Balance Sheet: Two Years against Cop City

Evaluating Strategies, Refining Tactics

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Starting in April 2021, a bold movement set out to defend Weelaunee Forest in Atlanta, Georgia, where local politicians and corporate profiteers want to build a police training compound known as Cop City. In the following assessment, participants evaluate the strategic hypotheses that the movement has produced and tested over the past two years and reflect on the risks and possibilities of the next phase of the struggle.

For background on the events that are analyzed below, consult "The City in the Forest," which covers the first year of resistance, and "The Forest in the City," which details the second year. A week of action is scheduled to begin March 4.

Preface: The Problem with Models

As protest movements and insurrections appear around the globe with increasing frequency, large swaths of humanity are engaging in a new form of open-source resistance. Protesters in Palestine, Hong Kong, Myanmar, Chile, Equador, Peru, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Iran, and beyond communicate with one another in a global language of refusal, explicitly referencing each other in instructional online protest guides. Revolutionaries have always imitated each other's breakthroughs, and 21st-century communications platforms have made this process much easier.

Memetic resistance enables large numbers of people to participate in such activities without theoretical coherence, shared goals, relationships of trust, or longstanding organizations. Because of this, contagious and reproducible tactics can spread rapidly between contexts—across languages, oceans, continents, and worldviews. This phenomenon cannot be stopped. As societies continue to grow more atomized over the coming years, depriving desperate people of the collectivity and trust they would otherwise need to formulate plans according to shared goals and principles, the struggles to come will depend more and more on this approach.

But if revolutionaries' ideas and strategies do not spread as quickly as the tactics they use, it is likely that these tactics will eventually be appropriated to prop up the reigning order. If protest movements only imitate the models provided by other struggles, they may not enable the participants to cultivate new priorities, new desires, new values. In some ways, this is a strength of this paradigm of resistance, as it allows radically different people to fight alongside one another without need of coherent organizational or political alliances. But if revolts mobilize people without connecting or transforming them, they will not be able to bring about profound social change.

Over the next decade, as the climate chaos and economic immiseration that are already hitting the Global South begin to impact previously affluent global centers like the United States, more and more people will find themselves struggling with inflexible bureaucracies and state violence. Even conservatives who are relatively comfortable today may find themselves in open conflict with police tomorrow.

Yet one may fight specific police without taking a stand against policing itself. Those who have no analysis often fight against particular injustices only to preserve the system that causes them. Common-sense ideas tend to justify and reproduce the dominant social

order, as it is the status quo that produces those ideas in the first place. Without revolutionary visions or questions, even the fiercest struggle can only return us to our starting point. Those who want to change the fundamental structures of our society must spread their ideas and ways of thinking at least as widely as any *image* of struggle, or else the movements of the future may seek only to reclaim the lost privileges of a chosen few or recreate an imagined version of the 20th century.

The model is always wrong. Even if all one hopes to accomplish is to spread the tactics and gestures of revolt, mere forms, styles, and instructional guides will not suffice. Methods that work in North Africa cannot be automatically grafted onto the suburban sprawl of Los Angeles. Moreover, if those fighting on the frontlines do not take for granted that brand new effective revolutionary doctrines will fall from the heavens as a natural consequence of their methods, they will need to spread a questioning attitude within their movements. There is nothing wrong with risking being wrong; there is nothing right about doubling down on irrefutable claims or immutable practices.

All of the headway that the movement to defend the forest has made can be credited to an experimental and problem-solving mentality. Wherever people have held to rigid dogmas, those have obstructed the movement. With stakes so high, we cannot afford to fall into sentimental attempts to imitate past successes, nor stubbornly insist on formulas that cannot be rigorously tested and refined. There is no "Defend the Forest Model." There is only reality and those prepared to confront it.

In order to take what has worked so far in this struggle to apply in other contexts or times, rebels and creative people will have to resist the urge to imitate tactics or images alone. Instead, they will have to cultivate a shared understanding, or at least shared questions, with those around them about what is happening, what is missing, and what is possible.

Victories and Setbacks

In spring 2022, the movement faced a number of dilemmas. After the Atlanta City Council approved Cop City, a small group of activists remained determined to fight against it. They engaged in small skirmishes with contractors and police in the Old Atlanta Prison Farm.

Around the same time, small groups of people began building encampments on both sides of the South River, in Weelaunee People's Park (as it later became known) and the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. Activists also began a pressure campaign against the supporters of the Atlanta Police Foundation, specifically targeting their contractors and subcontractors. Meanwhile, other groups initiated another round of public canvassing, while yet another circle organized periodic Weeks of Action. Those fighting in the courtrooms continued their appearances and appeals. New groups emerged to bring in young children and their communities; some invited groups of Muscogee (Creek) people to their ancestral homelands. Finally, whenever it was possible, anonymous saboteurs demonstrated the vulnerability of the forest destroyers by disabling or destroying excavators, trucks, tractors, and other pieces of machinery left in the forest.

