

Protesters suing Phila. over raid on warehouse

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Former protesters and others arrested in the Philadelphia police raid on the so-called puppet warehouse during last year's Republican National Convention filed a damage suit against the city yesterday in federal court.

"We filed the suit on behalf of the named plaintiffs who were here in Philadelphia to exercise their First Amendment rights, to demonstrate their political views at the site of the Republican National Convention," said lawyer Paul J. Hetznecker, who defended the puppeteers as their cases moved through the courts, "which by our own history and tradition of democracy is where dissenting voices should be heard. Their constitutional rights were suspended for the period of time they were incarcerated."

Hetznecker said that although only 10 people were named in the suit, others would be added.

The suit is the largest — at least in terms of numbers of defendants — of many court actions filed against authorities for their handling of the demonstrators. Last week, two of the alleged "ringleaders" who were arrested, John Sellers and Terrence McGuckin, also filed suits.

The warehouse incident occurred last Aug. 1, when police, accompanied by Department of Licenses and Inspections officials, entered the building in the 4100 block of Haverford Avenue and arrested about 75 people. They were charged with misdemeanors, but none was convicted.

Police said they had seized pipe, wire, and other items allegedly used to make "lock boxes" to link protesters in street blockades.

Almost 400 protesters were arrested during the five-day

convention. Most cases were dismissed, although a few protesters were convicted on misdemeanor charges. Ten people arrested in the warehouse opted for an early deal that included six months' probation. The District Attorney's Office dropped the charges against the others.

It was subsequently revealed that the affidavits the state police used to obtain search warrants for the warehouse raid were based in part on reports from the Maldon Institute, a controversial research organization run by a former John Birch Society editor.

The suit was filed against Deputy Police Commissioners Robert Mitchell and Sylvester Johnson, Deputy L&I Commissioner Dominic Verdi, L&I Commissioner Edward McLaughlin, 10 unnamed police officers, and the City of Philadelphia.

The complaint was filed by Ryan Cooper, Matthew Hart, Brad Johnson, Jennifer Kates, Jessica Mammarella, Milan Marvelous, Angela Modugno, Beth Pulcinella, Gwen Witherpoon, Erik Woodworth, and Spiral Q. Puppet Theatre Inc.

City Solicitor Kenneth I. Trujillo would not comment on the specifics of the lawsuit. Speaking about the warehouse incident, he said: "I think that the conduct of the Police Department was exemplary and many people consider it to be the epitome of restraint. Nothing that I've seen and none of the lawsuits that have been filed to date give me any concern as to the city's liability, and we will defend them vigorously."

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Inquirer staff writer Linda Harris contributed to this article.