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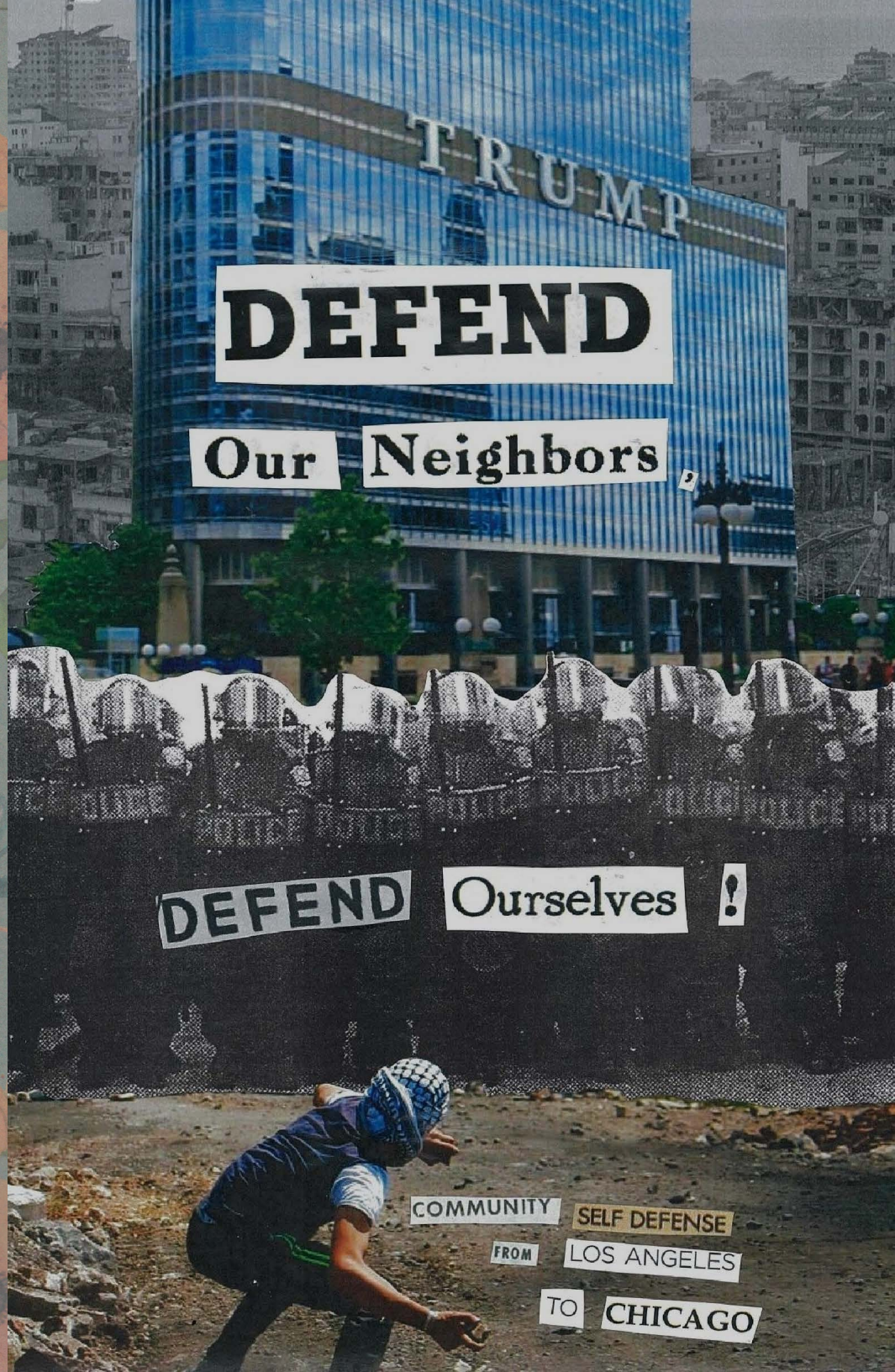

DEFEND

Our Neighbors ,

DEFEND Ourselves !

COMMUNITY SELF DEFENSE FROM LOS ANGELES TO CHICAGO

People of conscience across the so-called United States are outraged by the cruel spectacle of ICE kidnappings and racist terror. They want to do something about it. But what works?

We believe we need more proactive tactics, offensive and defensive, that empower people to take intervention in and prevention of abductions as a serious and achievable goal. One way forward is a community defense hub, or centro.

A centro is a place where anti-deportation activists can gather, building connections with the surrounding community and establishing a hub for anti-deportation activity. It draws on the existing strengths of working-class immigrant communities and solidifies connections with formal and informal anti-deportation networks in the area. By putting us in places we know ICE will appear, a centro allows us to join immediate proactive responses to prevent kidnappings, taking action with rather than for our neighbors. This situated political work, unlike spectacular protests or clandestine activities, builds relationships of trust and obligation that continue beyond individual confrontations.

