Madison, Wisconsin: State Violence Threatened—and Rebutted

written by Paul Buhle | February 27, 2011

A small and curious bulletin begins this note from the front lines: as of several hours ago, the head of the Wisconsin professional police association announced that its members would not eject demonstrators from the Capitol building, and suggested some would be spending the night with the demonstrators in order to protect them. This follows an announcement from the Governor's staff that by February 25, the building's upper floors would be cleared, all sleeping bags and blankets anywhere in the building removed, and as of 6:00pm, Saturday, February 26, the building as a whole would be cleared. Which is to say: by all means necessary, even if (as at present) up to 8,000 people of all varieties, Wisconsin citizens and others from as far away as Los Angeles, would need to be pushed out the doors. The sheriffs, left to their own devices, might do it. Against the opposition of the police: no, not likely. Young people and others not young have had the experience, here in Madison, within the last ten days of nonviolent demonstrations, hearing occasional rumors of an approaching violent crackdown but happily not (yet) seeing clubs fall on the heads of their friends, family members, neighbors, new-found comrades and themselves. It is a surreal experience, this good-natured mass gathering, and not likely to be forgotten with the passage of time. Some hundreds of us remember a different Madison scene from long ago: a police riot. Shooting and bombing no doubt make any such experience of peaceful protest a thousand times worse. And yet with mere clubs coming down, there is always a sense of violation, loss of control, a chaos organized from above, and with dark intent. The purpose of every such attack is not only to clear up some geographical area, return it to control, but to terrorize, humiliate and dehumanize. A glance at any on-sight police or public official in charge of "crowd control" reveals, I insist, the same amoral will to overpower by whatever means are to be allowed. I was, after all, close enough to see it happen, four decades ago and counting. The eyes of the man waving the club at me would have looked the same as his counterparts across the Middle East and beyond today. Violence here so far has been so totally nonexistent, with police actually congratulated the crowds, in public statements, for their good behavior. We wave back and exchange pleasantries, thousands of us each day, in response. Our mass demonstration day after day has more more notably peaceful, in the sense of any infraction, than the scene of the only scene that rivals it in numbers and zeal: any average UW home football game, with its crowds, omnipresent drunks and rowdiness. Nevertheless, rumors overnight, for several nights, hinted that orders would be given to drive hundreds of protesters from the capitol building at some point in the early AM. Uniformed firefighters from the around the state, steel workers and assorted others vowed themselves to stay overnight. Seminars in nonviolent protest have now been given to perhaps a thousand protesters. The police raid did not happen, again and again. On Wednesday, hated Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker warned that legislative chambers (a small part of the Capitol building) and "corridors" (that is, a very large part of the building) were going to be "protected" by which he meant "cleared" for "security reasons." As the Democrats in the Assembly stalled bills and the Democratic Senators stayed missing, not a single challenge took place. By the time of his 6:00pm press conference, thousands of demonstrators had again taken over the atrium of the building, and we climbed close enough on the stairs for a roar in the back of his press conference. Along with a characteristic New York Times report of the day that Wisconsin is "divided" over the issues at stake, these were worrisome signals for the possibility of the assault–and justification in advance for police violence as "maintaining order" of a troublesome minority that only happened to include teachers, social workers, senior citizens , the handicapped and parents with small children in their arms. It must be stressed that the great majority of the police at the Capitol, local and county in particular, continue to express all the body language of being on the side

