

find each other.



For U.S. Anarchists, Violence Is Necessary

Perry Stein

Perry Stein
For U.S. Anarchists, Violence Is Necessary
08/12/2017

vnews.com

lib.edist.ro

08/12/2017

Contents

'Anarchist Standard Time'	4
'They're Mad'	6
Identifying as an Anarchist	8

Washington — By day, they are graphic designers, legal assistants, nonprofit workers and students. But outside their 9-to-5 jobs, they call themselves anarchists — bucking the system, shunning the government and sometimes even rioting and smashing windows to make a point.

Dylan Petrohilos, 28, said his family's struggle with poverty drew him to the movement. Sammi LeMaster, 22, first became involved because of her belief that the country needs a stronger response to shootings by police. Legba Carrefour, 37, has been protesting for well over a decade.

The trio are among a group of Washington, D.C.-area residents who have been quietly active in gay rights demonstrations, Black Lives Matter and many other causes.

But their anarchist community made a fiery entrance into the Trump presidency on Jan. 20, when they organized thousands of people to protest his inauguration by blocking security checkpoints and marching in the streets. Hundreds of them, clad in black clothes and masks, rioted through the downtown.

They used wooden poles and pieces of concrete to break storefronts and smash newspaper boxes, according to an indictment in D.C. Superior Court. More than 200 people were arrested and six police officers were injured. City officials tally the damage from the rioting at about \$100,000.

What the court documents call “malicious” and “violent” acts, the anarchists see as a necessary way to draw attention to poverty, racism, educational inequality and other problems.

“Allowing inauguration to proceed as a peaceful unfolding does not reflect that this is not a peaceful country. There is no peace,” said Carrefour, who would not say which inauguration protests he participated in and whether he knew if the violence would occur. “We wanted to make it a clusterf—, and we made it a clusterf—.”

Anarchists — who are often grouped with the antifascists, or antifa — have been increasingly visible across the country, engaging in high-profile protests that sometimes turn violent. In Berkeley,

Calif., they have squared off with far-right and other groups, rioting to stop people they deem to be fascists from speaking on campus — ticking off debates about free speech. In Portland, Ore., the threat of violence between anarchists and far-right groups forced a popular family parade to be shut down.

Interviews with a dozen anarchists in the Washington area and beyond show a group that, while angry with President Donald Trump, would be dissatisfied with any U.S. leader. (They protested President Barack Obama's second inauguration, too, but it was a smaller group.)

They said they think liberals become complacent when a Democrat is in the White House, letting injustices go unquestioned. But they also think marginalized groups will fare worse under the Trump administration. In their minds, the entire U.S. government should be abolished and reimaged on a much smaller scale.

"The Trump presidency has certainly given a boldness to fascists and racist movements throughout the country, and that's a moment where anarchists are ready to respond in a way that many others aren't," said Samantha Miller, 32, a D.C. anarchist who helped organize the Inauguration Day protests.

'Anarchist Standard Time'

The election was still months away when Carrefour and a friend in June 2016 were drinking beers, smoking pot and lamenting the exhausting presidential race. With Hillary Clinton the clear front-runner, they decided it was time to begin planning inauguration protests.

Clinton was an establishment Democrat with fairly traditional political views, her flush campaign propped by corporate donors — everything they stood against. Then Donald Trump was elected. The anarchists ramped up for a more radical response.

Petrohilos, a graphic designer, was introduced to anarchy through the local punk-rock scene, a genre of anti-authoritarian music. He grew up poor in the Maryland suburbs.

Between evictions and domestic violence incidents, Petrohilos said, he learned how unjust America could be.

"Growing up in poverty, you think about your relationship with the economy, and how people have power over you," Petrohilos said.

He attended a punk-rock show as a high schooler and saw a magazine on a table that read "What is Anarchy?"

He read it, then looked up scholarly text on the ideology. He started identifying as an anarchist.

Petrohilos, who has attended antiwar demonstrations and marched with Black Lives Matter, faces charges of rioting, conspiracy and multiple counts of destruction of property for his alleged role during the inauguration. He, and others, face years in prison if convicted.

In the wake of the arrests, the anarchists and left-wing political activists came together to support those facing charges. They formed the Dead City Legal Posse — a punk-rock reference — to raise money for the protesters' transportation and legal costs. The group's leaders say they have raised tens of thousands of dollars through online donations and fundraising events, including a punk-rock karaoke night at the District's famed Black Cat club.

Anarchists worldwide recently held a week of solidarity to show support for those arrested. The charges, they contend, are overblown and intended to intimidate people from protesting authority.

"The main principles of anarchism is solidarity and the importance of solidarity within society," Petrohilos said. "So I think it's incredibly important that people are showing up for each other when we are seeing the harshest state repression in a generation."

For LeMaster, it was the community. For Carrefour, it was the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle that drew him to anarchism. During the widely televised anti-globalization demonstrations, thousands of people protested the WTO's conference on global trade, causing millions of dollars in damage to stores. Soon after, in April 2000, Carrefour participated in his first protest as an anarchist, joining thousands who formed a human blockade around the International Monetary Fund and World Bank headquarters in downtown Washington during a policymaking meeting.