A centro may be as simple as a folding table and a bucket of whistles to alert people when ICE shows up. But it could become a great deal more: the basis of community outside and against the law, capable of coordinating our efforts in moments of social unrest and explosion.

Is ICE mostly targeting day laborers? Restaurant workers? Something else? In a predominantly Latino neighborhood with substantial community support, where people are being targeted out and about, and while waiting for work by a particular hotspot, the centro's setup and responses will look different than a place where the locals are more hostile, or a wealthier and whiter area where people are being targeted while on the job. Coordination and communication between neighborhoods, across the city, and between cities will help us adapt our tactics to each particular area.

Over time, these local projects will make space for other place-based experiments to emerge, which will only benefit from broad connections with like-minded people across the city.

Nothing other than bold, ceaseless experimentation will get us through this moment.

hostile management and security, who may treat you well while simultaneously harassing people sleeping on the street or the day laborers you're trying to work with.

This is not a short-term fight, and these pieces of infrastructure should outlast the present moment. Finding ways to coordinate resources and make defense hubs sustainable as initial floods of volunteers decline and raids continue unabated will be crucial in the coming months. We can address this on the front end by presenting volunteers with set expectations for their participation: at least one shift a week for recent volunteers, and multiple weekly shifts for people taking on more sensitive and consistent logistical tasks. Recurring trainings to onboard people to the centro every few months can help boost presence as numbers on shift decrease after each initial influx.

V. coordinate with other hubs

At the time of writing, several community defense hubs are slowly forming around the city. Regular communication between these projects will be crucial to overcome their specific limits in Chicago, many of which might not be shared with Los Angeles.

For example, the heavily segregated neighborhoods on the South and Southwest sides of Chicago – with their wide streets, fast traffic, and innumerable parking lots – allow ICE to move very fast, making it much more difficult for patrols to find ICE, barring a large caravan of agents. But this can also make it easier for people at centros to drive to raids; there have been several instances of small groups of responders following, surrounding, and shouting at ICE agents, and in the process stopping abductions. In the historic neighborhoods on the North and Far North sides, closer to the lake and much whiter, the narrower streets and denser sprawl can create more opportunities to block ICE, making bike patrols a much more effective tactic. But compared to the Home Depots and laundromats repeatedly targeted in Los Angeles, or the Home Depots and intersections regularly targeted here, hotspots in the neighborhoods being most rapidly gentrified on Chicago's Northwest side are substantially less obvious.

I. no one is coming to save us

The neoliberal order was not built to last. It was one get-rich-quick scheme after another, delaying the day of reckoning until the last of the postwar order could be sold for scrap. Whatever "consensus" existed was purchased by the dismantling of the social safety net, the hothouse expansion of mass incarceration, and monetary shell games of a finance sector conjuring lost profits out of numerical alchemy. This gilded age has now given way to the open anti-social violence, racist state terror, and dissolution of civil society that churned away underneath it. And today, not even the heads of state are urging calm.

Masked agents in unmarked vans kidnap our neighbors off the streets, as JB Pritzker, the self-styled anti-Trump, sends state police to beat protesters outside the ICE kidnapping center in Broadview. We know what our conscience dictates: we have to run every federal agent out of our city, and so long as they're here, they need to be afraid to do their jobs. But the people in power who told us they'd stand in the way don't do much more than talk. Raids in our neighborhoods don't provoke anything more than consternation from local Democrats, when they're discussed by the city and state government at all. The police form lines to shield the feds, and people who resist are brutalized. Local politicians who object to deportations are themselves detained, as the agents responsible act with total legal impunity. The Trump administration's lawless paramilitaries have received incredible amounts of funding, regular legal processes have failed to check the regime's expansion, and its detention centers are shielded from public scrutiny. Fascist terror is here for entire stretches of Chicago, occupied by agents in military fatigues, carrying long guns and ambushing street vendors from unmarked vans. And since nobody is coming to save us, we'll have to do it ourselves.

In crisis moments like these, when state, local, and federal governments abandon and terrorize whole populations, people have historically taken the conditions of their lives into their own hands. In the early sixties, in Lowndes County, Alabama, people organized autonomous militias and an independent political party, the Lowndes County

Freedom Organization, to protect Black farmers from state and vigilante violence that they called "white terror." Inspired by their example, a few years later, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense to protect poor Black people from police terror. These organizations responded to unchecked racist violence by empowering people to defend themselves: the Black Panther Party taught people their rights, but it also encouraged them to protect themselves however was necessary.

