Tools and Tactics in the Portland Protests

From Leaf Blowers and Umbrellas to Lasers, Balloons, and Power Tools

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Across over two months of protests, demonstrators in Portland have experimented with a variety of tactics and strategies. The clashes in Portland drew international attention starting in mid-June, when footage spread of federal agents in unmarked cars snatching demonstrators off the sidewalks and Donald Trump announced that federal agents would be using this model to intervene in other cities around the United States. After Trump's announcement, the demonstrations in Portland grew exponentially, drawing thousands each night, until the governor of Oregon declared that federal agents would be withdrawn from the streets. In the following overview, participants in the Portland demonstrations describe some of the tools and tactics they have seen employed there.

Many of these tools work best in combination with each other. As usual, diversity of tactics is key—not just tolerance for different approaches, but thinking about how to combine all of them into a symbiotic whole. Soon, we aim to follow up this cursory review with a more thorough accounting of the full range of street tactics and equipment relevant to today's demonstrators.

The Portland protests have also produced some new terminology, such as the expression "swoop," which describes what happens when a reformist with a megaphone makes a power play to hijack a gathering organized by people who want to see the police abolished. As demonstrators expand their notions of what tactics are appropriate in this swiftly polarizing society, we hope they will also expand their visions of what is worth fighting for, adopting horizontal models of organization and learning how to identify and resist power plays.

Digital Security

This thread spells out how to protect your privacy via proper phone safety at demonstrations—before, during, and after the protest. You can find a lot of important information about general security in protest situations at maskon.zone.

If you can, leave your real phone at home. Without using your ID, buy a temporary phone with a new SIM card—or use an old phone, deleting everything and updating it. Your SIM has a number (your "IMSI" number) which is often collected by police automatically, so a new SIM helps.

If you have to bring your phone, back it up and remove personal data that you don't want police to access. Use a new version of iOS or Android—they automatically encrypt the phone so police can't just open it up and read your messages. Disable Airdrop on iPhones. Passcode on!

En route to protest, keep your phone off if possible. Don't charge it in random places. Keep it in "Flight/Airplane Mode" and "Turn off Location Services." GPS doesn't track you—but cell phone towers can get your location within 15–30 feet.

Install Signal to send messages and enable disappearing messages in each conversation. Don't use ordinary text messages, normal voice calls, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Facetime, or Instagram. These can all be used against you and record your data forever.

Share footage with friends via Bluetooth. Don't connect to random wifi access points. If you buy things while you're in the streets, use cash. Your credit card purchases and bank account ATM locations can be used to track you. This also applies to sending money online.

After the protest—don't publish photos without removing metadata. Download and screenshot the photos, or use a tool like "Image Scrubber". Don't brag or speculate about who did what.

Be careful uploading. Your computer IP address reveals your approximate location—it can be tracked to your personal machine. Install Tor Browser torproject.org or Brave (brave.com) using a "Private Window with Tor" (top right) to post sensitive information.

Masking and Proper Attire

Wearing a mask is responsible from a medical perspective—in the era of the pandemic—but also for security reasons, to protect your privacy. Nowadays you don't just have to worry about the police filming and arresting you, but also about far-right internet trolls trying to identify you from video footage.

If demonstrators are dressed appropriately in black bloc fashion, it should be difficult to make out identifying particulars.

Pay attention to detail. Cover your tattoos and other unique traits. Cover your whole face, not just your mouth. There should be no visible logos on your clothes, shoes, or backpack. Read *Fashion Tips for the Brave* for more details.

Riot Ribs, Food Carts, Infrastructure

It is really good for morale to have a group of people providing food and other needed resources. Portland protesters have been deeply thankful that Riot Ribs have come out to feed everyone free food. This enables people to stay longer and helps them to feel that it is worth the effort and risk to support the movement that nourishes them.

Feds and cops know how important these mutual aid efforts are and intentionally target them in hopes of breaking the will of the demonstrators. You can "before" and "after" shots of the infrastructure one night that federal mercenaries attacked it.

Unfortunately, uniformed officers are not the only danger threatening community infrastructure. In late July, Riot Ribs experienced a coup involving physical violence and intimidation. Wherever money is involved in activism, there is great risk of infighting unless the goals, structures, and expectations have been set very precisely in advance. The original Riot Ribs folks have left town, apparently taking the concept of Riot Ribs on the road to other cities as Revolution Ribs. Someone should write in detail about the rise, fall, and rebirth of Riot Ribs.

Leaf Blowers

Leaf blowers can dispel tear gas or smoke.

