

NEWS



Trump and DeSantis speeches draw fresh protests to Moms for Liberty's Philly summit

The day, with speeches from former President Donald Trump and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, offered contentious moments between the group's members and detractors.



Demonstrators gather Friday along 12th and Market Streets in Center City to protest against Moms for Liberty outside their national convention.

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by Oona Goodin-Smith, Ximena Conde, Punya Bhasin, Maddie Hanna, and Jeremy Roebuck

Published Jun. 30, 2023, 1:18 p.m. ET

Updated 7:32 p.m. ET

With a [field of GOP presidential hopefuls addressing them](#) Friday, members of the controversial, self-described parental rights group Moms for Liberty vowed not to be deterred by protests that have dogged them since the beginning of their annual conference in Philadelphia.

But [for a second day](#), demonstrators amassed outside to heckle attendees, organize banned-book giveaways, and wave signs with slogans like “Moms for Bigotry” and “Stop the Hate.”

“I fought to defend against this,” said Hanoch Fields, a rabbi and retired U.S. Army colonel and chaplain, who joined a crowd of about 60 demonstrators Friday morning across the street from the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown, where the conference was taking place. “There’s free speech, and then there’s a lot of what this group is espousing.”

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Travis Culver, 50, of Berwick, member of Defense of Democracy, protests his wife, Kristina Culver, 48, outside the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown near 12th and Market Streets in Center City. ... [Read more](#)
Tyger Williams / Staff Photographer

The demonstrations — though smaller Friday than the group that greeted summit-goers at a welcome reception a day earlier at the Museum of the American Revolution — were no less energized.

A decidedly older crowd of faith leaders, elected officials, suburban parents, and grandparents — some traveling from hours away — gathered outside conference sites across Center City and said they felt compelled to turn up to push back against Moms for Liberty’s contentious agenda of [opposing diversity education and sensitivity to LGBTQ issues in schools](#).

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As former President Donald Trump arrived at the Marriott for his speech Friday afternoon, he was greeted by dozens chanting “Lock him up.” Some booed, while others held up their middle fingers. A lone bugler played “Taps” as Trump’s motorcade entered the hotel’s parking garage.

“I wanted to remind him what he is,” said Tim Smith, 38, of Gettysburg. He held

a blue sign emblazoned with a single word: “Loser.”

Inside the conference hall, attendees and featured speakers — who in addition to Trump included other 2024 GOP presidential primary contenders [like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley](#) — appeared to draw energy from the hostility they encountered outside.

“I see Moms for Liberty is coming under attack by the left, attack by the corporate media, protests out here in the streets,” DeSantis said in [a speech Friday morning](#). “That is a sign that we are winning.”

» **READ MORE:** [DeSantis, Nikki Haley make their 2024 pitch at the Moms for Liberty convention in Philadelphia](#)

Ryan Walters, superintendent of public instruction for the state of Oklahoma, likened Moms for Liberty to the nation's founders.

“You know who else was called a terrorist group, an extremist group? The Founding Fathers,” he said. “This is the most important conference in Philadelphia to happen since 1776.”

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Founded in Florida in 2021 amid protests over COVID-19 pandemic school closures, Moms for Liberty has since emerged as a leading force in training and recruiting conservative candidates for school boards across the country. The group says it has 285 chapters in 45 states — including in the Philadelphia region.

But the Southern Poverty Law Center earlier this year [designated the organization an “antigovernment extremist” group](#) trafficking in conspiracies and propaganda, citing the group's efforts to ban books from school libraries and its opposition to diversity and inclusion in classroom curriculum.

The organization's national conference, playing out this year in heavily Democratic Philadelphia, is expected to draw 650 attendees and is set to run through Sunday with protesters planning rallies and daily "all-day dance party protests."

Addressing the convention Friday, organization cofounder Tiffany Justice likened what she described as indoctrination efforts from the group's critics to those deployed by Mao Tse-tung, Adolf Hitler, and terrorists. She said they'd be sending information about death threats they received to the FBI.

Protesters remained undaunted.

State Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta (D., Philadelphia) delayed a trip to Harrisburg to join demonstrators waving LGBTQ Pride flags and chanting "get out of our city" on the sidewalk across the street from the Marriott as DeSantis addressed the

breakfast crowd.

“Their ideas aren’t new,” Kenyatta said. “These ideas have lost before, and they’re going to lose again.”

Others, like 63-year-old high school librarian Martha Hickson, said they were drawn by Moms for Liberty’s efforts to ban books that the organization has deemed pornographic. Critics have noted that books featuring LGBTQ themes and characters of color have been disproportionately singled out by the organization’s efforts.

Hickson, who made the 90-minute trip from Hunterdon County, N.J., said her school district had beat back [a book banning effort last year](#) from parents who’d called her a “pornographer” and “pedophile.”

Though the effort — which targeted books by LGBTQ authors like Jonathan Evison and Juno Dawson — ultimately failed, Hickson said she feared similar pushes would continue as groups like Moms for Liberty become more effective in organizing.

“Each one of those books fills a need,” she said. “To erase the book is to erase the person.”

Several parents of children attending schools in Central Bucks School District — which [was the target of book banning efforts from groups affiliated with Moms for Liberty earlier this year](#) — gathered outside the Central Library of the Free Library of Philadelphia on the Parkway for a midday rally.

Anusha Viswanathan, mother of a kindergartner in the district, balked at Moms for Liberty’s characterization of itself as a parental rights organization, saying it stood instead for only “some moms [and] their comfort and liberty.”

“How is it that you are going to ban books with certain words, when I was called

those very same words, walking down the halls of school,” Viswanathan said.

But despite the pushback outside its venues, the Moms for Liberty conference and its guest list of high-wattage speakers proceeded largely undisturbed with little contact between attendees and protesters.

In between Friday’s speeches, [they attended “strategy sessions”](#) with titles like “Dark Money’s Infiltration in Education” with tips on stopping outside groups from “bringing radical content into our schools” and “Comprehensive Sex Education: From Sex Ed to Sexualization,” which organizers said would walk attendees “step by horrible step” through school sex-ed standards.

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Conference-goers have largely been shielded from the protests by police. Summit attendees were shuttled into Thursday’s event at the Museum of the American Revolution by charter bus and protected by barricades.

Still, some contact between the group’s members and their detractors was inevitable.

A group associated with the pro-LGBTQ Agenda PAC infiltrated the Marriott,

booking hotel rooms so they could place door-hangers on each guest room, declaring: “Please Disturb: Fascism in Progress.”

Outside, Susan Hunter, 63, who introduced herself as a Christian mother, shouted at demonstrators saying she was “fed up” with “Pride stuff being shoved down everyone’s throats.” She hoped, she said, that Moms for Liberty could help restore Christian ideals to public school classrooms.

And as Trump departed, protesters followed, booing and shouting at those leaving the convention. Escorted by police, some conference-goers shouted back. One group of attendees followed by protesters waved American flags as a woman told the boisterous group to “grow up.”

Earlier in the day, James Calkins stood back from the hotel to marvel at the scene.

Mingling among the protesters in a “Trump 2024” hat and with his two children by his side, the husband of a Moms for Liberty chapter president from Santa Rosa County, Fla., was peppered with questions from the crowd.

What would he do if his children came out as gay? Did he know he was not welcome in Philadelphia?

Calkins took the badgering in stride.

“This is their freedom of speech,” he said. “I may not agree with what they’re saying, but I respect them. ... I love debate.”

Staff writer Julia Terruso contributed to this article.

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