Our own crisis has produced similar forms of autonomous self-defense, pursued independent of whatever politicians and major non-profits have promised. Earlier this year, after the raids in Los Angeles intensified and began targeting workplaces and day laborers, locals created defense hubs, or "centros." These established a steady presence at key locations intended to disrupt ICE operations, organized at the neighborhood level. Unlike previous anti-deportation tactics (rapid response, public protests, and even autonomous blockades of ICE infrastructure), these became a means of proactive intervention, deterring and preventing deportations instead of attending to them after the fact.

Instead of establishing control over an area and dictating what its inhabitants are allowed to do, defense hubs support what popular resistance already exists, moving forward from what people targeted and harassed by the police and feds want.

This allows us to use our limited resources more effectively, and gives us spaces to encounter each other as part of a movement broader than our political affinities or working lives: in Los Angeles, defense hubs have provided infrastructure for mutual aid and area patrols, spaces for politicized people to meet each other, and crucially, offered outraged people local, place-based relationships that give their anger direction.

Instead of parachuting into ongoing confrontations, developing relationships of trust and becoming a known presence have been crucial for effectively battling the feds with, not for, the people who live in any given area. And, crucially, during and after an attempted raid or abduction, having somewhere to refer others back to can help people plug in to the immediate needs of the centro, to potential future needs in the fight against the border regime, and to future struggles beyond it. In

flyers, stickers and zines for the flyering teams. These volunteers at the main center can also handle onboarding for the various parts of the project. Some roles require less vetting than others, and it's important to avoid letting security concerns stifle the project itself. It's smart to give these more sensitive tasks to more experienced volunteers, but to make their practices changeable at any moment if the broader group finds them stifling. Good leadership is directly recallable!

IV. plan from there

Each location will have its own local particularities. Some businesses will be more or less hostile to targeted migrants, some residential areas will offer more shelter than others, and people will involve themselves at varying speeds depending on whether they trust you. Defense hubs work best when they are proactive and plan for eventualities: do people have exit plans during raids? Can groups or individuals provide shelter if it's needed? And among volunteers, having a set, basic course of action during a raid or abduction can help mitigate nerves and frantic, overwhelming feelings of urgency when raids and abductions do occur.

Shifts might be planned based on which days of the week and which times most day laborers congregate at the site; they might also be planned around the frequency and locations of abductions in the area. Right now, Chicago Home Depots see most of their raids occur between 7:00 AM and 5:00 PM. **ICE has repeatedly appeared when there are fewer or no people on shift at a location, which suggests they watch for when there are fewer people around to raid with less resistance.**

Some best practices we've learned: first and most importantly, these centers will succeed or fail based on whether you are attentive to the needs of the surrounding area. Just as important is that no one collaborates with the police. Under no circumstances should someone call in the police, whether to report ICE misconduct (which the cops routinely ignore, and often even facilitate) or to resolve some street-level dispute which could otherwise be de-escalated without subjecting all its participants to state violence and potential death. This extends to

experiments in Los Angeles and Chicago, but they're by no means exhaustive. As you help run the defense hub, reflect regularly on whether what you're doing is working, and what new innovations might make it work better. (And share those innovations with your friends at other hubs!)

- **Bike Patrols:** folks on bikes can patrol several blocks around the site, keeping an eye out for ICE vehicles or masked agents. Relaying that information back to the rest of the group can help people prepare, give others time to flee, and facilitate more effective rapid response capable of interrupting raids and abductions.
- **Foot Patrols:** groups of two or three can walk the block directly around the site, looking for the same things as the bike patrols, and blowing on their whistles if they see anyone who is confirmed to be ICE. In Los Angeles people have started wearing identifiers, like armbands or colored hats, to be more identifiable as ICE watch and not plainclothes agents themselves. These groups should focus on particularly at-risk areas around the defense hub, and within a 5-10 minute walking distance of the table.
- **Car Patrols:** ICE watchers in cars can keep an eye out for agents and follow them when they're spotted, if the driver is comfortable doing so. ICE has recently begun retaliating against cars following them, shooting one woman and tear gassing several rapid responders. People who follow ICE vans should be aware of this additional risk.
- **Flyering Teams:** small groups can go door-to-door in the neighborhood sharing information on how to report ICE activity to the defense hub, explain the goals of the project in plain language, and add people to the local group chats on WhatsApp or Signal. Flyering groups can also advertise the location of the center itself, encouraging locals to come check it out and help out if they'd like.
- **Standing Lookouts:** individuals can stand at street corners in busy or particularly at-risk areas with whistles to alert locals of sightings, and phones or walkie talkies to relay information back to the hub.
- **Tabling:** volunteers can help staff the main location, keeping watch at the site itself, sharing resources with passers-by, monitoring social media and chats for updates, and helping produce

Los Angeles, this infrastructure was initially established by mutual aid networks distributing PPE after the Palisades fire; likewise, the centros could persist and become mature pieces of autonomous pro-social infrastructure against capitalist crises.

