The Fight Against Cops

written by brian bean | February 9, 2026

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Walking daily to the grocery or the bus stop, one block from my home in Chicago, I pass a red octagonal traffic sign that has been improved with a sticker reading "Stop Cop City." It is not uncommon to see the slogan of a movement over seven hundred miles away in Atlanta fighting to stop the construction of Cop City—otherwise known as the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center—stickered, painted, and wheat-pasted on surfaces around our Midwestern metropolis. The local struggle in Atlanta to stop Cop City became a national movement that resonated due to its resilience, creativity, flexibility, and popular militancy. In both its hope and its tragedy, Stop Cop City portends both the trajectory of intensification of the police state in a world in crisis and the contours of what our resistance can be like. We can learn from this organizing of everyday Atlantans, providing vital lessons for our movements against racist cops and cages.

Thankfully these lessons are recounted in the tremendous recent book, *No Cop City, No Cop World: Lessons from the Movement,* edited by Micah Herskind, Mariah Parker, and Kamau Franklin. The volume collects the voices and perspectives of participants in a series of essays recounting the many angles of the struggle. The book really captures what it feels like to be in a movement, the electricity and solidarity of people in motion, moving forward with great speed at times and crashing against entrenched barriers at others, of debates about strategy and tactics, of people finding roles and figuring out what to do and how to organize as they are being thrown forward by the pace of history. Along with its strength at capturing a historical snapshot of an inspiring movement, the book presents a series of powerful lessons about a struggle that is both local—against a cop training facility in Atlanta—and international, reflecting the intensification of the police state due to ongoing capitalist crisis and the movement from below against it.

Among the lessons we gain is seeing how policing is a ruling-class solution for the economic and political crisis driven by capitalism. We see how the integration of a Black bourgeois political class in cities like Atlanta produces few answers to structures of anti-Black racism in this country. We see how a united movement with a diversity of tactics can—to quote the editors in their introduction—"overwhelm the enemy on all fronts and with all tactics to make Cop City as untenable, toxic, and challenging as possible for those working to build it" (5). Atlanta forces us to take seriously the perfidy and determination of the police state and the repression used against us if challenged. Marlon Kautz—cofounder of Atlanta Solidarity Fund—lays this out starkly in his essay in which he points out that this challenge is "one which any future movement must prepare for if it intends to challenge the powerful and win" (242).

The Atlanta Way: Context for the Struggle

Like the red oak and Loblolly pines of Weelaunee forest defended by the movement, *No Cop City, No*

Cop World firmly roots the current struggle in time and place. Mekko Chebon Kernell writes of the forests being the ancestral land of the indigenous Myskoke peoples stolen by the ravages of settler colonialism. The book includes an eviction notice a group of Myskoke organizers delivered to Atlanta's mayor Andre Dickens. No Cop World means Land Back. Layered upon the ghosts of settler-colonial dispossession, the Atlanta Press Collective describes how the current location was also the site of the Atlanta Prison Farm, tracing a "straight line of carceral violence" through six decades of abuse and torture that occurred there on literally hundreds of unmarked graves. Moving into the contemporary, the excellent essay by journalist Micah Herskind provides an understanding of the political economy of Cop City's construction. In an analysis evoking Ruth Wilson Gilmore's seminal work on the construction of California's mass-incarceration edifice, Herskind puts forward that "Cop City is the Atlanta ruling class's solution to a set of crises produced by decades of organized abandonment in the city" (13).

Herskind maps out changes in the city dating back to rapid, publicly funded private development and gentrification fueled by Atlanta's hosting of the Olympics in 1996. This exemplifies trends in many American cities related to the decline of manufacturing and the rise of finance, investment, and real estate (FIRE) capital. In the words of Sean Larson and Tyler Zimmer writing in *Rampant* (rampantmag.com/2020/02/who-runs-chicago/) writing about the Chicago example: "the central feature of FIRE is that it sees cities not as living environments for people, but as investment climates for capital." The result of this was that Atlanta policymakers worked to ensure that the city had a "good business climate" for investment. By 2022 outlets like *Money* and *Realtor Magazine* named Atlanta as the "best place to live" and the "top real estate market" in the country, while it was at the same time "proclaimed the most unequal city in the country" (15). This polarization is of course no accident. What is termed "the Atlanta Way" of strategic partnership between white economic elites and Black political leadership meant that the always racialized project of gentrification correlated with the organized economic abandonment of Black Atlantans. And of course, the shock troops of that project are the police, meaning that while affordable housing and homeless shelters were being closed, the Atlanta Police Department budget continued to grow—today accounting for a third of the city budget.