The Encampments and the Tree Houses

Forest defenders maintained various encampments from October 2021 to January 2023. Located in different parts of the forest, these encampments addressed concrete problems facing the movement. They drew on specific preexisting strengths within radical environmental networks. They also introduced observable limits and problems—some of which have been resolved, while others have not.

These encampments enabled activists to gather a tremendous amount of information about the forest destroyers and their plans. They made it difficult for contractors and subcontractors to operate inside the forest. They disrupted the construction timelines and compelled police to focus on carrying out evictions. As long as police had not cleared the camps, contractors remained averse to advancing on construction timelines. Those who wanted to participate in the movement could join an encampment, where they could enjoy free shelter, sustenance, and community, at least if they managed to fit in with the specific subculture and attitudes of those living in the forest. Journalists, photographers, documentarians, community members, students, and others who were curious about the movement, wanted a tour of the land, or sought an easy and low-risk way to contribute could usually find someone living in the forest to talk to.

After the third Week of Action, which culminated in fierce clashes with law enforcement, the construction of tree houses expanded drastically. These offered journalists a picturesque image and a romantic story at a moment when they might otherwise have reduced the narrative to militancy and clashes alone. The tree houses also enabled some of the encampments to persist despite the frequent sweeps of the Prison Farm by police. If the police were to evict the activists from tree houses, some believed, they would do so at the cost of considerable resources and perceived legitimacy.

On the other hand, the encampments posed challenges to the movement. It is not out of contempt for the frontline defenders that we discuss these, but out of respect for them, for their dedication, their joys and hardships, their sacrifices in pursuit of the world that we are trying to build together.

Sustaining the encampments required a Herculean effort. Feeding dozens of people and providing them with water, building supplies, clothing, camping equipment, kitchen equipment, and other needs was ceaselessly demanding. Much of this work was organized by those living among the trees, but not all of it. There were periods during which the majority of campers were newcomers, eager to help but unaware of camp norms or chores. A fair number of forest defenders who did not live in the encampments invested the majority of their movement-related energies in feeding and assisting those who were living in the forest.

The dynamics of the camps were complex, especially those involving tree houses, which require a great deal of training if the resident is to avoid serious bodily harm or death. Few people with jobs, children, class schedules, or other commitments can move into forest encampments for long periods of time. The majority of those living in the camps were white; this was likely more related to the form of the permanent encampment itself and the free time required to participate in it than to overtly discriminatory behaviors.

By no fault of the forest dwellers, supporting the encampments came to stand in for mass strategizing and action. Some people came to conflate the effectiveness of the movement as a whole with the well-being of the camps. Something similar occurred among the police, as well, who became obsessed with the people living among the trees and dedicated a disproportionate amount of effort to clearing them out. Just as those evictions have not crushed the movement, activists living outside the forest should not have allowed their own initiative, creativity, and energy to come to revolve so disproportionately around the encampments.

The period of small-scale, intensive encampments on the land is probably over. But the need to physically defend the forest has not passed. Therefore, other strategies will have to emerge to fill this need.

Stop Reeves+Young and the Pressure Campaigns in General

Refusing to lose themselves in the symbolic and convoluted world of official politics and representation, some activists embarked on a research-intensive campaign targeting the companies contracted by the Atlanta Police Foundation. By identifying the support structures of the Cop City plan, these activists helped to propose concrete strategies. The first general contractor hired by the APF, Reeves+Young, backed out of the project after a number of actions directed at their CEO, their Board of Directors, and some of their subcontractors. This was a significant morale boost for the movement, and many hoped that continuing on this path would lead to similar results for whatever company was contracted to replace them.

When Brasfield & Gorrie was hired to replace Reeves+Young, activists set about pressuring them, their Board, and their subcontractors, just as had occurred before. Some hoped that home demonstrations, office visits, call-in campaigns, and other pressure tactics would enable risk-averse activists to participate in direct action against Cop City. It is certain that hundreds, if not thousands, of people have called the offices and cell phones of the forest destroyers over the past year. But few did much more than that.

