

The Struggle to Stop Cop City—By Any Means Necessary

September 13, 2023



Reposted from *The Forge: A history of Stop Cop City and the struggle to defend the Atlanta Forest*. A must read for anyone interested in getting the whole story and understanding the strategic thinking informing some of the most important organizing in the country or understanding the stakes of the 61 indictments against protesters involved in the movement.

Cop cars on fire. Occupations of the Weelaunee Forest. Weeks of action. Volunteers with clipboards, collecting referendum petition signatures in the summer heat. Weekly canvassing. Town halls and open mic sessions. Direct action and civil disobedience. Record-breaking numbers of people showing up for public comment (on three separate occasions!). Regular food distributions and mutual aid. Surveillance cameras smashed. Music festivals in the forest. Comrade care clinics. Protests outside the homes of politicians and CEOs. Trivia night fundraisers at local restaurants. Shareholder divestment campaigns. Wheatpasting, movement art, and diss track competitions. Children marching in the streets. Political education and community journalism. Jail support crews sitting vigil for people whose freedom was purchased by bail fund organizers. Bank ATMs vandalized. Corporate pressure campaigns. Marches, demonstrations, and solidarity actions across the globe. Construction equipment burned.

These are all scenes—by no means the full story—from the movement to Stop Cop City: a decentralized, autonomous movement that has worked since the spring of 2021 to stop the destruction of the Weelaunee Forest and the creation of a more than \$90 million urban warfare training center, backed by a coalition of public and private Atlanta elites, in a majority Black working class community.

They are also all activities that the state is aggressively seeking to criminalize, most recently with a sprawling indictment filed days ago that charged 61 people with domestic terrorism and RICO (“racketeer influenced and corrupt organization”). The indictment is a blatant attempt to intimidate

local organizers and movements across the country who are challenging the violence of policing, and to influence public opinion against the popular community-based struggle to stop construction of the facility.

The Stop Cop City movement has made Atlanta an epicenter of abolitionist organizing, weaving together movements for racial, economic, and environmental justice. The movement has no single unifying political framework; it includes abolitionists, anarchists, communists, liberals, libertarians, environmentalists, voting and civil rights activists, Indigenous and anti-settler colonialism organizers, and many more who may not identify with a particular political philosophy but who all choose trees over cops, transparency over backroom deals, and community resources over a burgeoning police state.

The movement's decentralization and diversity of tactics has been one of its greatest strengths, building an astonishing breadth and depth of local, national, and international support. While comprising many different streams of action and thought, each has fed into the movement's broader strategy: call it starving the beast, a war of attrition, or even just throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks, the ethos of the movement is that community members must engage on all fronts to make Cop City as untenable, toxic, and challenging as possible for those working to build it. That we must stop Cop City by any means necessary.

The movement's focus extends far beyond Atlanta's elected leadership, focusing also on the Atlanta Police Foundation and its private backers, project contractors, corporate media, Republican state leadership, and "public private partnerships" such as the Atlanta Committee for Progress that form the bedrock of the city's broader ruling class structure. The struggle has clarified the fundamental nature of Atlanta politics, as the so-called liberal Black Democratic mayor of Atlanta, the conservative white supremacist Republican governor of Georgia, and the web of corporate interests behind them both have coalesced in their attempts to destroy the movement, reinforcing the reality that the two party system remains united on issues of cops and capitalism. But just as the ruling class has consolidated behind Cop City, the Atlanta left is forging its own solidarities and fighting across tendencies and frameworks for a new city altogether.

The Birth of a Movement

The plans for Cop City were first proposed by the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF) as early as 2017, but it was not until the 2020 uprisings calling for a total transformation of the status quo that the City dusted off those plans. As the protests raged in response to the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Atlanta's Rayshard Brooks, the city's ruling class actors quickly consolidated around Cop City as a multifaceted solution to the threats of uprisings, white elite fear, crime panic narratives, police protest, and the corporate desire for stability.

Shortly after the announcement of the plan in January 2021, organizers began canvassing their neighborhoods and building community opposition to the project. A coalition began to formalize in early summer 2021 as organizations like Defund APD, Refund Communities (DARC), Community Movement Builders, A World Without Police, the Atlanta Sunrise Movement, the South River Forest Coalition, and others came together to organize residents against the plan.