Experiences in Chicago show that even a handful of people shouting at the feds or alerting neighbors with whistles or megaphones can stop ICE from taking someone or kidnapping more people. Significantly, they provide a platform to strengthen and support people's immediate response to ICE activity.

II. setting up a defense hub

First, pick a spot. This should be somewhere federal agents repeatedly target for deportations. Test out a few locations if you can't find a suitable one! In Los Angeles and Chicago, ICE has made a habit of targeting day laborer corners outside of Home Depots, but anywhere that migrant laborers congregate regularly is promising, including spots where gig workers rest between deliveries, gas stations, swap meets, other big-box stores, and certain major intersections. Ask around!

While looking at various spots, ask these questions:

1. What is the flow of people and traffic around the site? Walk a few blocks around the area, and pay attention to local businesses, street vendors, schools, and residential areas.
2. What is local security's relationship to the day laborers? (We have found, for example, that every Home Depot where day laborers congregate is very hostile to them, especially when they're visibly poor.)
3. What are the relationships between local businesses and the day laborers or gig workers at the site? Are there any supportive businesses nearby, and are there any especially hostile ones? Who at the latter actually wants the day laborers gone, and who is being intimidated into compliance?
4. What kind of ICE watch presence is already there, if any? What do they need? Are they affiliated with any groups?

5. What supplies do laborers bring, and what might they need? (Ask them!)
6. When and where has ICE been preparing for raids in the area? What are the main ways they've been conducting raids? How might people impede those tactics? How do locals want to fight back? While exploring the area, ask folks who live or work nearby about recent ICE activity. Learning what has happened in recent weeks and months will help you understand how the area works and how you might fit into it.

Second, meet people in the area. To set up an effective defense hub, you will need the participation of other people in the area. Many informal networks have emerged that support local day laborers, interfere with raids, protect targeted people, and keep the area moving despite constant state terror.

It is essential to engage with locals as collaborators: you may be surprised by the tactics and priorities people bring to this project, and as a defense hub, your role is to support and facilitate them as much as possible. **No single group or organization, no matter their funding or professional presentation, should dictate what autonomous self-defense looks like.**

Pay attention to the people in the area with reason to know how ICE and the police operate: day laborers, people who sleep on the street, vendors, gas station employees, etc. These people are often at the front lines of neighborhood self-defense, and they'll have insights into relevant tactics and considerations that you don't yet.

Third, start getting organized. If people are comfortable with it, consider adding them to a group chat on WhatsApp or Signal to coordinate patrols and resources, and share verified sightings of ICE. Socialize best practices to limit unnecessary messages in these chats and create space for everyone. Some of this infrastructure may already exist, especially for patrols. That's good for you!

Reach out to other local groups whose structure might benefit the project. In Los Angeles, the defense hubs sprang up widely because of the Los Angeles Tenants' Union's pre-existing infrastructure: local chapters, expected regular meetings, and experience strategizing to meet their goals. Whoever is brought into the project should agree to explicit, written codes of conduct that guarantee its autonomy from any one of these local organizations, and keep power firmly in the hands of people who work on the project together.

Fourth, gather supplies. The physical defense hub will look like a table or two under a canopy, where you'll distribute relevant information, answer questions, give people a spot to rest between patrols, and distribute whatever else you've brought. You can also decorate it with signs or banners to make it more obvious to passers-by and locals why you're there, and possibly invite them to approach and help out.

Try to integrate the defense hub with the area's needs. This will include chairs, food and water, but since it's gotten cold outside, coffee, hand warmers, coats for people who might not have any and portable heaters are also appreciated.

Whistles have become crucial for community-level raid-response in Chicago. Being able to provide them to whoever's interested in helping out will go a long way to impeding ICE raids in the area. The accepted whistle code is: brief sequential bursts if you've seen ICE in the area, and long, continuous noise if you're witnessing an ongoing raid or abduction.

Other pieces of equipment that activists in LA have found useful include megaphones and umbrellas. Print out relevant information: "Know Your Rights" info, information about how to identify ICE vehicles (and which vehicles are not ICE), and legal resources. You will want to make signup sheets publicly available if possible: for patrols, grocery distribution, ride-sharing, and shifts at the defense hub.

Where you set up your defense hub depends on local businesses' relationship with the ongoing raids. For example, your local Home Depot might not let you stay directly on their property; therefore, you might set up on the sidewalk on the other side of the property line, or on the side of the nearby street.

III. what can people do?

Now that you have the supplies you'll need to launch your defense hub, you'll need to help fill the gaps in anti-ICE work at your intended location. Below are some examples of things people can do from