Visiting the homes, churches, job sites, and offices of Brasfield & Gorrie executives or their subcontractors has not yet drawn the kind of participation some hoped for. In some cases, it seemed that this strategy primarily attracted direct-action-oriented people who might have preferred to simply vandalize an office or facility under the cover of night—which has occurred dozens of times across the country. Some protests or rallies at offices or homes have involved confrontational methods, with the consequence that many participants did not feel comfortable returning to an address for a follow-up protest; this inadvertently contributed to the general abandonment of this tactic. Misapplied militancy did not increase the pressure against the targets—in fact, over the long term, it actually diminished it.

It is not clear how many subcontractors have dropped from the project as a result of the pressure campaigns against them. Can a pressure campaign push Brasfield & Gorrie out of the project? So far, the answer has been no.

If activists hope to isolate Brasfield & Gorrie from the Atlanta Police Foundation, they will need to identify and target the weak spots in their corporate organization. Insurance

providers, for instance, are essential to corporate entities. If Brasfield & Gorrie lost their provider, they would have to halt all of their jobs. If this occurred multiple times, it could be expensive. If the service provider (in this case, Brasfield & Gorrie) were compelled to choose between being a successful corporate enterprise or fulfilling one contract (in this case, building Cop City), they would likely choose the former. If activists cannot create that kind of dilemma, they are not likely to attain their goals with this kind of strategy.

In early January 2023, Mayor Dickens spoke to the Rotary Club of Buckhead at a Maggiano's Little Italy restaurant. He pleaded with them to place bids for Cop City construction contracts. Some of the business owners in attendance responded that they were afraid because of protests against the development. Mayor Dickens insisted that the protesters "would be taken care of"—a chilling phrase, only a few days before police killed a forest defender named Tortuguita—and argued that because Brasfield & Gorrie wasn't backing down, others should feel confident to join them.

Is Brasfield & Gorrie receiving financial assurances or support from municipal or state-level authorities? They could be. The Third Quarter campaign updates from the Atlanta Police Foundation in 2021 and 2022 reveal that the construction company and their subcontractor, the Brent Scarborough Company, both donated generously to the Atlanta Police Foundation. The Brent Scarborough Company also made generous contributions to the Brian Kemp gubernatorial campaign both of those years. If these companies are in fact engaged in bribery or "quid pro quo" corruption schemes to secure access to public contracts, we could imagine the government might allocate tremendous resources to protect them from grassroots resistance.

All this is speculation. But there are precedents for governments stepping in to support corporations targeted by activists, even when the corporations were *not* working directly for the government. Two decades ago, the government of the United Kingdom repeatedly took action to protect the animal testing corporation Huntingdon Life Sciences after the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty campaign drove away all their investors. The state-owned Bank of England offered HLS an account when no other bank would; the British government helped HLS to negotiate a refinancing when their last backers pulled out; when HLS lost their insurance provider, the Department of Trade and Industry gave HLS unprecedented coverage. The SHAC campaign would have driven HLS out of business if not for all this. One of the chief functions of governments is to put a finger on the capitalist side of the scale whenever corporations come into conflict with ordinary people.

Brasfield & Gorrie may not be counting on making a profit on finishing Cop City so much as securing government contracts for decades to come if they hold the line against the movement. If this is true, protesters and researchers will need to discover what vulnerabilities Brasfield & Gorrie retain despite the backing of the state. If they cannot, their efforts would be better spent on other targets—or else on other strategies.

At the same time, if Cop City can only attract the governor's personal cronies, perhaps it is closer to failure than is readily apparent.

Canvassing and Door-to-Door Outreach

Activists have organized multiple waves of canvassing since summer 2021. At first, a group called “Defund APD, Refund Communities” (DARC) drew together dozens of activists to strategize around door-to-door outreach in southwest Dekalb County as well as other parts of Atlanta. These canvassers were chiefly interested in spreading awareness of the project. When the City Council passed the ordinance to build Cop City after 17 hours of negative feedback—chiefly, comments from those DARC had canvassed—the momentum around this cycle came to a close.

Over the year and a half since, several more waves of canvassing have taken place. Every few months, a new cohort dedicates themselves to knocking on doors and passing out leaflets. In some cases, proponents of door-to-door outreach have built on the efforts of those before them. Other groups have wrongly assumed that no one else had yet considered addressing those living in the immediate vicinity of the forest.

Gentrification, urban restructuring, digital communications technology, and the War on Drugs have destroyed the social fabric of urban neighborhoods. Once upon a time, neighboring households often shared the same forms of employment, religion, language, and ethnicity; this increased the likelihood that they could mobilize around the same discourse or plan of action. In the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, organizing efforts were often modeled on the urban landscape itself—in some cases, revolutionaries could build a coherent organization simply by walking around knocking on doors.

