DON'T PANIC, STAY TIGHT

SOME FRONTLINE REFLECTIONS FROM BLOCK COP CITY

We've chosen to reprint this anonymous submission to the now-defunct *Scenes From The Atlanta Forest* website (formerly at **scenes.noblogs.org**), since we believe the questions it raises and the tactics it describes are worth consideration here in Chicago. We don't yet know whether or how the new administration's cruel, terroristic policies and media stunts will translate into mass mobilization, or on what lines that mobilization will break, but we'll all need to model some of the political and tactical creativity communicated in this piece if we aim to struggle and win throughout the next few years.

Lake Effect Collective
Jan. 25, 2025

DON'T PANIC, STAY TIGHT

Some Anarchists · Nov. 22, 2023

On Monday, November 13, a group of about 350 people marched from Gresham Park to Constitution Road in an effort to march onto the Cop City construction site. We participated as an affinity group of five people from Atlanta.

"You fight with the army you have, not the army you wish you had."

We are writing this report back as a group that was initially skeptical of the Block Cop City initiative, finding the "nonviolent direct action" framework a bit naive. We are not among those who thought it "dangerous" or "liberal." As revolutionaries, we chose to participate despite our reservations, recognizing that the world is not always as we want it to be. We saw few alternate avenues for mass participation in the wake of a failed referendum campaign and an objective decline in the frequency of clandestine actions. We offer our experience, analysis, and critiques from a place of respect for all the organizers and participants, and a desire for revolution in our lifetime.

We unequivocally denounce and distance ourselves from the opportunistic, shameful, and unsolidaristic statements and screeds written by bloggers, passive spectators, and media spokespeople from the City government about this mobilization and its proponents over the last several months. May we all outgrow that part of ourselves seeking to demean and belittle people we disagree with.

We send our humble greetings to those who participated in the front of the clash and also those who set fire to 16 Ernst Concrete trucks on the night of the 13th. We are also proud and inspired by the vigil at Dekalb County Jail during which inmates broke windows, set fire to a bush outside the jail, and successfully lowered plastic bags to the ground; bags which protesters filled with cigarettes, lighters, and pizza. While Block Cop City caused hundreds of police to evacuate the construction site of all equipment, the arson on the night of the 13th extended the consequences of the initiative well into the future, halting construction for at least a week and forcing the APF's concrete provider to unceremoniously back out.

ON THE SPOKESCOUNCIL

The first day of the spokescouncil was an opening presentation and Q&A closing. About 450 people crowded the room, a majority of which were not from Atlanta and had never been to the forest. Many had never been to a protest involving tear gas or less lethal munitions, and a significant percentage had never been to a protest at all. Accordingly, a basic framework for the action was shared as well as some rather necessary information about the forest, the roads surrounding it, and the activity happening there recently. More specific details about the content of the action were discussed the next day.

Organizers of the spokescouncil took responsibility for coordinating hundreds of strangers into a collective conversation, and they did a good job. They declared their support and solidarity with acts of combative protest and clandestine sabotage within the movement. The room, which remained dedicated to tactical nonviolence for the morning and mid-day of November 13 in the vicinity of the Weelaunee forest only, chanted in unison "*if you build it, we will burn it*."

At the opening of the second day of the spokecouncil, roughly 30 minutes of the allotted time were taken up by someone who had no intention of attending the action and actively encouraged others not to attend. In a confusing and cliche-filled rant reminiscent of a counter-insurgency handbook script, they suggested that Muscogee people did not support the initiave. They simultaneously accused the group of not being militant enough and of not being careful enough. Another Muscogee person briefly combated them, vocally supporting forest defenders' bravery and courage. Belkis Terán spoke up and shared ideas for supportive roles for those who did not want to attend the action and led the spokescouncil in chants. The opening remarks were closed, and the spokescouncil broke out into color clusters.

