

From Ferguson to Oakland

17 Days of Riots and Revolt in the Bay Area

CrimethInc.

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A wild and growing anti-police revolt is in full swing across the Bay Area. It is a node in the growing national movement sparked by the insurrection in Ferguson following the police execution of Michael Brown, and at the same time it is a continuation of local struggles dating back at least to the 2009 Oscar Grant riots in Oakland. Some of us who have participated in events in the Bay over the past two and half weeks urgently desire to communicate to others around the world about what is unfolding here. Our aim is not to claim bragging rights or to establish Oakland as the riot capital of the United States. On the contrary, it is necessary to spread word of the unprecedented nature of these events precisely because it suddenly seems more possible than ever before that revolt against white supremacy and the police could spread beyond the usual spaces of protest.

In order to illustrate the magnitude of what has unfolded since a grand jury announced it would not indict Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown, we must make one point clear: we are losing track of how many highways have been blockaded, which stores have been looted, which intersections have seen the fiercest fighting with police. All of this has been unfolding on a nightly basis for over two weeks. Roughly 600 people have been arrested. Many of the main business districts across the East Bay are boarded up. It has become routine to hear police and news helicopters tracking the latest riot each night. Militarized police forces from across northern California are now regularly being deployed in our streets. Oakland, Berkeley, San Francisco, and Emeryville have all experienced riots and looting.

Many of us have been through various movements and small-scale revolts in Oakland and the Bay Area over the past decade or more. Yet this is something different. While the numbers taking the streets on any given night are not massive—usually in the range of 500 to 1500—the consistency and level of intensity that this insurrectionary wave has unleashed have not been seen here in decades. All this is unfolding outside the control of any organization or political clique. At this point, there are barely even specific call outs for marches or meet ups: crowds of neighbors, students, activists, and militants are now gathering each night on their own chaotic initiative. An informal alliance of graffiti crews, groups of friends composed primarily of young Black and Brown rebels, and clusters of anarchists of various stripes and backgrounds has emerged to create the most vibrant and combative tendencies within the uprising. Those who show up with suggestions as to where the energy of the crowd might best be applied are given a hearing, and sometimes their proposals are carried out. Those who attempt to calm and manage the situation are ignored, and often attacked if they attempt to impede others' actions.

The initial wave of rioting, marches, and blockades in Oakland during the week of November 24 was just the beginning. There followed multiple blockades of the 880 and 980 freeways, numerous die-ins blocking roadways, and shutdowns of the West Oakland BART station—and then the riots began in earnest. Here is a rough timeline of the events of the past two and a half weeks, followed by our initial reflections.

Revolt against Police in the Bay Area: November 24 - December 10, 2014

November 24: A grand jury in Ferguson refuses to indict officer Darren Wilson for the shooting of Michael Brown. Ferguson burns. Over 2500 meet in downtown Oakland and proceed to block the 580 highway for hours. Then the crowd marches back downtown to the police station, where clashes erupt on Broadway. Participants erect burning barricades and loot several corporate stores, including a Starbucks and Smart and Final grocery store. Dozens are arrested.

November 25: A small crowd takes over highway 880 in Oakland. A larger crowd blocks highway 580 later in the night, and nearly 100 are arrested. The remaining crowd creates massive burning barricades across Telegraph to hold back police. A series of corporate stores are looted in North Oakland and gentrifying businesses are smashed. Another mass arrest occurs near Emeryville at the end of the night.

November 26: A destructive march plays cat and mouse with Oakland police in downtown and West Oakland for hours before being dispersed by police. Multiple businesses in downtown are damaged and more are arrested.

November 28: A coordinated civil disobedience action at the West Oakland BART station shuts down all service in and out of San Francisco for over two hours. That night, in San Francisco, nearly 1000 protesters lay siege to the shopping district of Union Square during Black Friday, clashing with police and damaging fancy stores. They march into the Mission district, where stores are looted and banks are smashed. The night ends in a mass arrest of the dwindling crowd.

December 3: A New York grand jury fails to indict any officers in the choking death of Eric Garner. Crowds block Market Street in San Francisco. In Oakland, a march weaves through downtown; riot police prevent it from reaching OPD headquarters. Instead, participants march through the wealthy Piedmont neighborhood.

December 4: Another march weaves through Downtown Oakland, eventually heading east towards the Fruitvale district, where there is a showdown with Oakland police and a mass arrest. In San Francisco, a die-in blocks Market Street for a second night.

December 5: Hundreds march through downtown Oakland, holding a noise demo in front of the jail to support those arrested during the revolt. The crowd moves on to take over the 880 freeway before being pushed off by police. Next, the march surrounds the West Oakland BART station and destroys the gates protecting the riot police inside. The station is shut down for an hour before the march moves back downtown, where property destruction, clashes with police, and arrests occur.

December 6: A march originating near UC Berkeley campus eventually clashes with Berkeley police near their headquarters and proceeds to loot multiple stores, including a Trader Joe's and Radio Shack. The crowds grow as many students take to the streets. In response, police departments from across the region pour into central Berkeley, firing dozens of rounds of tear gas and physically attacking demonstrators and bystanders, inflicting serious injuries.

December 7: On Sunday night, another march starts in Berkeley and moves into North Oakland, clashing with police, destroying multiple California Highway Patrol (CHP) cruisers, and taking over Highway 24. CHP officers use tear gas and rubber bullets to push back the crowd. People respond with rocks and fireworks, then march back into downtown Berkeley, destroying bank façades and ATMs. They attack cell phone and electronics stores, culminating with the looting of Whole Foods. The night ends with hundreds of people gathering around bonfires in the middle of Telegraph, popping bottles of expropriated Prosecco. Police are afraid to engage the crowd, but some participants are snatched in targeted arrests.