Things don’t seem to work that way in the 21st century. But there is more to say about canvassing, regardless of whether it remains a good way to build a formidable revolutionary organization.

In all likelihood, door-to-door canvassing has connected many people to the movement who live near the forest. These rounds of outreach may well have spread positive associations with the movement far beyond the left-wing subculture from which many of the canvassers hail. Some current participants in the movement might have first learned of the plan to destroy the forest from canvassers. None of this can be proven or disproven on a scale larger than anecdotal examples.

Without a clear, falsifiable hypothesis to test, nobody can judge the effectiveness of canvassing or any other proposal. Has canvassing increased local participation in the movement more than other strategies? Have grassroots networks or organizations grown proportionally to the hours they have invested knocking on doors in the area? Nobody knows for sure. In any case, canvassing has almost certainly not *harmed* the movement. Whether it is worth the hard work it requires remains an open question.

Weeks of Action

So far, there have been four Weeks of Action to defend the forest and stop Cop City. Each of these has altered the tactical and political landscape of the movement in demonstrable

ways. In addition, the organizers of these Weeks have usually articulated specific aims and expectations.

Groups with extensive contacts outside of local political subcultures have been the main proponents and organizers of these. In gathering people from across the country, the Weeks of Action have expanded the priorities and capacities of many grassroots activists around the United States, especially anarchists and their associates. The Weeks of Action have enabled the movement to impose an irregular seasonal rhythm on the Atlanta Police Foundation by rearranging the balance of forces in concussive bursts. They have allowed activists to keep the forest destroyers in a state of anxiety and reactivity, forcing them to adopt a discourse about "outside agitators" that has been delivering diminishing returns since the Ferguson uprising of 2014. They have also enabled the movement to grow outward across the country rather than accumulating in a single metropolis. This is important because the forest destroyers depend on supply chains that extend throughout the country, far beyond downtown Atlanta.

The participants who dedicate the most energy to the Weeks of Action have been able to take breaks between them, which has enabled them to maintain long-term participation in the movement. Although the Weeks have complemented other approaches and sometimes relied on them, they operate on a different rhythm, as many groups and strategies, especially legal and frontline defense, require responding urgently to the activity of the forest destroyers at a pace set by the enemy.

On the other hand, Weeks of Action are often preceded and followed by a temporary increase in tension with the police. As the proponents of Cop City rely on more and more desperate means to force through their agenda, this pressure could become too great for the local participants in the movement. If the Weeks of Action do not increase the number of people prepared to respond to repression on the ground and in the courtrooms, then they are setting the stage for defeat.

This model entails other challenges, as well. For example, when there were encampments in the forest, preparing for mass convergence was often stressful because hundreds or even thousands of short-term residents were about to share the space that the forest dwellers relied on every day for food and shelter.

Most groups or organizations do not necessarily maintain a robust network of connections around the country and the world; they have other strengths to offer. At times, because of the outsized impact of the Weeks of Action on the fight to save the forest as a whole, those other strengths have been underexplored or utilized.

Finally, it is possible that risk-tolerant segments of the movement have relied too much on a convergence model of action that often results in arrests. Over time, this repression could cause problems for people and movements in other parts of the country, where autonomous groups are less prepared to support people facing legal consequences, especially far away.

Courtroom Strategies

The South River Forest Coalition, South River Watershed Alliance, Save the Old Atlanta Prison Farm, and some individuals have pursued legal strategies to halt the destruction of the forest. Over the past year, most of these efforts have focused on appealing the legality of the land-swap agreement between Dekalb County CEO Michael Thurmond and Hollywood real estate mogul Ryan Milsap. Before January 31, 2023, when the government finally approved the Land Disturbance Permits for Cop City, they also applied pressure to the Dekalb County Commissioners to deny these permits on ecological grounds.

When Cop City is defeated and the land-swap is overturned, at the institutional level, this will likely appear to be the result of legal efforts. The forest destroyers do not possess a unitary chain of command, so no single entity will come out waving a white flag of surrender. Instead, various "technicalities" and "oversights" will put various development phases "on pause." It is likely that the project will never be overtly cancelled. Instead, it will be reformed repeatedly, and then eventually, it will simply evaporate from public discourse. The authorities will go to great lengths to make sure that the public understands that this is the consequence of legal measures, not direct action. They will have their own story about what has taken place, and that is fine.

There are already visions regarding what this forest could become. The most developed of these plans, the South River Forest Vision, has already been added to the City Charter. Before the current demolition plans, this Vision was the plan for the area. In the past two years, this document has taken on new components, new radical alterations and improvements. It could have changed more if different sectors of the movement decided to engage with it. It is not a perfect document, but it offers the government something to grab onto. It offers their lawyers the chance they will need to say, "Oh, it turns out Cop City is actually illegal. We will have to go with the previous plan."