And then it exploded. The 2020 George Floyd and Breonna Taylor rebellions surged through the country's streets. In Atlanta, one focal point of the uprising became the police killing of Rayshard Brooks in a Wendy's parking lot in the weeks after the national protests began. The community immediately responded to the murder of Brooks by burning the Wendy's to the ground and initiating a community occupation of the parking lot in attempts to set up the Rayshard Brooks Peace Center (56). In response, Atlanta's corporate class demanded stability and thus the city and the private Atlanta Police Foundation moved to push forward the Cop City project to "provide a material investment in police capacity on the heels of the uprising, as a project to prepare for and prevent future rebellion" as well as an "ideological investment in the image of Atlanta…as a stable securitized city that will protect their interests" and as another example of repurposing public land, in this case valuable greenspace, into an opportunity for more development (14).

No Cop City is systematic in breaking down the ruling class interests driving Cop City. Mariah Parker's chapter in the book—"Boss Terror"—traces the completely overlapping list of corporations and CEOs who "slip plunder into the piggy banks of their local police foundations" to directly subsidize the sprawling training facilities (60 million in private dollars to Cop City), high-tech surveillance, and lethal gadgetry of the police. Eva Dickerson outlines how, along with the corporate elite, the city's "Black misleadership class"—including progressive Democratic party luminaries like Stacy Abrams and Raphael Warnock—"lends respectability to racial inequality."

In Herskind's chapter and throughout the book the significance of Cop City as a localized iteration of a strategy being pursued nationally is continually noted. An estimated sixty-nine similar "Cop Cities"

are being planned in cities around the country as local governments aim to reinforce the police fix for the various consequences of capitalist crisis. I write about this in my recent book on policing (*Their End Is Our Beginning: Cops, Capitalism, and Abolition*, Haymarket, 2025) that "for the ruling class, all the problems created by this tumultuous situation [of capitalist crisis and revolt] have one primary solution: more police" (188). "State reliance," I write, "on repressive 'solutions' has intensified and will continue to do so" (188). Cop City, and the intensity that it was pushed through, is a starkly clear example of this.

"Get Up, Get Out, and Get Something": Lessons of Advances

From the heroic organizing in Atlanta we can draw relevant and poignant lessons for our organizing around the country. Chief among these is the strength of the movement in trying to operate on many fronts to pressure and contest the destruction of the forest and construction of the fancy pig pen. *No Cop City* outlines the impressive breadth of these. One example was that understanding the collusion of capital and mainstream media, and knowing that the "corporate media was not going to report accurately or favorably on opposition to a policing project that the city power structure had coalesced around," the Atlanta Community Press Collective (ACPC) worked to not just document the movement, and raise up alternative voices, but to craft a counter-narrative and "make the day-to-day workings of local government accessible to the public" as a tool for action (162). The ACPC continually responded to the narratives of mainstream media and Hannah Riley notes in her chapter that the city complained regularly about how the ACPC stymied their attempts to control the story. Ashley Dixon, an organizer with Southern Crossroads, gives a how-to on the nitty-gritty work of canvassing, knocking on doors, holding townhalls, and family-friendly events with facepainting and bouncy houses to build the movement at the same time that others in the book outline the important role that direct sabotage of the machinery used in construction played. Paul Torrino's essay "The Saboteurs" and an anonymous account of one of the forest defenders who lived in the forest attempting to stop its destruction approaches the topic with a directness and groundedness that sometimes is absent from some pieces that seem to fetishize sabotage.

