

Democrats convene in Denver amid police state security and a sea of corporate cash

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Nothing could more graphically expose the political fraud of the “change you can believe in” mantra promoted by the Democrats and their presidential candidate Barack Obama than the reactionary atmosphere surrounding the party’s national convention, which kicked off Monday in Denver, Colorado.

The more than 4,000 Democratic delegates—covered by an army of some 15,000 members of the press—are convening in what amounts to a political bubble surrounded by security measures consistent with those of a police state. The convention itself, not to mention the lavish parties being thrown for the delegates—many of them elected officials—is being paid for largely by major corporations looking to buy political influence.

The media has focused the bulk of its attention on the convention’s first day on speculating as to whether lingering “bitterness” on the part of Obama’s principal rival for the nomination, Senator Hillary Clinton, and her supporters will detract from the unity message that is meant to predominate. Most of this coverage is cast entirely in terms of personal frictions and identity politics, without a hint of any substantive political issues involved.

This is in keeping with the general tenor of the convention itself, which is packaged as a \$60 million, four-day infomercial, with no question of a debate over policy breaking out on the floor of Denver’s Pepsi Center, where the delegates are assembled. The media, with very few exceptions, functions as an uncritical conduit for this process, accepting its narrow parameters as given.

It has been more than three decades since such a convention was an arena for any form of political debate, and where the outcome was not preordained. The ritualistic character of these events is a function of the widening gulf separating the official politics of the US two-party system—controlled lock, stock and barrel by the banks, corporations and a narrow financial elite—from the vast mass of the American people.

A stark illustration of this same divide is to be found in the extraordinary security measures that have been put into place in Denver. The Democratic Party, the ostensible political opposition to the Bush administration, is meeting under what amounts to a state of siege, justified in the name of the “war on terror” and the assumed need to exert iron-fisted control over any expression of political dissent in the streets.

The actual scale of protest in Denver is decidedly limited. On Sunday, barely 1,200 people participated in an antiwar demonstration led by Ron Kovic, the paralyzed Vietnam War veteran and author of the book *Born on the Fourth of July*, and Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq. The leaderships of the major antiwar protest groups are part of the

effort to divert anger against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan into support for a political party that has funded and will continue both US interventions.

Nonetheless, demonstrators have been confronted with overwhelming police force. The ranks of Denver's police have been doubled by the influx of cops from throughout the surrounding area.

As Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* reported, "Hundreds of heavily armed officers, some clad in riot gear or hanging off SUVs, are saturating Denver's streets in unprecedented numbers, quickly isolating any hint of trouble that could tarnish the city's reputation under the limelight of the Democratic National Convention.

"The officers—on foot, horseback, bicycles and motorcycles—are armed with black batons and pepperball guns that resemble assault rifles. And they were quick to move Sunday when hundreds of rowdy protesters took to the streets of downtown."

Police have distributed pamphlets to would-be protesters warning them that they will be subject to arrest if they refuse orders to disperse, even if they have broken no laws. To deal with potential mass arrests, the city has opened a temporary detention center—a warehouse divided into chain-link cells. Critics of the security crackdown have dubbed the site "Gitmo on the Platte," after Denver's South Platte River.

The authorities have also attempted to restrict protesters to a so-called "free speech zone," the Orwellian term they have given to an isolated patch of a parking lot ringed by two layers of black steel security fencing, giving it the appearance of a detention camp.

The force of 1,500 officers brought in from 52 police agencies in nearby areas does not include a huge federal contingent that has been mobilized for the event.

The Department of Homeland Security has declared the conventions of both the Democratic and Republican parties—the latter to be held next week in St. Paul, Minnesota—"National Special Security Events." This designation places the department and the Secret Service in charge of overall security and brings in an array of national police, military and intelligence agencies.

Some \$50 million in federal funding has been allotted for security measures at each of the conventions. In Denver, a portion of this money has gone to equip police with body armor and shields as well as to purchase an armored vehicle.

Federal and local police agents have established a secret headquarters, dubbed the Multi-Agency Command Center, or MACC, from which they are monitoring every movement in the city via hundreds of security cameras that are trained on the convention center, protest sites and the entire surrounding area.

In a chilling indication that the police surveillance is far wider and more intrusive than has been reported by the media, protest leader Cindy Sheehan reported returning to her Denver hotel room Monday to find a man in her room using a screwdriver on the telephone.

