

find each other.



A Frontliner's Recollection of the George Floyd Uprising in Nebraska

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The following narrative was written by request and sent to Irruptions from someone who experienced the demonstrations in Lincoln in late May and early June. While we were finalizing the edits for this blog-post, Omaha Police murdered Kenny Jones, a 35 year old Black man. It is difficult to find the right words to express the mixture of grief and anger that we and many in the Omaha and Lincoln communities are feeling. However, it is certain that this anti-Black violence cannot persist. We must stand in solidarity to put an end to the institutions that continue to murder Black people. It is our hope that this piece helps us to consider how to defend our communities from state violence. We feel deeply the sentiment expressed at the end of the text: “We have each others’ backs. We’re still here.”

On Monday May 25th, George Floyd was murdered by the state. The next day, the streets of Minneapolis filled with people, rising up against what they knew to be a reprehensible system. The talking heads on cable news and Twitter wasted no time making comparisons to the Ferguson uprisings years earlier, and even the Rodney King riots. In the immediacy of the moment, it seemed like the reaction to this crime would stay localized. Then, the 3rd precinct was razed to the ground, and it was as though the whole world changed. Although the rebels in the streets faced a nigh endless assault of tear gas, beatings, and arrests, their will remained strong. Protests spread from city to city, but I wrote off my own town as one that would

not stand up to fight. After all, for years this city seemed to be falsely insulated from overt conflict. I was wrong. On Saturday, May 30th, Lincoln, Nebraska, woke up to the news that the rebellion had travelled across the plains and somehow ended up on 27th and O Street. A small skirmish between demonstrators and police erupted late the previous night, and it was like waking to a cold shock. It was the beginning of a story that is hopefully still being written.

The uprisings, which began as a response to George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis Police this summer, has been the subject of countless analyses, op-eds, and personal narrative pieces that seek to situate the events within the history of proletarian struggle. My aim here is to reflect on the significance of the uprising specifically in the city that I live and in the people I share a community with: the working people of Lincoln, Nebraska. This piece is meant to examine the surprising turn of events in Lincoln from my vantage point as a blue collar worker turned frontliner, the unsurprising pattern into which the movement settled, and where I see multi-racial coalitions of the working-class seizing their place in movements in Lincoln in the future. image

“We’re marching until they hear us. And they haven’t heard shit.”

That Saturday, it seemed as if the day-to-day worries of those in Lincoln faded into the background. Everyone had been watching the protests unfold in other places, and now that they

close to the mass movement we saw in May and June, it will happen again. The bruises on our bodies may have gone away, but I hope their memory never does. I’m not the only individual who has realized the effect working people can have on this city, and it’s only a matter of time until we find each other again.

Next time, we must not allow ourselves to be silenced. Not by the cops, not by the city, and not by pacifiers and clout chasers, speaking through microphones. Our comrades all over the world and throughout history have done this very thing. We can look to those examples as inspiration. We can look to Chiapas in 1994, Tahrir square in 2011, and Hong Kong, Chile, Nigeria, Belarus, and Minneapolis in 2020.

If Lincoln’s streets are filled again two weeks, two months, or even a year from now, I am confident the fabric of this city will change. We know that we can organize and support ourselves directly and autonomously; we have done it. Let’s keep the memory of these events close. Let’s refuse the gatekeepers in charity and government. Let’s find each other again. We have each others’ backs. We’re still here.

of the State Troopers knelt with the crowd, and we all went home afterward, the police would refrain from violence.

That is exactly what happened. We let ourselves be represented by a few. Unsurprisingly, our new representatives gave in to the wishes of the city, accepting shallow symbols of support in exchange for the public perception that Lincoln was somehow above the unrest that continued in the rest of the country. The city talked the next morning not of the courage of its people but the courage of those troopers who kneeled. It was the perfect democratic resolution to the protests, the police and politicians heard us, and nothing had to change. The police did not beat us that night, but they did defeat us.

The people left.

As soon as organizers began to treat our oppressors in the police and city government as collaborators, the faces I saw those first few nights started to be replaced by the very people whose strategic passivity and complicity we had attempted to upend in the beginning. Our protest had been gentrified. Graffiti was replaced by nicely printed signs, and the people were displaced by middle-class liberals who needed the aesthetics of resistance to re-legitimize their facile politics.

