

Journalists file lawsuit in GOP convention arrests

By STEVE KARNOWSKI (AP) – May 5, 2010

MINNEAPOLIS — Amy Goodman, host of the syndicated "Democracy Now!" news program, and two of her producers filed suit against the cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis and other defendants Wednesday over their arrests while covering the 2008 Republican National Convention.

The three were among an estimated 40 to 50 journalists who were arrested covering street protests at the convention in downtown St. Paul, along with about 800 demonstrators and bystanders.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Minnesota, alleges that authorities violated the First Amendment freedoms of Goodman, her producers and other journalists by interfering with their right to gather news.

Goodman's daily program airs on over 750 radio and TV stations in North America.

"During the RNC, law enforcement arrested journalists without probable cause, physically assaulted them, detained them for lengthy periods, and searched and seized their belongings, including their cameras, video, and other media equipment, even though many of these individuals displayed their press credentials prominently and repeatedly identified themselves as members of the media," the lawsuit alleges.

Goodman, and her producers Nicole Salazar and Sharif Abdel Kouddous, are asking the court to issue a permanent injunction against authorities to prevent interference with their journalistic rights in the future; to declare the actions that restricted their work unconstitutional; and to award unspecified compensatory and punitive monetary damages, including reimbursement for lost or damaged property and medical expenses.

Salazar and Kouddous were arrested Sept. 1, 2008, on the opening day of the convention as riot police massed near the convention hall. The complaint says they were visibly wearing their press passes and holding their equipment and identified themselves as journalists.

The complaint says Salazar was videotaping as officers corralled journalists and bystanders in a parking lot. It says the officers pushed her to the ground, knocking her video camera from her hands. Officers slammed Kouddous against a wall after he shouted to officers arresting Salazar that she was a member of the press. And it says Goodman was arrested and pushed to the ground after she went to the arrest site and asked officers to release her producers.

Salazar was left bloodied with cuts, scratches and bruises on her face, the complaint says. Kouddous suffered injuries that it says resulted in long-term numbness in his hands, chest pains for several weeks, and scars on his arms. Goodman experienced several weeks of pain and tingling from her left elbow to her thumb as a result of handcuffs that were too tight, it says.

The lawsuit names both cities, their police chiefs, Ramsey County and its sheriff, one identified police officer and other as yet-unidentified officers. The Minneapolis Police Department was among several agencies providing security during the convention.

St. Paul's interim city attorney, Gerald Hendrickson, said his office had not been served with the lawsuit so he couldn't comment.

Minneapolis City Attorney Susan L. Segal was out of the office and did not immediately return a phone call seeking comment. Minneapolis spokesman Matt Laible and representatives of Ramsey County Attorney's office did not immediately respond to phone messages.

St. Paul Police spokesman Paul Schnell said that, as a rule, his department does not comment on pending litigation.

Anjana Samant, staff attorney with the Center for Constitutional Rights, said they decided to file the lawsuit because of what they considered indiscriminate, and possibly intentional arrests of journalists during the convention and the run-up to it. She said they fear the arrests could set a pattern for federal and local law enforcement agencies at future events.

Salazar was cited for felony riot, Kouddous was told he was facing a felony riot charge and Goodman was cited for interference with a peace officer and obstruction of the legal process. Kouddous and a Democracy Now! cameraman were also among a large number of journalists arrested Sept. 4, 2008, on the final night of the convention. Kouddous was cited then for unlawful assembly.

Authorities eventually dropped all charges against all arrested journalists, as well as many of the protesters and bystanders who were arrested. The only major case still pending is of a group of protesters who've dubbed themselves the RNC8, who are scheduled for trial in October.

On the Net:

- Democracy Now! website: <http://www.democracynow.org>

Copyright © 2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Map