Much of the summer 2021 organizing involved engagement with City Hall over the proposed legislation to lease hundreds of acres of forest land to the Atlanta Police Foundation, rallying residents for public comment, protesting outside council members' houses, researching the network of corporations behind the proposal, and building public pressure through political education, banner drops, petition circulation, demonstrations, and town halls.

Atlanta leadership had initially expected the plan to sail through with little resistance. APF is an exceptionally influential actor in Atlanta politics, and few politicians would dare—or even desire—to challenge them. But significant public pressure generated by the campaign successfully delayed the Cop City legislation at the Atlanta City Council's August 2021 meeting in a narrow 8-7 vote. While many expected the legislation to be approved at the following meeting, the delay opened up space to continue organizing and to win minor concessions, while giving corporate donors pause and building the nascent movement's power. In September 2021, residents called in virtually to offer over 17 hours of public comment, the vast majority of which opposed the facility, while activists protested outside the homes of council members (and were promptly arrested). Despite the pressure, the Council approved the legislation with only four dissenting votes.

For many campaigns, a major legislative setback is the time when things fall apart. And in some ways, they did: one organization involved in much of the early organizing, DARC, dissolved in response to attempted co-optation and anti-Blackness, and many organizers experienced the characteristic burnout following a major setback.

But instead of collapse, a new tactic was born and the movement was given new life. Following the September 2021 vote, in the long tradition of land defense, forest defenders took to the Weelaunee Forest and began camping out, building tree huts, erecting campsites, and challenging initial deforestation efforts. Forest defense created a rush of new energy in some of the darkest moments of the struggle to #StopCopCity with an uncompromising call to defend the forest by any means necessary—in the process, deepening analysis of and resistance around the connections between police militarization, climate disaster, environmental racism, Indigenous displacement, genocide, and more. By putting their bodies on the line, forest defenders clarified the stakes of the struggle and made clear that nothing about Cop City would end on the powerful's terms. City Council could approve the project, APF could secure contractors, and the funds could be raised—but none of that means Cop City will be built.

The forest defenders' direct action garnered national and international attention and, alongside other organizing, successfully delayed the issuance of the permits needed to begin construction. Its success was also the reason that city and state leadership eventually resolved to crush it.

While police had terrorized protesters since the beginning of the movement, the end of 2022 marked a new phase of escalation in police violence and repression. In mid-December 2022, police began to intensify raids on the forest encampments, charging six forest defenders that month with domestic terrorism as part of a plan orchestrated by a newly developed task force including APF, the Georgia Bureau of Investigations, DeKalb and Atlanta police, the Federal Bureau of Investigations, the Department of Homeland Security, and others. Just days later, developer Ryan Millsap—who illegally claims to own the county-owned public land adjacent to the city-owned Cop City site—sent a team to demolish the entrance to the park, where much of the organizing and public events had taken place, in a clear act of retaliation against the movement.

The following month, a joint task force marched into the forest on what would become a deadly day. In addition to arresting seven more forest defenders on domestic terrorism charges, police opened fire on Manuel Paez Esteban Terán, known as Tortuguita, ending their life in an act of cold-blooded murder while Tortuguita sat with their hands raised and legs crossed on the ground. More domestic terrorism arrests followed at a protest held just days after Tortuguita's murder, in which a cop car was burned and windows of APF donors were smashed in acts of righteous rage against the system that murdered their comrade.

Having taken control of the forest and cordoned it off to begin clearcutting, the state may have once again expected the movement to end. Instead, it only grew as national and international attention on

Atlanta intensified and new people joined the fight. A March 2023 Week of Action was declared as local organizers invited people from across the country to join the fight for the forest. Once again, the state responded with escalated force, descending on a music festival held in the forest and charging 23 people with domestic terrorism in response to incidents nearly a mile away from the concert. Repression would continue in following months with more arrests, intimidation of activists, and the political arrests of bail fund organizers with the Atlanta Solidarity Fund. Most recently, the state announced a RICO indictment of 61 people allegedly involved in Stop Cop City efforts, representing yet another escalation in the state's attempts to criminalize and cage the movement out of existence.