We'll meet again.

I continue to be hopeful. Even though each demonstration I have attended since this summer has failed to achieve anything

were here, no one knew what would happen next. Like many others, I drove downtown in the late afternoon to see if anything was happening. Without a call to action on Facebook, a flyer, or even texts from friends, the people found each other on the streets of downtown Lincoln. All one had to do was follow the mass of kids on skateboards, couples holding hands, and angry individuals with signs.

By the time I arrived, the crowd had started marching. There was no route. There was no one with a megaphone leading the charge. The crowd simply marched to where they would be seen, to where the status quo had been upended the night before. The people at the back of the march may have assumed that some of us at the front had a plan, but there was no plan. We were there to make undeniable the existence of an oppressive, racist system to disturb the comfort of the Midwesterners hiding behind white picket fences and Nebraskan niceties. Walking up O Street, passing by the EZ Go (with its smashed-out windows) the police helicopters and news cameras followed us as we continued past the intersection on 27th Street.

After what seemed an eternity of walking against weekend traffic, with the noise of chants, the honking of horns, and terrified white stares glaring through the windshields of their Dodge Caravans, I turned to the young man next to me and asked “Where the hell are we marching to?”

He made no pause in response: “We’re marching until they hear us. And they haven’t heard shit.”

The power that I felt in the crowd on that day is unmatched by any moment I can recollect in my recent life.

As we began our return march to the capitol, our reinforcements arrived. They seemed to come from all over, coming out of the night like the stars appearing in the sky.

I noticed the diversity in the crowd. We were a multi-racial crowd, undeniably, but the composition of demonstrators was also a mixed bag of sub-cultures, professions, and stages of life. There were skater kids, teenagers of every stripe, liberal activists, blue collar workers, parents in their 60's, mid-20s hipsters, and leftists. The mood was angry, but there was hope in our solidarity.

I sat to take a breather on the capitol steps next to some high schoolers. People kept pouring onto Centennial Mall, and those of us on the steps watched as a group burned the American flag. No one told them to stop; it seemed appropriate. There was a speaker blasting "King Kunta" by Kendrick Lamar, and I shouted along with everyone around me. Looking down amongst the crowd, you could see small groups gathered throughout the plaza in front of different speakers, each with their own thing to say. I heard lots of "Fuck 12" and "All Cops Are Bastards" chants along with the Black Lives Matter chants and calls to say George's name. We understood that we were confronting an enemy. After some time at the capitol, the crowd grew restless, and we stood to leave.

We knew it wasn't over, and there was no dawdling parent there to tell us to go home, no organizer to say that our piece had been spoken.

Power was consolidated by a few.

Over the next week, power was slowly re-distributed from the crowd itself to just a few individuals.

After the events of Saturday and the intense police violence on Sunday, we found each other once again congregated outside the courthouse on Monday. This time though, there were people from the front telling us how we should feel and how we should act. The mood was still hopeful, but there was disagreement amongst the crowd. Several individuals were now recognized as leaders of the movement, though it didn't seem like we had ever asked to be led. Some of those leaders instructed the crowd that they didn't want anyone to stay out past curfew that night. The Mayor herself was allowed to speak and urged us all to abide by the curfew, otherwise she couldn't guarantee our safety.

At this point, individuals in the crowd still had some agency. Person after person stood up and said that giving in at this moment and playing on the city's terms would be the death of anything meaningful to come from this uprising. So, we decided to march past curfew, but in a compromise: We followed the leaders who had just told us to go home.

They led us to the capitol steps. For some reason, we agreed to wait. We were waiting for the same thing that had happened the last two nights to happen again. After all, why wouldn't it? Nothing had changed in Nebraska's police departments. No structures had been dismantled. But that night, our leaders negotiated. They said that if the supervisor

I could get to her, three others were already helping her find treatment.

This was the police that I knew. This was the violence that BIPoC and working-class people have experienced in their communities in Lincoln for years. It was only now that the world seemed to care.

We discovered our power.