Tear “gas” is actually a fine particulate matter—imagine a bag of flour exploding, but much finer and lighter. When this particulate lands on you, it stays there and can be re-activated later, especially by water or sweat. For this reason, demonstrators have used leaf blowers to blow tear gas off of people after exposure—it is the same concept as taking a shower at the beach to get the last of the sand off your body.

Be careful not to blow tear gas in a direction where it could affect other people.

A single leaf blower can serve to blow gas from a single canister away from people until others can extinguish it, as demonstrated in Hong Kong. But for best results, use several leaf blowers together.

When you’re choosing a leaf blower, make sure it has a good fan and a wireless power source.

Leaf blowers work well in combination with umbrellas and shields. While the shields protect demonstrators against impact munitions, the leaf blowers keep the gas moving away from protesters until someone can run up and extinguish the canister or throw it back at the assaulters who shot it. Teamwork!

This article traces the origins of the leaf blower as a tool of struggle, from Hong Kong to the debut of the “dad bloc” in Portland.

In some cases during the clashes in Portland, demonstrators with leaf blowers and other tools were able to keep the tear gas that federal mercenaries deployed entirely within the fence surrounding the so-called Justice Center.

A few people in Portland have employed other less effective tools—such as box fans—for the same purpose.

Not wishing to be outdone, federal mercenaries in Portland used a fogger to spray demonstrators with poison.

Umbrellas

Umbrellas can serve several functions at once. An umbrella can block a stream of pepper spray. A full line of umbrellas at the front of a demonstration can block the view of unwanted cameras and police spotters stationed on rooftops—for example, concealing efforts to attack the joints of the fence, or making it safer to change clothes or employ other tactics. While not a reliable substitute for a shield, an umbrella can also aid in deflecting

police bullets, green and blue powder marker rounds, and the laser spotters used by police to identify troublemakers.

On January 20, 2017, during the fierce resistance to the inauguration of Donald Trump, a single umbrella played a crucial role in enabling a large number of demonstrators in the black bloc to break out of a police kettle and escape arrest. Previously seen in demonstrations in Hong Kong, the umbrella has become an anti-fascist symbol of sorts.

In Portland, people with umbrellas have worked shoulder to shoulder with those carrying shields, creating a phalanx that can hold a line in a street, offering cover and protection to those behind them. In at least one case, demonstrators have forced federal mercenaries to retreat back into their courthouse by slowly advancing in a line like this.

For their part, police haven't hesitated to randomly steal demonstrators' umbrellas.

Shields

So far, in Portland, shields have mostly been used in defense against attacks from a distance—such as impact munitions, tear gas grenades, and the like—rather than against batons or police charges.

Different shield designs are better for different situations. Like umbrellas and leaf blowers, shields can do things in large numbers that they cannot do alone. If you want to form a shield wall, ideally your shield should be big enough to cover your body. But the bigger your shield is, the heavier, bulkier, and more difficult to transport it will be. Smaller shields can be lighter and easier to sneak into a protest area. Many people have been carrying smaller shields with them while playing other roles besides maintaining the shield wall. Having even just a little bit of protection has saved people from serious injury and provided the confidence to hold territory they might not otherwise have been able to.

A common Portland shield design involves cutting a plastic barrel vertically into three or four curved rectangles, leaving the circles from the top and bottom of the barrel for making smaller shields.

On the other hand, to form a shield wall, it is best to be able to line up shields so that they overlap slightly, as even slight breaks in the wall can present a vulnerability. Consequently, plywood may be preferable to barrels for that particular application.

Some in Portland have experimented with using lubricant on the edges of shields to make it more difficult for police to grab them during charges.

Make sure you're using an effective technique when taking blows. If you are using a tall shield, hold it very tightly against your body where the center of your chest is; that makes you harder to move, preventing your adversary from pushing you around by your shield and ensuring that even if your shield moves, it still covers your body.

Sports Equipment

You can use sporting equipment to catch tear gas and throw it back. Just as you would when using a leaf blower, make sure you're communicating well with other demonstrators and have a well-thought-out plan regarding what you are going to do with the canisters.

Some of the most effective tools for this purpose include lacrosse sticks, wiffle ball scoopers, and kitchen mitts—anything that enables you to engage with the canisters without touching them directly.

Demonstrators have used hockey sticks to hit the canisters back, too. Some people have been upgrading their umbrellas—for example, duct-taping an umbrella upside down on a lacrosse stick or hockey stick handle. The user can flip the tool around and use the side that makes the most sense in a given situation.