As it stands, every significant ruling on the movement that has taken place in a courtroom thus far has been a setback. As two years of struggle have illustrated, legal strategies alone are insufficient. They cannot halt adversaries who are willing to destroy things illegally, who wield disproportionate power in the economy and court system. They cannot win in a game rigged by the Atlanta Committee for Progress and the industrial forces they represent to Georgia state senators. But legal strategies can slow the progress of development. They can put forest destroyers on the defensive, forcing them to respond to various requests, and they can provide the adversary with opportunities to quit the project within a logic of jurisprudence that they understand.

In late February 2023, an exploratory committee headed by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) released a new South River Forest vision document. Meant to foster cooperation between Atlanta and Dekalb and move forward with turning the South River Park into an actual park, the documents make no mention of the conflict that has unfolded over Weelaunee Forest. Maps produced by the committee simply mark the land that the movement is fighting for as beyond the bounds of the prospective park. This vision indicates the narrowing ambitions of some urban planners. The original call for the park envisioned 4000

connected acres of forest. The new proposal has already shrunk that number to 3500 acres, accepting the loss of forested areas to Cop City and Ryan Millsap as if they are inevitable.

Will the South River Forest Coalition, the South River Watershed Alliance, and other sectors of the movement accept this new conciliatory and defeatist vision? Surely, if the current administration does not suspend these projects after law enforcement killed a protester, there is little chance that they will pay any mind to this amended version of the South River Forest Vision.

Sabotage and Other Forms of Direct Action

Since the very beginning, shortly after local activists first exposed the plans to build Cop City, anonymous groups have sabotaged machinery, vandalized offices, and engaged in other forms of direct action. After the police killed Tortuguita on January 18, 2023, people across the country broke windows, stormed offices, burned machinery, glued ATMs, and painted slogans every day for a month. On February 19, 2023, while the APF was spending $41,500 per day to stage police officers in and around the forest at all hours, saboteurs still managed to torch excavators and tractors under the cover of night.

The rationale behind direct action is that people can enact the changes they want directly without waiting for permission. Sabotage is a form of direct action with a long history in this country and across the world. It has been used in a wide array of struggles. Freedom fighters depend on it whether their struggles take place in factories, plantations, prisons, schools, offices, slaughterhouses, shopping centers, pipeline corridors, forests, or elsewhere. Sabotage is especially empowering for those facing intense repression or powerful adversaries, because saboteurs are not dependent on safety in numbers. Instead, they can rely on the element of surprise, the cover of night, intimate knowledge of their targets, the arrogance of law enforcement. Generally speaking, the saboteur wants to use methods that demand the *least* time, special skills, and effort and that *minimize risk* to participants and bystanders while resulting in the *maximum consequences* for the target.

The infrastructure of control is vulnerable—and nowadays, it is everywhere. Direct action demonstrates this. Effective sabotage campaigns can cripple authoritarian regimes, apartheid states, colonial exploiters, entire economies. But to accomplish this, they have to inspire the self-directed activity of other influential segments of the population, especially those who can access logistical bottlenecks.

In the movement to stop Cop City, saboteurs have sometimes claimed responsibility for their actions online. By issuing online statements ("communiqués"), saboteurs can explain what happened, where, and why. These statements break the media silence surrounding such actions, making it more difficult to erase or misrepresent them. The authorities do not want civilians to know how easy it can be to perform them. But there are risks to releasing communiqués. For one, if authors do not adequately hide their digital identities or accidentally reveal identifying characteristics via their style or phrasing, they could be caught. Moreover, the more abstruse the statements, the less likely it is that readers will identify with the action.

People who carry out direct action often have an interest in explaining their motivations. However, if the intention is to encourage more people to take action, they can do themselves a disservice by alienating readers with complex jargon or by bringing up unrelated topics, however important those may be. If the communiqués explain *how* the actions are carried out, this can contribute to copycat actions. Anyone who performs more than one act of sabotage risks leaving a unique "fingerprint" in their actions, rendering them vulnerable to repression as investigators patiently track subtle technical similarities or other clues. If more anonymous saboteurs adopt the same model, that may make it more difficult to track the first ones who used it.

When it comes to claiming responsibility, simplicity may be best: in the fewest words, with the simplest and most conventional language possible, explain who did what, where they did it, when it happened, why they did it, and how.