Organizing on All Fronts

Despite the repression, and in some cases because of the repression, the movement continued to grow and work on many fronts against Cop City. Activists continued to pressure contractors, while others worked through courts and the county commission to challenge the project's construction permits. Canvassing around the forest continued, as organizers hosted town halls and block parties for residents surrounding the forest to get more deeply involved. Movement journalists and researchers with the Atlanta Community Press Collective continued to file open records requests and shed light on the backroom dealings of APF and the city, while attorneys and jail support organizers built out infrastructure to support criminalized protesters. Student organizers became activated and held demonstrations on and off campus, while an infusion of energy and resources from nonprofits who had previously stayed on the sidelines brought more attention and support to organizers on the ground. Others focused on media narratives, working to shape public understanding and combat the city's attempted misinformation, gaining a decisive upper hand in the narrative war online and in national media—even as most local media continues to be a megaphone for powerful Atlanta interests.

While City Hall was a central site of struggle in the early phase of the movement, it was not until the spring of 2023—after years of canvassing, movement building, and consciousness raising—that many in the movement once again engaged heavily with the Atlanta City Council. Through information obtained by movement journalists, organizers learned that legislation would be introduced on May 15th to authorize \$67 million in public funding for Cop City—over double of what was originally promised by the City. Organizers rallied residents to City Hall for public comment, resulting in a record-breaking 7 hours of public comment that unanimously opposed the facility. Three weeks later, on June 5th, Atlanta and DeKalb County residents shattered the record they had just set, speaking for over 14 hours against the proposed funding.

Though the City Council voted to approve the funding, as many expected, these days of public comment were revealing about the state of the movement and the extent to which abolitionist frameworks have taken root in Atlanta. Hundreds who spoke articulated not just what they do not want—Cop City and the destruction of the forest—but also what they do want to see in their communities. Listen to the public comment from June 2023, and you will hear many who may not identify as abolitionists, but for whom an abolitionist ethos has clearly sunk in as they speak to a vision of safety that include well-funded schools, mental and physical healthcare, affordable housing, street lights and paved streets, bike lanes, parks and greenspace, public transportation, arts and culture, child care, and an array of other public services—not more police.

Following the Council's approval of the funding for Cop City in spite of broad opposition, the movement has continued to organize on many fronts. Many have pressed further into the strategy of pressuring contractors and corporations away from the project. Organizers called the movement's sixth Week of Action for the last week of June, during which time activists continued to protest key

corporate Cop City backers and deepen base building efforts.

Meanwhile, activists in Atlanta and across the country have continued to engage in direct action against funders and contractors working to build Cop City. In the last month alone, ATMs were glued shut and windows were spray painted with #StopCopCity messaging at a Chase Bank in Michigan; bricks have been thrown through the windows of UPS stores in Oakland and Bank of America ATMs were destroyed in the Bay Area. In Atlanta, two machines owned by contractor Brent Scarborough were burned, and the home of an executive for general contractor Brasfield & Gorrie was tagged, protests were held outside the house of an Atlas Consulting project manager's house (during which time they learned that Atlas pulled out of the Cop City project because, as he put it, "you guys are fucking nightmares and you broke all of our fucking windows").

At the same time, a newly formed coalition announced a referendum effort to put Cop City on the ballot just days after the funding was approved (though the plan itself had been in development for some months). To put the issue on the ballot, the coalition must gather close to 70,000 signatures, which would trigger an election for Atlanta residents to vote on whether the project moves forward (an effort that is being challenged in court by the City, which has also announced its use of known voter suppression tactics such as signature matching to disqualify signatures).

Solidarity and Care

While opinions vary on the political utility of the referendum strategy—in part over well-founded concerns that an infusion of larger nonprofit resources can co-opt radical energy and threaten to deradicalize movements in pursuit of vague notions of respectability and palatability—the Cop City referendum has been vocal about its support for a diversity of tactics. In June 2023, the coalition released a statement declaring full throated solidarity with the Stop Cop City Week of Action and abolitionist organizing in Atlanta, and rejecting the framing of nonviolent vs. violent resistance "at its very core." When a coalition spokesperson was asked for comment about a small fleet of APD motorcycles that was burned —perhaps an attempt to pit the above-ground effort against the underground one—he responded: "Compared to arresting 76-year-old women and shooting activists who had their hands up? No, we're not worried about the motorcycles."

