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Pro-abortion rights and LGBTQ+ protesters rally ahead of the start of the DNC



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UPDATED: August 18, 2024 at 10:43 p.m.

A crowd of hundreds called for abortion and LGBTQ+ rights Sunday evening in downtown Chicago, getting a head start on a week of protests before the Democratic National Convention kickoff Monday.

Starting with a rally on Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive by the Chicago River, with Trump Tower as a backdrop as the blazing sun set behind the Marina City Towers, demonstrators headed south to the Grant Park monument of Union Army Gen. John Logan, which protesters climbed in an iconic moment [during the DNC protests in August 1968](#).

After an acoustic sing-along by the crowd — “My body, my body/ My choice, my choice,” punctuated by a flute and ukulele — emcee and activist Scout Bratt took the mic to say, “Palestinian liberation is reproductive justice,” a nod to the common thread that ran through speeches and chants during the evening.

“And we reject any political compromises on bodily autonomy,” added Bratt, a spokesperson for Jewish Voice for Peace and a member of the social justice group Avodah. “Today, we are coming together on the eve of the Democratic National Convention to be sure that they don’t even begin ... without knowing our demands.”

The rally and march took place a week after the coalition [Bodies Outside of Unjust Laws](#) — endorsed by more than 30 local and national organizations — won a permit for a route on Michigan Avenue following [a long legal battle](#) with the city. The lawsuit continues in federal court with representation from the American Civil Liberties Union over the city’s [security perimeter](#) ordinance.

Other groups have also [had difficulties obtaining permits](#) in what they have called a slow and contentious approval process; [several have taken the city to court](#).

The Sunday gathering sought to demand that if Vice President Kamala Harris wins the presidency in November, she will commit to sweeping legislation for abortion access and transgender and LGBTQ+ health care, as well as an end to U.S. aid to Israel and a call for a cease-fire.

They hope national legislation will include no gestational bans or viability limits on abortion and a guaranteed minimum income so children can be raised “in a healthy, nurturing environment.” And as trans people continue being [targeted by the far right](#) — which the coalition sees as attacks on the bodily autonomy of all LGBTQ+ people — they also demand equal employment and housing rights enshrined in legislation.

Marching south on Michigan and waving Pride and Palestinian flags, protesters were flanked by Chicago police officers on bikes. Curious passersby on the busy street held their phones up to take photos and video, and tourists at the Bean in Millennium Park craned their necks to catch a glimpse of the growing group.

The coalition includes pro-Palestinian groups that emphasize the interconnectedness of human rights struggles in Gaza and at home; for instance, anti-war, women-led grassroots organization CODEPINK has said that discussions of reproductive justice within the Democratic Party must consider Israel’s war in Gaza.

“Reproductive genocide, my comrades and friends, is the eradication and destruction of life-giving and life-sustaining resources such as food, such as water, such as medicine, such as medical care,” said Chicago organizer and community leader Leena Odeh of the Palestinian Feminist Collective.

According to [reports from the United Nations](#), miscarriages in the region have increased by 300%, and a shortage of medical supplies means that women are giving birth without pain relief and children are dying without incubators. The largest fertility clinic in the region has been destroyed by Israeli forces, newborn babies face malnutrition and have no access to clean water, and 690,000 women and girls have no access to menstrual hygiene products.

Protesters also decried the state of abortion access across the United States and in Illinois, which is considered [a refuge in the Midwest](#) in the aftermath of the 2022 Supreme Court case of Dobbs v. Jackson, which overturned Roe v. Wade.

“There were not enough abortion clinics in Chicago and Illinois to meet local needs before Dobbs, and there has not been any meaningful expansion of abortion care since then,” said Elena Gormley, a social worker and the co-chair of the Chicago Democratic Socialists of America. “Local abortion funds are stretched too thin due to out-of-state demand ... If this is what’s happening in a ‘safe blue state’ — what’s happening everywhere else? What’s happening in Missouri, in Mississippi, in Indiana? We deserve more.”

At one point during the march, three women approached the demonstrators from the side, wearing shirts and holding signs for the Progressive Anti-Abortion Uprising movement. They called abortion a form of violence and oppression and engaged in a few verbal exchanges with the protesters.

There was a more tense, but short-lived verbal confrontation between protesters and police along the route, but protest marshals and members of the National Lawyers Guild Chicago used their bikes to create additional barriers and diffuse the moment.

On more than one occasion, speakers forcefully reminded Harris she has to earn their vote. They also repeatedly called out Democratic leaders for what they see as a disconnect between promises and policies enacted at home and abroad.

“We are at a pivotal moment of recognizing and raising consciousness about all the ways in which the Democratic Party and its brutal policies violently suppress working-class organization and liberation movements. The main line of the Harris candidacy is to vote for them or face fascism, when in fact, the two parties are two sides of the same coin,” said Sultana Hossain, an Amazon labor union activist and co-facilitator for NYC Labor for Palestine.

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Nadine Naber, professor of gender and women’s studies at the University of Illinois Chicago and co-founder of Mamas Activating Movements for Abolition and Solidarity, said, “We are here to fight for our bodies and our hearts. And I believe that any movement guided by radical, collective love is like fire.”

The moonlit evening ended under the watchful eye of General Logan as the group sang another tune, this time including a banjo and maracas.

Editor’s note: Earlier versions of this story misstated a word in a quote by Sultana Hossain, an Amazon labor union activist and co-facilitator for NYC Labor for Palestine. She said: “We are at a pivotal moment of recognizing and raising consciousness about all the ways in which the Democratic Party and its brutal policies violently suppress working-class organization and liberation movements.”

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Originally Published: August 18, 2024 at 7:23 p.m.

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