Lastly, if those who focus on this kind of action do not concern themselves with other political means, if they do not respect others' boundaries and concerns, they will tend to become an isolated faction. If their efforts are not comprehensible to society at large—or at least connected to the movement they participate in—they risk wasting their energy on poorly timed actions that will not contribute to the momentum of the movement. Just as media spokespeople, jail support teams, and other specialized groups can develop the bad habit of evaluating everything according to its relevance to their areas of expertise, saboteurs must be careful to see others' efforts as part of a larger whole, rather than simply judging them according to how much damage or disruption they cause.

If saboteurs are not thoughtful, their preferred methods—precisely because those are easy, empowering, and often effective—can dominate their own and others' imaginations at the expense of political flexibility and creativity. If all you have is a hammer, everything will look like a nail.

Strategies Yet Untested

New tactics, new strategies, and new formations are developing within the movement. These will combine the most resilient methods of the previous phases with new content and approaches that have not been explored until now. It is important that all of the participants develop their own reflections, their own priorities, their own aspirations and ways of understanding the situation. The courage, clarity, focus, and inventiveness of individuals has contributed at least as much to the experiments and victories of this movement as the formal decision-making of organizations and collectives. The more comfortable everyone feels innovating, the less that dogma or adrenaline alone will structure what comes next.

Here They All Come, Trailing Behind

The movement to defend the forest and stop Cop City began in April 2021. Throughout the ups and downs since then, this movement has been sustained by the dedication of a few

hundred people in Atlanta and a few hundred more across the country. It is impossible to overstate the contributions of anarchists, abolitionists, and radical environmentalists, who have constituted the vast majority of organizers.

Now, after two years, the situation is changing. Following the murder of Tortuguita—and not an instant earlier—a number of non-profit organizations and a smattering of local left-wing groups are looking to get involved. This is good, because it could make the movement more versatile and bring in more resources and participants. The presence of interfaith groups, students, and civil society organizations will make it more difficult for the authorities to employ the "terrorism" narrative they have been pushing. No matter how fierce or dedicated small groups of people are, they cannot pose a credible challenge to the system without fostering widespread participation. Yet if the radical edge that has led the movement up to now is not able to keep the initiative as the movement expands, the principles that brought it this far could be lost.

Over the preceding decade, we have seen large-scale mobilizations and autonomous movements erupt suddenly, drawing together thousands or even millions of people alongside activist groups and nonprofit organizations. In what has become a familiar paradigm, the most ambitious and uncompromising participants have had to fight for space—forced to establish their own bail funds, assemblies, march routes, and media platforms in order to express themselves and take action. Most of the tactical innovations that anarchists and autonomists have developed over the previous decades have emerged in that context: breakaway marches, consensus meetings, spokescouncils, anonymous blogs, and so on.

The movement to defend the forest in Atlanta represents a different paradigm. Now it is the quasi-institutional left, the coalitions and organizations, the "progressive" Democrats, and the nonprofit groups that have to try to carve out space for themselves.

This is not unprecedented. After Black youth and anarchists initiated riots in response to the murder of Oscar Grant by Bay Area Rapid Transit police in 2009, civic and non-profit organizations spent months seeking to tame, shame, and contain their rebellious energy. Something similar occurred in 2014 after courageous residents around West Florissant sparked a nationwide movement in response to the murder of Michael Brown by Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson. Non-profits and their allies are a real part of contemporary struggles—but as long as they steer them, they tend to push them into the arms of the Democratic Party, towards cooptation and toothlessness.

We can expect to see the influence of the nationwide associations and organizations increase in the coming months, especially as elements within the original movement are sidelined by state repression. If they are allowed to gain their own footing and develop their own infrastructure alongside those of the existing movement, they are likely to outpace it and to overdetermine the outcome. If that occurs, they will lead the movement to reconciliation with the authorities—in other words, to failure.

Yet while remaining vigilant against cooptation, frontline fighters and other long-term participants must allow newcomers to join and transform the movement they have built. The current balance of forces—in which the police are willing to kill activists and charge whoever survives with Domestic Terrorism—demands that the movement rapidly expand before the authorities can isolate and destroy it.

Whoever is able to surround their opponent will win. Literally speaking, this is likely to be true tactically in the conflicts that play out in the forest. Politically speaking, if one side becomes isolated from allies and sympathizers, greater and greater means can be deployed against them and they will be unable to respond.

The Students

In the first week of February 2023, Morehouse and Spelman students disrupted an event at the Atlanta University Center. These students, supported by an open letter signed by 20% of the faculty, boldly denounced Cop City and the destruction of the forest. The next day, predominantly Black students from Georgia State University, Emory, Georgia Tech, Morehouse, and Spelman marched through downtown chanting slogans and delivering fiery speeches.