December 8: The third march from Berkeley is by far the largest. Over 2000 people take over Interstate 80, stopping all traffic for two hours, while another segment of the demonstration blocks the train tracks parallel to the freeway. The crowd attempts to march on the Bay Bridge but is pushed back into Emeryville where over 250 people are mass arrested.

December 9: The fourth march from Berkeley sets out once again down Telegraph Avenue into Oakland and shuts down another section of Highway 24 and the MacArthur BART station. Increasingly violent clashes ensue with CHP officers in full riot gear, who open fire with rubber bullets and beanbag rounds, causing numerous injuries and ultimately pushing the crowd off the freeway. The march then looped through downtown Oakland and made its way into Emeryville, where a Pak N Save grocery store was looted along with a CVS pharmacy and a 7 Eleven. The night ended with another round of arrests, scattering the crowd.

December 10: Hundreds of Berkeley High School students stage a walkout and rally at city hall. A smaller fifth march from Berkeley makes its way into Oakland where a T-Mobile store is looted and other corporate stores are attacked. People point out and attack undercover CHP officers in the crowd, who pull guns on the crowd as they make an arrest.

The rhythm of unrest has changed tempo repeatedly over these twenty days, but shows no signs of quieting. Revolt has shifted fluidly between various forms of resistance—from relatively calm marches to mass highway blockades, intense street fighting, and targeted expropriation. This has kept the movement resilient and capable of bringing in a diverse range of new participants day after day, even when there are sharp disagreements over which tactics are appropriate and little consensus over what direction the movement should take.

It is difficult to anticipate what will happen next. No one predicted that this revolt would be sustaining this level of intensity more than two weeks after people first gathered at 14th and Broadway while Ferguson burned. At this point, it appears likely that the momentum will continue in some form until at least the week of Christmas.

The long-term repercussions are unclear. At the very least, it seems that the reactionary period of social decomposition that followed the high points of struggle here in the Bay during 2011 and early 2012 is over, and something new and even more ferocious is taking shape. We can also tentatively conclude that the tactic of blockading major infrastructure, including highways, has spread beyond the high water mark previously set by the port blockades of the Occupy movement. There have been at least ten highway blockades in the East Bay alone over the past couple weeks; such blockading is now considered a favorable tactic even by those who identify as “peaceful protesters.”

Meanwhile, the consistent pace of combative demonstrations that traverse municipal boundaries is pushing local law enforcement infrastructure to its limits. Police units are increasingly reluctant to engage with the crowds; officers who find themselves locked in street fights are retreating more frequently. Media reports suggest that the first two weeks of protests have cost Oakland \$1.36 million in overtime alone.

Of course, the unrelenting pace of events is also straining the anti-repression infrastructure that has become such a vital sustaining force for rebellious movements here in the Bay. This infrastructure is one of the lasting local manifestations of Occupy Oakland; it has roots stretching back to the Oakland 100 Support Committee, formed in the immediate aftermath of the original Oscar Grant riots. Arrests are now occurring every night, arraignments every day, rides must be coordinated to and from Santa Rita Jail constantly and additional money is desperately needed to bail out arrestees with more serious charges. How we follow through with displays of solidarity and direct material support for arrestees will determine how much strength we gain from this uprising moving forward.

Standing in the streets of Oakland in December 2014, it seems that we have come full circle almost exactly six years after Oscar Grant was executed by BART police officer Johannes Mehserle. The journey that began by the Lake Merritt BART station on January 7, 2009 when that first OPD car was smashed has taken many twists and turns through various waves of protest and movements, many of which have manifested in rioting and clashes with police in and around downtown Oakland. Meanwhile, a wave of small uprisings has unfolded in an increasing number of locations across the country in response to one police execution after another: Portland in 2010, Denver in 2010, Seattle in 2011, San Francisco in 2011, Atlanta in 2012, Anaheim in 2012, Santa Rosa in 2013, Flatbush in 2013, Durham in 2013, Salinas in 2014, Albuquerque in 2014. In each of these local uprisings, the name of a person whose life was taken by the state was snatched from oblivion and burned into collective memory through the actions of those who chose to revolt.

The brave people of Ferguson pushed this past the point of no return by doggedly refusing to leave the streets night after night, showing that these revolts could extend in time and increase in intensity. If there is one answer as to why those of us in the Bay now find ourselves in a near insurrectionary situation tonight, it is simply this: we are no longer alone. Another city has set a new precedent for resisting the racist police state, so Oakland is no longer an outlier.

The new paradigm of struggle emanating from Ferguson was further reinforced during the second week of the revolt, as news spread that a New York grand jury had failed to indict any NYPD officer in the strangling of Eric Garner. What had previously been restricted to singular outbursts of anger in reaction to individual cases of police executing Black and Brown people became a systemic struggle confronting the structures of white power and state violence within this country. This struggle is no longer just about Michael Brown, Eric Garner, or Oscar Grant, or even the thousands killed by police whose names have never entered the public consciousness. It is about the violent marginalization and enforced social death of entire Black and Brown communities. It is about the role of the police in exercising lethal force with impunity to maintain this order and uphold the slave state foundations of American capitalism.

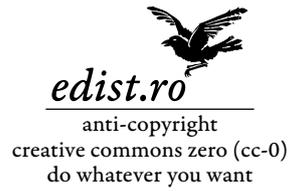
We can now finally speak of a national anti-police movement that came into being through the fires and blockades of late 2014. This should be celebrated as a massive victory for resistance in the United States. An important milestone has been reached and we are watching the results unfold every night before our eyes.

Many days ago, it became impossible to predict what would come next. We hope this uncontrollability spreads to new locations, in ever more creative forms of disruption and attack.

– Some Oakland Antagonists, December 10, 2014

To support arrestees in this struggle, please donate to the legal support fund.

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