The US Customs and Border Protection agency has been brought in to inspect vehicles in the city, while agents of the Transportation Security Administration are being deployed to screen those entering the convention center.

The military has also been deployed in Denver for the convention. In addition to the activation of over 1,000 National Guard troops, elements of the US Coast Guard have been placed in charge of intelligence operations in designated areas, while the North American Aerospace Defense Command and the Northern Command, based at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, are also participating. The Pentagon refused to supply any details on the precise role of these commands, but some of the media reported that they were providing the convention with “air cover.”

The convention’s business: bribery and influence-peddling

Behind these rings of steel and phalanxes of police, the real business of the convention is being conducted in a series of activities and events that amount to organized and officially sanctioned bribery and influence-peddling.

Speaking last Saturday in Springfield, Illinois, in his announcement of Delaware Senator Joseph Biden as his running mate, Obama claimed that his campaign was based on “a simple belief: that the American people were better than their government in Washington—a government that has fallen prey to special interests and policies that have left working people behind.”

Yet in Denver this week, he is presiding over a convention that is being paid for by these same special interests, with the clear understanding that their money will secure favors from Democratic politicians and, potentially, a Democratic administration headed by Obama himself.

While posturing as the party of “the people,” the Democrats have auctioned off access to US corporations, selling aptly named “presidential sponsor” packages for a million dollars each. The money buys companies private access to Obama’s advisors, tickets to exclusive parties attended by Democratic elected officials and luxury skybox seats to hear Obama’s acceptance speech Thursday in Denver’s Mile High Stadium.

The party had billed the stadium event as a sign of its openness and desire to include the people in its deliberations. But the auctioning off of skyboxes to the highest corporate bidders clearly expresses the Democrats’ real role as an essential prop of social inequality and the rule of big business.

An array of major corporations has sponsored parties, dinners and other events, using loopholes in new ethics rules touted by Obama and the Democrats, to stage lavish events for and contribute amply to Democratic politicians. While the rules limit individual donations to candidates to \$2,300, and bar direct contributions from corporations and unions, their provisions do not extend to the party conventions.

AT&T, which has refused to disclose how much it has given to the convention, held such an event Sunday night from which it barred the media, calling the police against a few reporters who attempted to interview those attending. The bash was given for the Democratic Leadership Council.

AT&T was one of the principal beneficiaries of legislation passed by Congress last month—with Obama voting in favor—which vastly expanded government domestic surveillance powers while granting blanket retroactive immunity to telecommunications firms that collaborated in the Bush administration’s illegal domestic spying program.

Another telecom, Qwest Communications, has donated \$6 million to the convention—the largest known contribution.

As the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out Monday, “The largest donors frequently have some of the largest business issues pending before state and federal agencies at the time lawmakers ask them to donate.”

Qwest has a case pending before the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that would grant it regulatory relief. The newspaper reported that a member of the convention’s fundraising committee, Rep. Diana DeGette of Colorado, also sits on the congressional committee that oversees the FCC and wrote a letter to the agency on the company’s behalf.

Other major corporate convention donors with issues before Congress that have significant implications for their bottom line include Comcast Corp., Xcel Energy Inc., UnitedHealth Inc., Eli Lilly and other big pharmaceutical firms, and Kraft Foods.

One major donor worth noting is Lockheed Martin, the huge military contractor. “Lockheed Martin strongly supports our nation’s political process and candidates that support in general national defense, homeland security, high technology and educational initiatives,” a company spokesman said of the convention funding. Clearly, it is confident that the US war machine will provide it with profitable conditions under an Obama presidency.

Among the events scheduled at the convention is a poker night for delegates at Coors Field, sponsored by a business alliance that is lobbying Congress not to place restrictions on Internet gambling.

Even the government-backed mortgage finance giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac had been slated to host events and contribute to the convention’s cost, until the idea was scrapped out of fear that it would trigger outrage because of the recent government move to bail out the firms.

Behind the media glitz and meticulously staged spectacle, the Denver convention’s reality of corruption, elitism and repression is the real face of the Democratic Party and the Obama campaign.

No less than the Republicans and their candidate John McCain, the Democrats defend the interests of the corporate and financial ruling elite. The thoroughly anti-democratic two-party system excludes any expression of the genuine interests of working people.

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