It took some years for students to respond to the movement in this way. Nowadays, the promise of class mobility makes many students somewhat risk-averse. Still, their participation at this juncture could be significant. Many of the board members of the Atlanta Police Foundation are professors. Students are well positioned to address them directly.

Symbolically speaking, Black students are an important demographic in Atlanta politics. Many in the ruling cliques rely on the patronage, networks, resources, and support of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities to advance their narratives and privatization schemes. The self-directed activity of these students could secure significant advances for the movement. Should these students embrace methods proportional to the situation at hand—such as unruly demonstrations, direct confrontation with APF members or school administration, sit-ins, walkouts, strikes, or other innovative forms of struggle—they could push the crisis into a new stage. In addition to catching the authorities off guard, this would enable Black students, and students in general, to introduce their own priorities and demands to the movement.

We are already seeing this develop. On January 31, 2023, Mayor Dickens hosted a Q & A session at Morehouse College at which students denounced and berated him for hours. On February 22, 66 faculty members at Spelman College signed their own denunciation of Cop City. At this point, the participation of students and professors in the movement is a foregone conclusion, but the nature of that participation remains to be determined.

The Greens

In February 2023, a small group of animal rights activists in Los Angeles descended on an office belonging to Atlas Technical Consultants. Wielding multiple megaphones and attempting to gain entry to the lobby of the Cop City subcontractor, these activists chanted denunciations of Cop City. Tactically speaking, this was not a radical departure from other events in the movement—but it represents a shift in participation, as it was coordinated by a formal organization with no previous ties to the movement.

In the weeks leading up to March, organizations such as the Center for Biological Diversity have released statements urging their supporters to join the movement. In Atlanta and elsewhere, nonprofit groups connected with national organizations have begun conducting “direct action trainings” and hosting online seminars with their members about the movement.

If animal rights, environmentalist, anti-militarist, anti-police, anti-racist, and anti-gentrification nonprofit organizations and activist groups across the country take steps to oppose Cop City, the pressure on funders, insurers, contractors, and subcontractors will increase dramatically. Some of those groups can mobilize considerable resources to promote their actions, as well as providing legal and financial aid. Participation in the movement could expand to include more senior citizens, although it also would probably attract more middle-class people.

The Best Offense is a Good Defense

Today, on-the-ground defense of the forest could form a comprehensive offensive strategy. The dynamics of the conflict have changed considerably since April 2022. If a large encampment of hundreds or thousands of people were established, it could contribute directly to the abandonment of Cop City as well as the land-swap. The confidence of the authorities is wavering, and construction companies are not enthusiastic about the project, thanks to recurring sabotage and continuous pressure. It is possible that a frontline struggle involving pacifists, students, rock-throwers, campers, interfaith groups, and motorists could push the legitimacy crisis surrounding the project to a breaking point.

As of now, there are two victory conditions for the movement:

1) The Atlanta Police Foundation is unable to hire anyone to destroy the forest.
2) A politician or government institution pulls the plug on the project.

If activists can continue isolating Brasfield & Gorrie from their subcontractors, their insurance providers, their lawyers, their associates and lenders, Brasfield & Gorrie may eventually drop the APF contract. It is possible that the contract is too risky for another company to pick up. Or, after losing so much time and confidence, it is possible that the funders of the APF might revoke their loans. Cadence Bank and Northwest Bank both previously offered the APF active lines of credit. Now, neither of them do. Nearly every transparent line of credit held by the APF is revocable. It is not too late to bankrupt them.

Lastly, it is possible that in their haste and hubris, the Police Foundation has violated their legal rights as a 501c(3). With close scrutiny, it is possible that someone could find illegal lobbying or criminal misappropriation of funds, assets, or influence involving the APF. Could a single lawyer have this organization disbanded, their assets frozen, their contracts canceled? Crazier things have happened. Still, with the forest in immediate danger, any courtroom victory will depend on activity in the streets. If forest defenders hope for a legal victory, they will need to become ungovernable first.

If the crisis developing around this project and other cases of police violence continues to polarize US society, the priorities of elected officials and bureaucrats could shift rapidly.

Governor Kemp has instituted a state of emergency since late January, allegedly because of the protest on January 21 in response to the killing of Tortuguita.

The Imperial Boomerang

While many people in Atlanta were mourning Tortuguita, the killing of Tyre Nichols by Memphis police department shocked the nation. Police and politicians carried out extensive media operations and counterinsurgency efforts in the days leading up to the release of the horrific footage. Aiming to desensitize the public by overexposure, the Chief of the Memphis Police released statements several days in a row warning people of the "inhumanity" of the video and suggesting that it was "worse than the Rodney King footage."