Torrino smartly points out that sabotage as a tactic is often deployed by left-wing activists as what he calls "militant reformism." The theory of change being that "if the project or industry becomes more expensive than the foreseeable profits or benefits, it will be canceled"—essentially a pressure campaign akin to a mass call-in campaign against a politician, albeit carried out with flame and baseball bat. In the example of Stop Cop City, Torrino outlines a different strategy of "fighting like winning matters," meaning not just hoping to problematize the actions of the building of the forest but seeing the acts of direct action and sabotage as a component of trying to build a "widespread mass radicalization" antagonistic to the police and structures of government. The breadth of the sabotage and the strength of the movement that refuses to be split by the "good protester / bad protester" dynamic and grows through these tactics reflects this. In her essay, Eva Dikerson writes of this dynamic, saying, "when we are closer than ever to cohering a mass of people who understand that we are at war with the state, the effectiveness of sabotage cannot be overemphasized." Torrino also smartly embeds this discussion of sabotage by describing the different and necessary roles that "underground" and "aboveground" activists play, noting that "underground" actions alone don't actually build the kind of "mass orientation" needed, even given the important roles that sabotage plays. Torrino provides one example in which a direct action at a construction company resulted in the employee coming out to tell the activists that their company was no longer involved "because you guys are a fucking nightmare and you broke all our fucking windows." Direct "nightmarish" action gets the goods. But "move things fast to change a few things right away, move things slow to change many in the long term," he writes.

The book outlines the many facets of this mass orientation, with descriptions of Morehouse and Emory students discussing building a student movement, ongoing legal challenges by long-term

environmental groups like the South River Watershed Alliance, and a narrative of the important role that groups like Community Movement Builders played mobilizing the Black community as essential to contesting the Black Democratic party narrative. Organizers Kamau Franklin and Curtis Duncan offer a healthy description of solidarity and why they did not see it an issue that early on many of the people on the ground were white. The initial "lack of participation from the larger Black community" led to more self-critique of how to mobilize Black organizations rather than the "pushing against non-Black support" that sometimes counterproductively arises in movements, particularly those more fixated on online spaces. The chapter talks about the amassing of this support, culminating in a large demonstration directed at the mayor, with Franklin taunting Mayor Dinkins with the rhetorical quip "is this enough Black people for you, Andre?"

Along with the coexistence of bouncy castles and the burning of construction vehicles, of sylvan encampments and indigenous stomp dances, one of the best examples of the Atlanta activists' ability to create a "multi-tactical movement" aiming to "use all the tools at our disposal to stop Cop City in its tracks" was the organized petitioning attempting to force a public referendum on the matter (175). After a City Council meeting regarding the planned construction shattered the record for in-person turnout, resulting in a marathon fourteen hours of testimony of people speaking against Cop City, organizers launched a campaign to force a public referendum. With a clear unity of principles, the initiative to "Let the People Decide" was started in June of 2023 with no money, no offices, no Georgia-specific ballot-initiative experience, but with a team of talented organizers sure that "everyone knows their people and where they are, so go find them" (176). They set out to get the 58,000 signatures on a petition needed to call a public referendum on Cop City. And find them they did as tireless organizing and appealing to democracy allowed them to smash through their goal, getting 116,000 signatures. This underscores the mass popularity of the struggle as no politician in Atlanta's history has ever gotten that many votes, indeed that amount is more than double the number of people who voted for the current mayor. Stopping the creation of this police playground was more popular than any elected official in Atlanta's history. But the attempt at referendum also underscores the blatant lack of democracy and intense repression in Atlanta, presenting massive challenges—from which another layer of lessons can be learned.

"Forever Hollerin' 'Hootie Hoo!' When We See Cops": Lessons of Setbacks

The intense reaction to the movement to stop the construction of the training facility presents a clear picture of struggles against the police. The chapter about the referendum—written by Mary Hooks and Kate Shapiro, two organizers with Southerners on New Ground—details how the mass, democratic, and public strategy resulting in record-breaking levels of support at council meetings and on the petition was met by the city blatantly ignoring democracy. The city deployed a vast array of administrative and bureaucratic obstacles to reject the clear mandate for a referendum from Atlanta's residents, from the city clerk refusing to accept the petition, to city councilors encouraging Atlantans to call the police on canvassers, to legal challenges to verify signatures, to publicly publishing—essentially doxing—the personal information of all petition signatories, to the city council refusing to put the issue on the ballot, to many other "shenanigans." On top of this the state also resorted to more brute methods of intimidation, violence, and murder.

In the chapter "Defending Our Movement," Atlanta Solidarity Fund (ASF) founder Marlon Kautz describes some of the lessons. Kautz describes a substantial campaign of police terror designed to break up the movement. Regular raids by paramilitary SWAT police on homes and in the forest camps, filling children's bedrooms with tear gas, people being arrested for writing No Cop City in chalk on sidewalks, mass arrests of people for attending a benefit concert, terrorism charges and the use of the RICO Act to charge as racketeering activities as simple as flyering and labeling the ASF a "criminal organization" (229). And, of course, most criminally the cops carried out the cold-blooded assassination of activist Manuel "Tortuguita" Terán as activists sat on the ground in their tent with

their hands up in an early morning police raid. Kautz writes: “The powerful interests behind a project [like Cop City] can only advance by interfering with public participation in governance, and such interference requires repression. This is a major obstacle for the movement against Cop City, and one which any future movement must prepare for if it intends to challenge the powerful and win” (242).

