

Posted on Wed, Dec. 17, 2003

FREE TRADE AREA OF THE AMERICAS

Groups air gripes about police actions

In a public forum, union members and activists complain of police harassment during the FTAA talks last month.

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A public hearing that attracted more than 150 union workers and activists critical of police action during last month's trade protests in Miami began with a photo montage: a line of officers in riot gear, clouds of pepper spray floating over marchers and a man whose arm had been bruised and bloodied by rubber bullets.

"I am ashamed of my city and how it treated working people," said Fred Frost, president of the South Florida AFL-CIO, addressing a packed conference room at the United Teachers of Dade headquarters on Tuesday night.

The forum, sponsored by the AFL-CIO and the Alliance for Retired Citizens, was designed as a public hearing to air the litany of complaints against the Miami Police Department and the other law enforcement agencies assembled to patrol the city during the Free Trade Area of the Americas talks in November.

The criticisms have largely centered on the events of Nov. 20, when two unpermitted marches resulted in hundreds of arrests and allegations from civil rights groups that the police used unnecessary force to disperse the crowd. Compounding their frustration, said labor leaders, was that busloads of union members and retirees trying to get to Bayfront Amphitheater were denied access to a rally and march -- despite assurances from city leaders that they would be admitted.

"We trained hundreds of union volunteers to serve as peacekeepers for our events. We paid thousands of dollars in extra security costs to meet police department requirements," said Richard Trumka, secretary-treasurer of the national AFL-CIO. "They kept raising the bar, and we kept meeting it. And they broke every promise they made to us."

Miami police spokesman Lt. Bill Schwartz dismissed the labor leader's allegations.

"Not true," he said, when told of Trumka's comments. "We went above and beyond to facilitate everyone's rights for freedom of speech. If anyone felt this was not true, they are not being honest with themselves or the public."

Schwartz said the actions taken throughout the trade protests were in the interest of public safety. City leaders have said the massive police presence, which included a coalition of more than three dozen law enforcement agencies, was in anticipation of a small group of agitators intent on causing trouble. Two citizens' panels and both Miami and Miami-Dade police are conducting reviews.

Speakers "testifying" at the forum -- which also featured a table to sign affidavits for future legal action -- allege a pattern of harassment and intimidation during the talks.

Trumka, who called for the resignation of Miami police Chief John Timoney, said he was searched by police while trying to enter a restaurant.

Others described retirees walking blocks, some with walkers or artificial legs, after police turned them away from a rally.