This police chief, Cerelyn Davis, was previously employed with the Atlanta Police Department, where she worked for the infamous Red Dog Unit, a special "crime fighting" task force infamous for maiming, killing, abusing, and stalking civilians. The unit was eventually disbanded and Davis was fired. She moved to Memphis to form the Scorpion Unit there, an identical task force responsible for the brutal killing of Nichols. Before she lived in Atlanta, she was in the leadership of the Durham Police Department in North Carolina. In all three departments, she participated in and helped to establish law-enforcement exchange programs with the apartheid-imposing Israeli Defense Forces.

Colonial domination in the global periphery translates directly to authoritarianism in the imperial core. With the failure of US military rule in Afghanistan after 20 years of human rights abuses, tens of thousands of trainers, consultants, contractors, and mercenaries are returning to the US to look for new employment opportunities. Likely, many of them will seek further employment in the private sector, where heinous abuse is easier to conceal.

All of these private sector firms build their business models around government contracts. In the era of capitalist globalization, when cutthroat competition has whittled away the profit margins of many sectors of the economy, the spheres of "security," arms dealing, and policing remain more profitable than ever. Cop City is an investment in this industry, funneling tens of millions of dollars through military contractors like Invesco into domestic police agencies. These investments are not new, but they will expand in the coming years as states rely more and more on private investors as a result of tax cuts for the rich.

If the two major parties keep doubling down on policing as their primary solution to unrest and desperation, the struggle against Cop City is likely just the tip of the iceberg. If the Puerto Rican and Hawaiian colonies are any indication, facilities like Cop City might be planned for every region of the country. We have not yet discovered strategies that can halt this process. It is urgent that we do.

Fortunately, the forces allied against us are spread thin, with vulnerabilities and divisions throughout their ranks. The fight against Cop City is becoming a signal fire for movements across the country.

If We Lose, Not Even the Dead Will Be Safe

Andre Dickens did not address the killing of Tortuguita for nearly a month. When he finally did, it was because of the pressure he faced at Morehouse College during the Q & A session with AUC students about Cop City. When a student boldly demanded that he address the killing, he responded simply "I wish [they] didn't die. It's not fun. But people die everyday."

We will see more and more of this sort of indifference to institutional killing if we permit them to build Cop City.

Dickens continues to make public appearances, including at cocktail parties and mixers in Buckhead. He has held multiple press conferences about Cop City, bemoaning the threats and "misinformation" spread against it, framing himself as the real victim. Tortuguita's killers have yet to be named. This is especially unusual in view of the tendency of politicians and corporate media to lionize every officer who sustains injury on the job.

The administration, which apparently did not even plan to release Tortuguita's name, hopes to kill and erase protesters while protecting their image among the urban liberals and fence-sitters who enable them. At every opportunity, the administration and the APF audaciously claim that the area where they hope to build Cop City "is not a forest." By denying what anyone can see clearly with their own eyes, they are addressing themselves solely to those sitting safely on designer furniture, passively waiting for newscasters to spoon-feed them the day's events while courageous young people are dragged off to jail, blanketed in tear gas, and shot to death.

In the long run, this will cost them. If they stake their future on those who are incapable of meaningful action, they will end up supported only by passive sympathizers and internet commentators. In dragging the conflict into the realm of pure force, they play a dangerous game, jeopardizing both their perceived legitimacy and their control.

In astronomy, ***necroplanetology*** is the study of planets that are being destroyed, or of the wrecked debris that indicates the previous existence of a planet. A terrestrial necroplanetology would recognize Cop City as an assault on something unique and irreplaceable. Not only is our own planet being destroyed—the planet that bore us, that gives us life, the only planet that could be our home—but the same process is eroding our capacity to imagine any relationship to the Earth other than the violence represented by Cop City.

If this movement fails and Cop City is built, it will be built upon the unmarked graves of enslaved African people, over the absence of the Muscogee Creek people who were forcibly relocated, another atrocity added to the suffering all of the prisoners who were forced to toil on this land. They will pave over the corpses of all of the forest spirits, all the creatures who have inhabited this bioregion, just as they are doing everywhere else. They will erase the lives and courage of all who are fighting to prevent further violence and death, all who are imperiled, all who have died, who have had everything taken from them, who have given everything they had to protect the possibility of a freer future. The defeated heroes will become footnotes on a plaque behind a glass case in City Hall somewhere, so that future administrations can fraudulently lay claim to their memory to justify future atrocities the way they do today with the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

We must not let this happen. Cop City will never be built.

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