Although there are many videos on the internet of people attempting to cover tear gas canisters with traffic cones and the like, it is a much better idea to extinguish them in containers of water. To deal with those tear gas canisters, take a water jug with a wide mouth, pick up the canister with protective gloves, drop it in the jug, and shake the jug while covering the top with your hand just enough that the gas doesn't get out. It can help to put a little baking soda, dish soap, and/or vegetable oil in the jug of water—3 tablespoons of each to 1 liter of water. Don't seal the bottle. You don't want it to explode.

Balloons and Bubbles

Demonstrators have used balloons to show which way the wind is blowing—in order to know which way tear gas will blow—and identify a rallying point on the ground. They have also employed bubbles to mock the force of the police.

Lasers

In Portland, demonstrators have used lasers to disorient police and federal agents; they can also disable security cameras. It's worth noting that pointing a laser at someone's face is expressly illegal in Oregon and can draw a more aggressive response from police than defensive tools such as gas masks, shields, and leaf blowers. Those who have employed lasers by themselves have been targeted for arrest or shot with pepper balls and rubber bullets, as it is easy to trace the source of the laser unless the person directing it moves around rapidly between applications.

Almost all the lasers seen in Portland during the last weekend in July were the cheaper green ones, the 303's (~50 mW), which can be deployed en masse to provide cover and irritate police. But the more powerful blue ones (~1w to 4w) are more effective against police, helicopters, and drones. They cost roughly $45 to $100.

Portlanders have also combined laser usage with high-powered flashlights on strobe function, in an effort to prevent the police from getting a good visual read on the crowd. Using bright lights to backlight a crowd might make it difficult for officers to pick out individuals at the front.

Police also use lasers to identify demonstrators for targeting.

Graffiti

This is so obvious that it almost doesn't bear mentioning, but demonstrators have painted inspiring messages all over the area in which these clashes have taken place, underscoring the determination of the participants. Federal agents have intentionally refrained from cleaning graffiti off the courthouse in order to pose as helpless victims, when in fact their violent provocations have been the chief cause of the entire sequence of conflict. Nonetheless, although images of graffiti on federal property may serve to outrage far-right voters who already supported Trump and his goons, these images also convey the courageous defiance of those who are standing up to the authorities.

Paint Bombs

Demonstrators have used paint to reduce the vision of officers wearing visors or utilizing transparent shields. Officers need clear vision to be able to go on attacking people.

One of the classic models for making a paint bomb is to inflate a small balloon and dip it into wax over and over until the wax can hold shape by itself, then pop the balloon and fill the vessel with paint. Other containers, such as hollow Christmas tree ornaments, can serve the same function.

Fireworks

The use of fireworks as projectiles to disorient or discourage police and federal agents has made for fantastic visual displays, both in the moment and in the footage that circulates afterwards. Ordinarily, it is irresponsible to aim fireworks at human beings, but the state mercenaries here are equipped with so much taxpayer-funded protective gear that this arguably does more to prevent them from harming others than it does to put them at risk.

On the other hand, many demonstrators are reporting that the booms of fireworks trigger their PTSD as a consequence of the ongoing trauma created by the booms of flash-bang grenades deployed by police. There are tradeoffs to everything.

Fire

Protesters in Portland have used fire to distract officers or to create an ambience of celebration. It's important to be very conscious about safety issues when people are doing this; in some instances, trees or human beings have been exposed to flame. Some protesters have used mortar fireworks to set fires from a distance.

The question of whether fire is appropriate at these protests has been hotly contested between demonstrators who are oriented towards symbolic displays and those who are focused on direct confrontation. Self-appointed protest police have been quick to put out fires, talk people out of setting them, and hassle people who have started them.

All of the fires in question have been purely symbolic—in contrast to the burning of the Third Precinct in Minneapolis, nothing significant has been burned. Fire has been employed to burn flags, trash, the elk statue and its location after it was removed, and on one occasion a tiny pile of pamphlets or something like that in the police union (PPA) building. So all the debate is about symbolic fires.

Fence Toppling

Since the end of May, the police have installed several fences in Portland in attempts to control demonstrations, and demonstrators have repeatedly attempted to topple or relocate them. The earlier fences were mostly of the ordinary chainlink variety; protesters dubbed a series of such fences "The Sacred Fence."

A word of caution about those previous fence relocations. Sometimes the fences that were torn down were left discarded in street intersections, creating a hazard of tripping or

injury, especially when officers subsequently attacked with tear gas, forcing blinded demonstrators to retreat hastily. Be mindful about where you put a fence after you dismantle it.

