptu nonviolent direct action trainings. Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping performed marriages and his choir intoned the sacred First Amendment. The Rude Mechanical Orchestra, a marching brass band, wound through the crowd. It was like all the best parts of a rally, without being tortured by scratchy voices on loudspeakers that you can't really hear and don't want to listen to but feel somehow that you should.

Meanwhile, on Broadway the delegates were greeted by the Mouse Bloc, (Disney paid for them to attend Broadway shows), who were also aggressively stopped by the police. Many were trapped in a net and arrested. Other protestors dogged the steps of delegates who were dining at the Boat House in Central Park or entering hotels. Our cluster stayed in Central Park, and had a very sweet full moon ritual near the obelisk, washing ourselves clean of all the ways we have taken in what Raven and Seelin and Burch, who planned the ritual, call 'the hex' and some of us call the fortress or the Empire—that whole intertwined system of belief and power that maintains oppression.

And this morning we're having the unusual experience of savoring the news, great pictures of huge crowds of protestors, even the New York Post and the Daily News writing stories with great quotes.

Whatever else happens during this week, we've already changed history.

We're left with just one mystery. No one admits to burning the dragon. The friends who brought it say they had no knowledge that anyone intended to burn it. Was it provocateurs? An accident? Or a spontaneous combustion, touched off by a spark of that cone of power we were raising fifty yards away? We may never know, but I'll tell you what I like to believe—that Liberty herself bent down with her torch to ignite a burning flame of truth at the threshold of the convention of lies.

Donations for the action can be sent to:

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