of the strikers—at least so far. Sheriffs, brought in from around the state, along with police from distant districts, are noticeably less cheerful and friendly than their local counterparts and perhaps a little on edge. That old macho, the swaggering impulse to show those demonstrators who is in control, was not entirely absent. So far, however, they lack anything (apart from sidearms) in the category of weapons, specifically billy clubs. Probably they have gas canisters, but if push might come to shove, even in the most peaceful and nonviolent circumstances, 500 sheriffs without means to beat and brutalize a crowd would evidently be not only outnumbered but also outpushed. And they know it. There is no sign of weakening on either side. For that reason more than any other, the memories come back. Oldtime peaceniks and other radicals tend to stay in Madison or drift back, so I could imagine, within this throng, dozens of gray (or bald) heads that had been struck or not struck in the famed police riot on campus in October, 1967. At least I was there and I can think of a few others in the crowd of the last week who also sat in at the Commerce Building (since renamed), pledging to remain sitting, and non-violent, until the Dow Chemical Company job interviewers left the campus. There were among us former civil rights workers back from the South, and the familiar advice to remove earrings lest the police rip them out of ears (in those days, the warning applied only to females), but I can safely say that we considered the prospect of an armed attack very remote. Campus authorities could simply move the interviews off campus, for starters. Or ask to postpone them. Or (speaking of high university officials) even come to the crowd of 225 and carry on a dialogue with all of us about democracy on campus and the ways in which the Vietnam War had raised new questions of university complicity in what could only be described as mass murder (for the Dow company, mass profits, indeed patriotic profits). And then it came, an orgy of beating, dragging students through shattered glass doors, then the arousing of the campus at large in an unprecedented degree as news spread, and crowds of several thousand gathered. It had all seemed so small at first that we could almost glimpse at middle range the Chief Inspector, well known to stock John Birch Society pamphlets around his office. He was discussing the rapidly deteriorating situation with the campus security chief, and calls were evidently being made back and forth with the administrators. Then, as the crowd swelled, vastly outnumbering the police and stealing away their self-confidence, orders were given to use gas, tear gas and then Mace, at long and short range. Just as in Cairo, tear gas canisters fired at the crowd were picked up with jackets, and hurled back. Advance and retreat, advance and retreat. Finally, as reinforcements arrived, the crowd faded back into a different strategy: organizing a campus wide strike. That evening and the next, in 1967, offered the perfect opportunity to explore the situation tactically. When the crowd in the Capitol Rotunda today hurled the charge, “SHAME, SHAME!” at the governor and the Republican politicians supporting him, my mind went back to that corridor going out from the UW Memorial Union ,where our professors walked while leaving the faculty meeting in which they decided to keep the school open, no matter that they could have ended the confrontation and cooled tempers, furthermore pressing the administrators to do what college presidents only agreed to do in 1970, that is, call for an end to the War. Rumors passed swiftly and we knew our friends among the professors—as we knew the war hawks happy enough to send us off to die, and the moral cowards, thinking of their careers. ” SHAME, SHAME!” It was fitting send-off. Not even the liberal Capital Times, launched way back in 1917 to protest the equally unpopular (in Wisconsin, that is) First World War, could bring itself in 1967 to blame the police, the administration or the Dow company. Local conservatives roared in rage, the liberals barked softly, and the students, along with a minority of faculty members (some of them escapees from Fascist Europe) and townspeople who supported them. Eventually and after years more of controversy, the war wound down, a leading protester, Paul Soglin, was actually elected mayor for the first of several terms (the new voting rights of 18 year olds would be decisive), and the several worst of the leading police officials died or retired. By 1975, Madison was properly famed as a progressive, tolerant place where “protect and serve” became real, to a large extent, and those who did included far more women, minorities, and people educated for their jobs. The police themselves in general happier about it, too—although never quite so liberal as the Firefighters. The memories of 1967-73 would seem to put us a million miles from 2011 and the crowds of middle class

and middle aged workers, joined by blue collar trades, students and others by the thousands who remain in the Capitol as I write. The distance would be an illusion and pose a danger in forgetting. Locals and history bugs know that the official versions of police violence offered of 1967, most dramatically in Pulitzer Prize runner-up, "They Marched into Sunlight," by David Maraniss–son of a once-famed local liberal newspaperman–are as suspect as the final pages flattering UW graduate Dick Cheney (he chose to stay in school rather than going to Vietnam). The need to rewrite history, making a visiting San Francisco Mime Troupe more guilty than thuggish police commanders, too closely resembled the rewrites of current affairs by New York Times reporters and commentators. I call it ominous because this way lies the rationale for public violence, described as “keeping order.” So far, in 2011, the police themselves say "No."