

The Fight Against Cop City

By Amna A. Akbar (Dissent Magazine)

Release Date: 20 May 2023

On Saturday, March 4, I arrived at Intrenchment Creek Park in DeKalb County, Georgia, for the first day of a week of action against a \$90 million construction project undertaken by the Atlanta Police Foundation — a private entity, backed by local CEOs and political leaders, that advances police interests. The foundation wants to raze eighty-five acres of public forest to build the largest police training facility in the United States, complete with a firing range, a burn building, and a “kill house” designed to mimic urban combat scenarios.

It also argues that the facility will boost morale among officers. The size and scale of the project, and the destruction and deforestation it will require, have led a growing number of activists, organisers, and community members to object to what they call “Cop City.” The campaign against Cop City is simultaneously a campaign to defend the Weelaunee Forest, the name used for the area by the Muscogee Creek people forcibly displaced by settlers from the land in the early 1800s before it became the site of the notorious Atlanta Prison Farm. These elements of the campaign — the histories on which it draws, what it’s fighting against and for, who it is bringing together, and how—have given it tremendous staying power despite extraordinary odds.

Locals often describe Atlanta as “a city in a forest,” with trees and a tree canopy covering almost half of the land. The ecosystem depends on this foliage, and activists say that the deforestation required to build the facility will harm air quality, hasten climate change, and contribute to flooding in predominantly poor and working class Black and brown communities. The proposed development will further distance residents from accessible green space while bringing toxic waste closer.

But the project will do more than fracture the largest green space in Atlanta. The activists fighting against Cop City argue that police violence itself constitutes an environmental hazard, and that toxic chemicals associated with explosives that could be used on the site will destroy the air, water, and land on which myriad forms of life depend.

The week of action I attended was organised in remembrance of Tortuguita, or Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, the twenty-six-year-old non-binary forest defender killed by Georgia State Patrol on January 18. Activists I met affectionately abbreviated their name to “Tort.”

While police originally claimed self-defence, body-camera footage and two different autopsies show police shot Terán thirteen or fourteen times and suggest they were sitting cross-legged with both hands up when the police fired.

Terán is the first environmental activist killed by police in recent U.S. history. Their death is part of an intensifying campaign of repression waged against protesters fighting environmentally destructive developments across the country, most famously the Standing Rock encampment against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). The recent protests, however, come at a time of greater popular recognition of the

climate crisis — and the seeming futility of turning to elected officials to take climate action against the same corporations that fuel their campaigns and structure the economy.

In Atlanta, there have been three waves of arrests and at least as many forest raids since December (2022). Sixty-eight (68) people are facing variations on common charges brought against protesters — disorderly conduct, criminal trespass and assault, and obstruction of governmental administration. But forty-two (42) among them face domestic terrorism charges, which carry a mandatory minimum of five years of incarceration and a maximum of thirty-five.

The thin affidavits suggest the basis of the charges are affiliation with Defend the Atlanta Forest, “a group classified by the United States Department of Homeland Security as Domestic Violent Extremists.” (A DHS official told the Washington Post it never made such a classification.) Those who have been released on bond are prohibited from having contact with their co-defendants or with Defend the Atlanta Forest.

Multiple activists have insisted, however, that Defend the Atlanta Forest is not an organisation at all: instead, it is a demand, a social media account, and a shorthand reference for a loosely affiliated group of autonomous individuals, protecting the land against encroachment and seemingly motivated by anarchist principles. This insistence is about their political commitments as much as it is a rejection of the state’s theory of criminalisation.

In June 2021, one year after the George Floyd uprisings and the Atlanta Police Department’s murder of Rayshard Brooks, Joyce Sheperd, then a city council member, introduced an ordinance to lease over 350 acres of public forest land to the Atlanta Police Foundation at the subsidised rate of \$10 per year for up to fifty years. The council attempted to rush the ordinance through the legislative process without any public input.

But thanks to a campaign by the Black-led membership organisation Community Movement Builders to slow down the project, over 1,100 people provided the council with public comments — with 70 percent opposed to the development. While opposition came from across Atlanta, support for Cop City came from police, firefighters, and wealthy enclaves. The council approved the project anyway by a 10–4 vote in September 2022.

The project rests on a private-public partnership, with the foundation aiming to privately finance \$60 million of the facility’s costs and the city covering the remaining \$30 million. Coca-Cola, Chick-fil-A, and Norfolk Southern (the train company responsible for the recent disaster in East Palestine, Ohio) have all donated to the foundation’s fundraising campaign, while executives from Delta, Waffle House, and Home Depot are on the board.

The Stop Cop City campaign emerged out of an ad hoc formation to defund the Atlanta Police called Defund APD, Refund Communities (DARC), working alongside Community Movement Builders and the Atlanta DSA. Activists credit the campaign’s longevity to the involvement of a range of organisations and individuals, with varied

political commitments and comfort with different tactics and strategies — what they have called “multiple grammars of struggle.” While there is undoubtedly disagreement within these formations, there is a shared sense of purpose to defend the land and oppose the development.

Some groups have done this through protest and pressure on the city council, while others have filed legal challenges. A number of activists moved into the forest, camping out to blockade the construction. Some have gone a step further and sabotaged equipment, targeting the private companies on which the project depends.

Last spring, in an open and anonymous letter to Reeves Young, a local construction company, activists explained the strategy behind the sabotage: “we will undermine your profits so severely that you’ll have no choice but to drop the contract.” Reeves Young has since backed out.

Then, this March, a group of Muscogee Creek people traveled to Atlanta and disrupted a municipal commission to deliver an “eviction notice” to Mayor Andre Dickens, the city, the police, and the police foundation. The letter demands that they “immediately vacate” Muscogee homelands and “cease violence and policing of Indigenous and Black people.”

This article is an abridged version of a much longer article syndicated from Dissent Magazine (URL: <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-fight-against-cop-city>), and was originally published on 10 May 2023 as part of their Spring 2023 edition.