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USA

“Cop City” Must Be Shut Down!

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What is Atlanta's “Cop City”? Why are people protesting?

Protests began in 2021 when the city announced plans to open Cop City – officially called the Public Safety Training Center (PSTC).

The large police training center, to be constructed on forest land owned by the city, has garnered national attention from Democratic and Republican supporters of “fighting crime” by giving police more weapons and powers. The Biden Administration is behind hiring tens of thousands of cops with little community oversight.

On January 18 police raided the campground occupied by demonstrators and shot and killed Manuel Esteban Paez Terán (known as Tortuguita). Since his death there have been nonstop demonstrations, with many arrested and charged with “domestic terrorism.”

Officers involved in the shooting claimed that Teran fired the first shot, hitting a state trooper in the abdomen and prompting them to return fire. Teran’s family said a private autopsy found he was shot 13 times.

A March autopsy report contradict the police allegations. The report said Teran was sitting cross-legged with hands in the air at the time. The protester’s family said that the released results of an autopsy they commissioned proves the killing was premeditated.

Police claim there was no body camera footage of the incident.

Following the fatal shooting, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security released a bulletin, obtained by ABC News, saying that since the shooting, suspected domestic violent extremists “have cited the incident as justification for violence.”

Joint Effort to Stop Cop City

Movements for police reform and restructuring, along with environmental groups such as Defend the Atlanta Forest, strongly oppose Cop City. The police have responded with armed force against environmentalists.

Some activists have fought back against the police violence with rocks and fireworks, and a few have thrown Molotov cocktails at or near the center’s site.

Arrests have been random. For example, a law student from North Carolina at the protest was charged with “domestic terrorism” and has not been allowed to attend her law school classes. So much for being presumed innocent. She was not the only one. Many of the arrest warrants issued had a designation of “domestic violent extremists.”

Yet there is no such designation in federal law. It’s why those who led the January 6, attempted insurrection, and invaded the Capitol building with the aim of keeping Donald Trump as president, were charged with other criminal charges — mainly misdemeanors.

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Terrorism, under the federal criminal code, is only charged for those allegedly tied to foreign groups designated as such (for example, ISIS and Al Qaeda).

Forest Protectors

One of the groups behind the protests, “Stop Cop City,” has demonstrated against the training facility for months. They say the center is further militarizing the police and will threaten the lives of marginalized people.

They pointed out that police have been raiding the forest for over seven months, destroying material by trashing camps and water supplies and threatening the lives of forest defenders. As the result, Tortuguita was murdered.

In a statement to an ABC news affiliate they concluded: “Protesters are only leveling the playing field & preventing future violence by disabling the economic machine of the Atlanta Police Foundation that seeks to sterilize all life within the Weelaunee Forest.”

Other groups, like Defend the Atlanta Forest, have argued that the center will impact forests that are a vital part of the community.

Atlanta has one of the highest percentages of tree canopy in any major U.S. city, according to environmental advocacy group Trees Atlanta, and is home to wetlands and important migration sites for birds.

“The Atlanta Police Department seeks to turn 300 acres of forest into a tactical training compound featuring a mock city,” the group said in a statement on their website.

“We refuse to let our forest be bulldozed in favor of the police and sold out to Hollywood.” (Georgia has a growing film industry because of large tax incentives and impressive landscape.)

Neither the city of Atlanta nor the police department have responded to ABC News’ request for comment on the accusations.

The center is expected to cost \$90 million and take up over 85 acres, with the “remaining portion of the 265-acres property as green space,” according to the center’s website, impacting a forest in Atlanta. The first phase of the training center is scheduled to open in late 2023.

It is city-owned property in unincorporated DeKalb County that is within the larger South River Forest, or “Weelaunee” as it’s called by the land’s Indigenous people.

Both the Democratic Atlanta mayor and Republican Georgia governor have argued that the new center will help officers “set a national standard for community engagement, neighborhood sensitivity and devotion to the civil rights of all citizens by law enforcement,” the center’s website reads.

The Democratic mayor signed off on the expanded center in 2021, in the wake of mass protests organized by the Black Lives Matter Movement and local reformers calling for a radical restructuring of the policing system.

The mayor along with the governor, not surprisingly, have called protesters “outsiders” and charged them as “domestic terrorists.”

State of Emergency

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Governor Brian Kemp declared a state of emergency on January 26 in response to ongoing protests in downtown Atlanta relating to Cop City. Kemp ordered the state’s defense department to mobilize up to 1000 state National Guard troops to be called up to active duty “as necessary.”

Authorities arrested six people on January 21 when demonstrations over the proposed training ground for the Atlanta Police Department. Protests started peacefully, escalated to involve shooting fireworks, smashing windows and igniting a police cruiser once protesters reached downtown.

Kemp’s state of emergency declaration, according to local media reports, came as Atlanta braced for more protests against the facility, as well as potential unrest following the release of body camera footage of the fatal beating of Tyre Nichols by five Memphis, Tennessee police officers.

On March 5, more than 30 people were arrested after police said a group of “agitators” launched an attack on officers using commercial-grade fireworks.

Atlanta Police Department officials say that after attending an event near the site of the soon-to-be policing center, a group of people changed into black clothing and entered the construction area. No officers were injured during the incident. According to police, some of those arrested sustained minor injuries, and several pieces of construction equipment at the site were destroyed.

After attending a music festival near the site of the soon-to-be police center, a group of people the police called “agitators” approached the officers. Twenty-three of the 35 protesters arrested, ranging from ages 18 to 49, were charged overnight with felony domestic terrorism. Atlanta Police Chief Darin Schierbaum claimed the charge reflects the “very violent” nature of the attack.

Police noted that 21 of the suspects charged with domestic terrorism were from out of state, some from as far away as Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New York. Two protesters charged are from other countries.

No officers were seriously injured during the protest. What the police and officials tell the public is mostly pro-police propaganda.

The opponents of “Cop City” remain vigilant and determined. They’re gaining multiracial national support from both those demanding fundamental police reforms and environmental activists fighting to save the forests.

It is ironic that they are facing the same charge of domestic terrorism made against Martin Luther King, Jr. (who was from Atlanta) in fighting segregation across the South in the 1950s and 1960s before Jim Crow laws were overturned.

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