Mutual aid has been a foundational framework throughout the course of the Stop Cop City movement, with regular food distributions, lending closets, care clinics, and more across Atlanta and in the forest. An ethos of care pervades much of the movement, through both direct support for community members and the creation of infrastructure to defend those targeted for their involvement with the movement. The Atlanta Solidarity Fund (ASF) and legal nonprofits have built out protester support infrastructure to bail out criminalized protesters and match them with attorneys—even as ASF organizers have become targets of political prosecutions themselves.

The movement's decentralization has made it slippery, posing a challenge for carceral forces trying to pin it down or determine a structure. Police warrants—and most recently, a bogus RICO indictment against 61 defendants— regularly refer to the "Defend the Forest" group, though no such group exists. There are Defend the Forest social media accounts that share information about the movement, but more broadly, Defend the Forest is simply a rallying cry for many working to prevent the destruction of one of the four lungs of Atlanta.

On the flip side, the decentralization sometimes makes it challenging for national organizations to know how to plug in. Many nonprofits learned the importance of "following the lead of organizers on the ground" in past years (while some simply learned the importance of saying they're following the lead of local organizers), but what does that mean when there's no clear leadership structure or organizing committee? These are challenges, but by no means insurmountable as national

organizations have connected with organizers and local formations to lend support.

Many different tendencies and political frameworks also raise the potential for internal conflict. But in general, to the movement's credit, organizers and supporters have kept tensions mostly offline, recognizing a common enemy and resolving to work through differences where the state is not watching. This isn't to say there are no tensions, disagreements, or shortcomings of the movement, but rather that working through them in relationships and community has been critical. The movement has largely rejected attempts by corporate media outlets to pit "good" activists against "bad" ones, or feed the narrative that radicals or "violent" protesters are jeopardizing "peaceful" protesters. Despite differences and disagreements, this is a movement defined by solidarity and collectivity - in spite of the RICO indictment's blatant effort to criminalize these very concepts.

Movement Wins

Through a diversity of tactics, the Stop Cop City movement has scored an array of wins on the way to its goal of not just stopping Cop City and defending the Weelaunee Forest, but of creating a new Atlanta altogether.

The first summer of the movement resulted in the delay of the legislation (a move that gave financial backers of the project pause) and ultimately a reduction in the authorized acreage for the facility—minor wins that nonetheless exposed early cracks in the project. The organizing also led to the creation of a community advisory board—which, as predicted by organizers, was a complete sham meant to provide cover for APF. Nevertheless, the board's continual blunders and scandals have further politicized residents and embarrassed the City. In the election following the Cop City vote, both the lead sponsor and a vocal proponent of the plan lost their City Council seats. Perhaps most importantly, the first summer of the movement laid the foundation through canvassing and base building for what would grow into a mass movement in the coming years.

In April 2022, construction company Reeves Young became the first contractor to bow out of the project following consistent pressure and direct action. Reeves Young would later be followed by Quality Glass Company and Atlas Technical Consultants, while the City of Atlanta and APF spends millions in attempts (thus far, futile) to secure the construction site.

The movement has continued to draw metaphorical blood, working toward death by a thousand cuts for Cop City and the ruling class structure behind it. The cost of the project has continued to climb. APF has struggled to secure the private funding it needs. The repression has been repeatedly denounced by free speech experts. The Democratic National Convention that Mayor Dickens worked desperately to attract to Atlanta chose Chicago instead. The city has faced a barrage of lawsuits and an avalanche of negative media coverage. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's function as a megaphone for corporations has been exposed. Lawmakers have been forced to make statements questioning political arrests and calling for an independent investigation into the murder of Tortuguita. The web of corporations behind so much of Atlanta's inequality has been brought to the fore and the previously secret influence of APF over city affairs has been put on display again and again. The fight to Stop Cop City has become an international cause, and even mainstream commentators are predicting the staying power of the movement in future elections. The Atlanta ruling regime is crumbling as residents are being radicalized against the status quo.

In short, despite setbacks and extreme state violence, the movement has accomplished massive victories. Perhaps most plainly, APF declared in April 2021 that Cop City would open in under two years. Today, two years since the passage of the initial legislation, the project is nowhere close to completion.

One thing has been made clear: Stop Cop City activists are dedicated to stopping the project by any means necessary, whether it's through a referendum, an inability to find contractors willing to continue work on the project, the loss of corporate funding, the Mayor and City Council canceling the lease, or by other means.

In any case, the movement to Stop Cop City by any means necessary is here to stay.