The vast system of oppression that exists around us had been confronted those nights in a way that was impossible to ignore. It had been confronted by teenagers, single moms, and people who would have never called themselves activists. We discovered the power to act in the solidarity that had been hidden from us. We felt it return to us when we stood together, when we confronted the enemies of our community, when we took care of each other's needs, and when we literally fought back against the ones who continue to oppress us.

This is the reason why I would keep going out into the streets night after night, even when the shooting stopped. I didn't go because I supported a particular organization or politician, or because I thought all this could simply get fixed with a ballot, I went out because we had discovered we could get there directly without any intermediaries. I wasn't alone in this.

Blood was spilled.

The crowd gathered together and advanced into the street. In the middle of O Street again, I saw friends who lived downtown, who couldn't help but be drawn to see what was going on. They came with us as we marched. No one spoke it, but we all knew where we were going. The helicopters followed us as we marched toward the Justice Center.

We were greeted by the LSO and LPD, literally smiling in their riot gear. We walked slowly up to them and stopped at the steps. We then did what we had been doing all night. Those of us in front knelt down and put our hands up. We spoke the opposite of what was about to happen - "Hands up! Don't shoot!"

For this our blood was spilled.

The first of many volleys of tear gas began, bean bag rounds were fired, and flash bangs erupted into the night. This caused many of us to retreat. Most people there hadn't experienced this before. Yet, as happens anywhere this takes place, it only emboldened the crowd. This violence confirmed in the open what we all knew, that the people are not allowed to speak outside the particular spaces given to us. So, we decided we were going to take the space without regard for the assent of the powerful.

We caused a disturbance.

I saw people on the streets that night deploying a diversity of tactics. Some continued to kneel while taking abuse at point blank range; some watched from across the street; others

threw fireworks and gas canisters back at the cops. I could hear the sound of windows breaking behind us and see the flickers of light from small fires being started. My wife called me from the middle of town and told me she could hear the flash bangs miles away. The facade of normalcy in this small midwestern town was being dismantled.

We would be told later that the people lighting fireworks, smashing windows, and spray painting were somehow outsiders, or even worse - infiltrators. But those of us who were there know that everyone felt the same mixture of rage and hope, and those acting directly were simply the ones making those feelings concrete. image

The next day, Lincoln was a different city. A curfew was issued, but the presence of the local police, the state police, and the national guard brought more of us out. No one would be dissuaded by calls to abide by the law, because the law had long ago lost its façade of legitimacy to people of color, poor people, and everyone else it never defended.

As a crowd gathered Sunday night, the first attempt at negotiating with the state was initiated by individuals at the front of the crowd. The first issue with this was that not only did none of us need someone to do this for us, the police, of course, lied to our faces. We were told that if we stayed away from the symbols of power - the capitol and the courthouse - no force would be levied against us.

However, the police met us that night wherever we went. The sun went down, and the paranoia around us went up. There was talk of undercover cops and an order by the governor to use live rounds - and it didn't seem out of the realm of

possibility. As we walked through the Everett neighborhood, people were running up to the front of the crowd, pleading for us to turn toward the justice center. They said that other protestors were being attacked there, and it wasn't until we saw videos that we marched to meet them there.

Before we could get far, what looked like a battalion of militarized police met us, equipped with their very own tank. As we approached, people passed word through the crowd about what was about to happen: "Know what you're about to get into. If you don't want to be a part of this, leave." It could've just been my perspective in the dark, but I didn't see one person leave the group.

When we came to the intersection on 11th & H, we did what we had done the night before. We sat down with our hands up. The rows of police from their different departments and agencies fired on us from point blank range. Most of us got up and ran. This time though, it didn't seem like many people left. We had only been forced into a retreat. For the next several hours, small groups of protestors continuously regrouped and confronted the cops. All over that neighborhood, the people came outside to watch, some even joined us.

As the night went on, I watched as person after person was treated by street medics for wounds from rubber bullets, bean bag rounds, & tear gas. I knelt to check my leg for the bruise left by an impact round. It hurt like hell. My eyes stung from tear gas, and I found it hard to breathe. On 11th Street, a woman ran by me with her nose bleeding, nearly torn off by a bean bag round shot directly into her face. I didn't know her, but before