"I was always an anarchist in search of anarchy," Carrefour said. "The fact that the people (at the Seattle protests) were not willing to take no for an answer, were willing to take direct action without any permission or anything, was completely mind-boggling."

Mike Isaacson, an anarchist, doctoral student and adjunct professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice who teaches a class on the political economy of fascism, said anarchy is "the idea that we should be seeking to liberate everyone because, when we are all looking out for each other, we all ultimately benefit."

Democracies, anarchists will argue, can only work on the smallest of scales. That's why anarchists often get involved in local activism, believing that that is where they can make a difference.

Identifying as an Anarchist

In the District, anarchists attend D.C. Council hearings, where, among other things, they had criticized the police chief's handling of protests. They helped organize protests with nonanarchist groups, including one to counter the city's recent Pride festivities because they believe the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender event had become too celebratory without focusing on those who are still marginalized.

Carrefour and others launched a group called DisruptJ20 (the name a nod to the Jan. 20 inauguration) to organize.

The anarchists already met regularly in "affinity groups," to talk about current events, upcoming protests and weekend plans, so there was a built-in system to spread the word.

"These are people that you have affinity with, people who you trust," said Miller, who works for a Washington-area collective that helps organize protests and actions.

Carrefour and LeMaster belong to one group whose members hold weekly potlucks at a rotating list of apartments, with deviled eggs, banana bread and the occasional Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen chicken takeout on the menu. They typically start late, and participants joke that the group runs on "anarchist standard time."

For the Inauguration Day protest planning, representatives from affinity groups across the country formed a council. People also connected through websites and message boards, including CrimethInc. — a site that describes itself as a "decentralized network pledged to anonymous collective action."

Some talked about trying to block bridges into the city, but many of the anarchists said they wanted to be closer to the inauguration action downtown. The group decided to use "black bloc" tactics, wearing dark clothes and masks so that authorities would have a harder time identifying — and convicting — participants.

"You can breathe easy at a black bloc. You know if one person gets demasked, they will have your back," said one anarchist who participated in the inauguration black bloc but asked to remain anonymous because of possible legal implications.

The protest wasn't a surprise to D.C. police. Law enforcement had secretly attended planning meetings and infiltrated a multiday "action camp," according to D.C. Superior Court documents.

At one gathering, attendees were asked to place their cell-phones in a microwave, for fear police or opposition groups were trying to listen in.

Carrefour said he knows that some people who are sympathetic to the anarchists' general beliefs would not approve of the tactics used at the inauguration. But, he said, recruiting more anarchists is never the goal.

"The notion of convincing people is a liberal idea," Carrefour said. "I also think it's important to attack the symbols of capitalism. It's just property at the end of the day."

The rioting brought swift rebukes.

On Inauguration Day, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser — a Democrat who has criticized many of Trump's policies — condemned the rioting, tweeting that while the city welcomes protesters, officials "cannot allow you to destroy our neighborhoods."

Muhammad Ashraf, whose 2015 Lincoln super-stretch limousine was burned by rioters while parked downtown, wondered whether the protesters understood the effect the rioting had on him.

Ashraf, 52, owner of Virginia-based Nationwide Chauffeured Services, watched on television as his limo was engulfed in flames. The vehicle was a total loss.

After insurance payments, it cost him \$60,000 out of pocket to replace, he said.

"When that car becomes a source of your livelihood, it becomes a part of your life. I don't know if the protesters understand that when they destroy something — the way I felt when I saw my car burning, it really hurt me deeply even though it's just a car," he said. "Six months later, I still want to know, did that accomplish anything?"

'They're Mad'

LeMaster said she used to consider herself a far-left Democrat. As a student at American University, she surrounded herself with

progressive friends, but grew frustrated with her peers' politics by her senior year.

They would rant on Facebook about the latest news, then do little to solve the problems that vexed them. When people started rioting in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray in 2015, she recalls some of her classmates being shocked by the violence and saying they could no longer support Black Lives Matter.

"I was like of course they're breaking windows, they're mad," she said. "That's going to make you stop supporting Black Lives Matter?"

LeMaster graduated in 2016, accepted a job as a legal assistant at a boutique law firm in Washington and knew little about the D.C. anarchy community.

Then a friend dragged her to a DisruptJ20 meeting in the basement of a church. LeMaster later learned that many people leading the meetings were anarchists. She liked them, but she didn't consider herself to be as extreme.

On Inauguration Day, she joined a group of LGBT activists and blocked Trump supporters from entering the Mall through a security checkpoint.

Later, she said, she saw the brawl between D.C. police and the black-masked protesters and watched as police doused people around her with pepper spray.

The next day, she and dozens of other activists — mostly anarchists — rallied at D.C. Superior Court, offering rides, food and cigarettes to protesters who were arrested and held overnight. LeMaster stood with the group, chanting "anti, anti-capitalista" as each person walked out. It was then she realized this community of anarchists was her own.

"It takes a while to get used to the label because it comes with a lot of baggage," LeMaster said. "People assume that anarchism is so extreme. But I associate it with wanting everyone's needs to be met."