In late July, the authorities built an industrial barrier around the federal courthouse with a sturdier frame, fencing, and smaller holes, anchoring it with concrete blocks at the back. On subsequent nights, the blocks were moved the front side; protesters and reporters frequently stood on these blocks, but federal mercenaries would target those who did so with considerable fire from impact munition weapons.

On July 25, some demonstrators equipped with power tools including a portable angle grinder managed to topple a section of the fence. The angle grinder was used effectively on the corner of the fence, but ran out of batteries before the job was finished. Lesson: charge up first and bring spare batteries.

The use of power tools was new. Umbrellas and shields were critical in protecting the operator from press cameras and impact munitions, while leaf blowers kept the smoke away.

“Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world,” as Archimedes said. Ultimately, the section of fence was pulled down toward the protestors side by a wide line of people, after earlier attempts to pull it apart at the place where the angle grinder had been employed, using a line of people pulling on ropes.

Possible improvements could include finishing the cuts into the hinges or using a sledgehammer to bang through an unfinished cut. It could make sense to arrange to have two sets of ropes pulling on both the left and right sides of a seam where the cut was made: two deep lines instead of one wide line. As people have discovered in the process of toppling statues, it is important to use a strap or chain that has no elasticity, rather than a rope that has too much give.

Protesters have used sections of the chainlink fence as “shields,” but these do not block gas or impact munitions. They have also used them, at least symbolically, to “barricade” the courthouse doors closed from the outside. This never actually stopped federal agents, as no one ever attempted to block the doors at the back of the courthouse.

At one point, demonstrators filled parts of the fence with expanding foam to prevent federal agents from shooting through it.

Whether it was acceptable to shake or topple the fence became a point of contention between the protest police and front liners.

De-Arresting

During the clashes in Portland, demonstrators have repeatedly freed people from police and federal mercenaries who were attempting to kidnap them. Successful de-arrests are usually only possible when demonstrators massively outnumber those attempting to kidnap them. To succeed, the action has to happen so fast that there isn’t time for police or federal reinforcements to respond.

De-arrests are risky and can result in much higher charges than the original arrest. It is not a tactic to employ lightly. However, if the balance of numbers and power are in the demonstrators' favor, successful de-arrests can show state or federal mercenaries that it is not worth grappling with a group of protesters, convincing them to shift to dispersal tactics.

Crowd Movement

Generally speaking, as long as the police are not prepared to kettle and mass-arrest everyone, the surest way for individuals to avoid arrest when police are pressing into a crowd to split it up is to follow the largest part of the crowd. This is because—all other things being equal—the biggest crowd is usually the hardest for them to deal with. This insight scales up, since the best approach for crowds is to stay as large as they can.

We have seen this with the crowds in Portland, where people have learned to stick together in large groups when the police attack, moving slowly and calmly rather than running and not retreating more than necessary—one block is typically the most that the police in Portland will advance at a time. There are chants about this: "Stay together, stay tight; we do this every night," reminding everyone that there is no reason to take exceptional risks to one's personal safety if one can return the next night to accomplish the same action more safely with more friends.

There are other factors to bear in mind, of course. It's better to be with a group that is aware of its surroundings, quick on its feet, and capable of defending itself than to be with a group that is sluggish, confused, and easily intimidated.

In Portland, we have repeatedly seen police employ a "bull rush" in which they charge at full clip while using some combination of tear gas, pepper spray, impact munitions, and batons on everyone in their path. If you are not part of a crowd big enough and equipped enough to prevent the police from injuring or picking off individuals, it's important to be ready to run. Cops can't sprint very far.

Disabling Cameras, Breaking Windows

People have used paint and other tactics to prevent surveillance cameras from filming demonstrators. Some demonstrators have also broken windows—a tactic that can serve to draw the attention of the police away from what they were trying to do before. If you are engaged in any sort of activity like this, it is especially important to dress properly (see above). It can be worthwhile to dispose of all the clothes you were wearing after an incident.

What's more expensive—another run to the thrift store, or bail money, court fees, and a lawyer?

Legal Support, Jail Support

It has been very important to organize proper legal support in Portland with federal mercenaries arresting people every night. Even if you can't go to the actions, you can help bail people out of jail or raise money to contribute to bail funds.

A movement that combines a wide range of the tactics described here—the way demonstrators have done in Portland—can hold space in the face of considerable state violence. Unfortunately, this may soon be necessary all around the United States.

Be like water—keep your mask tight—and destroy what destroys you.

find each other.

anti-copyright
creative commons zero (cc-0)
do whatever you want

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