One thing I found curious is that sadly Cop City was built before the book went to press. But this fact is essentially absent from the book. How do we, without losing the inspiring lessons that are also present—reflect on that fact in the context of the obstacles laid out. What does it mean that one of the powerful slogans of the movement that many of us chanted was the confident declaration that “Cop City will never be built!” Now that it has been built, how does that refract any of the lessons of the experience of those that fought, and those that suffered, and those that died. When we “fight like winning matters” how do we talk about our losses?

In any case, one of the critical lessons Kautz shares about Stop Cop City that we should all solemnly heed is that “for organizers, obeying the law is not a reliable strategy for avoiding repression” (244). This insight is essential for movements to really grasp: it is *how much* our activity materially or ideologically threatens those whom we oppose and not the legal definitions of the activity that determines whether the state will act against us. Therefore, he writes, “a plan to avoid repression is a plan to lose. Movements that intend to win must plan from the beginning to withstand repression” (245). To do so activists must build an infrastructure in advance to prepare for the repression bound to occur should their movement actually pose a challenge to the powerful. They should also try to reframe this work beyond just ways to reduce the harm caused by the forces of repression but attempting to “approach each new attack as an engine for future growth” by always looking to revise and expand movement practices to try to expose the vulnerability of a state resorting to more blatant forms of repression. On the last point, which seems quite important, I would have appreciated more concrete description from Kautz. Most critically though Kautz, and many others in the book describe the importance of the movement resisting the distinction of “good” or “bad” protesters to push back against the criminalization of dissent that these experiences of Stop Cop City show us are always going to be deployed against our movements even if care is taken to “obey the law.”

Resistance Is Everywhere

The Stop Cop City movement writes like fiery letters upon Belshazzar’s wall the stakes of what our movements for abolition are up against. In Atlanta, we see the local government cast democratic norms to the side, deploy a massive campaign of legal challenges and obfuscation, mobilize the entirety of corporatized media as stenographers for the police, wage a campaign of police harassment and arrest, attack with militarized SWAT raids, mass arrests, issue terrorism charges, essentially outlaw movement organizations, and assassinate an activist. All of this because regular citizens didn’t want a forest to be razed and a fancy training facility built for the police. The state carried out a massive, multi-faceted campaign of repression deploying an arsenal of resources and tactics was meted out even though what was at stake was not even as core as something like taking away the cops’ guns, decreasing their ranks, holding them accountable, or even making it more difficult to carry out their violent behavior. The state attacked, with lethally violent force, in reaction to a movement merely attempting to halt the cops’ *expansion* of new tools and resources. If Cop City was not built it would be—as I write in my book—“a minor setback for capital, but [the state’s] response was violence and murder. If we strike closer to the heart of their power and wealth, we can only expect a heavier hand of repression. We know the ferocity with which they are capable” (207). We must prepare.

This expansion of cops’ ability to use violence, this intensification of the police state is in some ways a long arc if one looks at—for example—the visible difference between a blue-coated beat cop of the

late nineteenth century, and the stormtrooper-esque super soldier of today's departments. But this intensification of the police state is—as *No Cop City, No Cop World* lays out—one that is a product of capitalist crisis, a crisis that portends to not only not go away but to deepen. "The stakes seem to be rising for both sides," writes Ruth Wilson Gilmore in her expansive contribution to the collection, and what is at stake is clearly class war. And, as she reminds us, "you can't reform a war away" (278). Rather the war must be won by smashing the police state, the cops, and the very means that our opponents use to carry out reaction, repression, and counterrevolution.

The reason that the struggle to Stop Cop City has such importance is that it reflects the struggles of the future. "Cop City Is Everywhere," the book's editors write in the conclusion, but also "Resistance Is Everywhere." As a tremendous document capturing the heartbeats and voices of a struggle from which we have a lot to learn to educate us on the battles of the class war we are currently fighting, it is a compass for liberation. The voice of the martyr Tortuguita is one of those contained in the text: "When all hope seems lost, Class war." Struggle is hope, and our hope is in struggle.