The colors were not divided into risk level. Instead, they were divided by position within the march, and by roles. The Blue was the vanguard cluster, assigning itself the responsibility of setting the pace and of clearing obstacles and police if the occasion arose. The Purple was the middle force, assigning itself the responsibility of filling space cleared by Blue, and of planting tree saplings, playing music, and maintaining morale. The Orange cluster was the rearguard, assigning itself the responsibility of maintaing a solid defense from behind, and a safe zone for others to retreat to in case of injury or chaos.

We particapted in the Blue cluster. It seemed that the Blue group volunteers were among the most experienced participants in the room. The group did not have some of the anxieties expressed by other members of

the general spokescouncil about adventurous outsiders or legal risks. We discussed tactics with ease and without a need for ideological or strategic debate. The framework of strategic nonviolence was accepted and the task of breaching the site within these parameters was discussed in some detail.

After discussing likely police reactions, we decided to maintain "perpetual forward momentum." For our cluster, this meant that we would not indulge in stare downs or face-offs with the police. Since this was not a photo-op, and since we had nothing to communicate to them, we did not care to yell or chant at cops outfitted in tactical gear. We decided to move around them if possible and through them if necessary. We discussed possible munitions at length, and determined that the use of less lethal munitions would not make us retreat automatically, and that we would only turn around if we were physically incapable of continuing forward. Later, we relayed this to the general spokescouncil.

THE MARCH

When we arrived at Gresham Park on the morning of Monday the 13th, it became abundantly clear that this was not the "Mass Action" we had been hoping for. It seemed that about a third of the people who had come to Atlanta for the weekend had opted to take on offsite support roles, and very few locals showed up. The march set off with 300-400 people, many of whom were extremely anxious and insisted on stopping every 10-12 steps so that the crowd could "stay together". As locals, we take partial responsibility for not better inoculating newcomers to the fact that the first ~1.5 miles would be on the bike path and through side streets where we were highly unlikely to meet a police response.

The route successfully misdirected the police. Multiple lines of riot cops crowded into the bike tunnel beneath Bouldercrest Road, anticipating we would replicate the route we took into Intrenchment Creek Park on the first morning of the 5th Week of Action (March 2023), which we attempted to take again during the 6th Week of Action (July 2023). When we turned off the bike path onto Cherry Valley Drive, the police had to scramble to regroup. In an online blog post titled "Participant Reflections on Block Cop City," the author(s) incorrectly claimed:

> *Even on the day of the action, the planned route that had been agreed upon (marching down constitution road rather than the bike path) was discarded in favor of marching up the bike path, a narrow chokepoint that ended in a fortified tunnel full of Dekalb County Police officers. People were then funneled back onto the street, ending up on constitution road anyway. From start to finish, it seemed that the police controlled and chose the route that protestors took.*

We are grateful for this article, because it offers real insights from a participant without the smug and self-aggrandizing tone and perspective of many other articles and denunciations. We respectfully disagree with the above excerpt, and many other parts of the report as well. Perhaps the author(s) lack of familiarity with the terrain impacted their analysis of what was happening or of what was possible. The part of Gresham Park we departed from does not connect with Constitution Road, and it is necessary to either take another road or the bike path to reach it. Moreover, the march did not encounter any lines of police on the bike path, thus it did not decide to turn on account of their presence. Finally, there was no publicly agreed-upon route. Instead, Block Cop City organizers assured us continuously that not all information was safe to share during the spokescouncils, including the route. We agree with the decision to keep the route a secret until the morning of the action. We expected this, and have experienced this many times in black blocs, counter-summits, and breakaway marches. We believe that the secrecy of the route helped produce a situation in which we could clash with police on our own terms, catching them off-guard in such a way that allowed us to temporarily overwhelm them in spite of their superior weaponry, as well as their commitment to violence in the face of the crowd's commitment to nonviolence.

For those who can only visualize this information bottleneck from afar due to their lack of participation, picture anonymous people in balaclavas, hoodies, sunglasses, gloves, etc. discreetly sharing the march route with those who seemed to come donning similar outfits.

THE WEDGE

Upon meeting the line of riot cops, the Blue cluster continued without hesitation, forming the two banners into a v-shaped wedge. The wedge broke through the police line, as planned the night before. 50-60 protesters from the Blue and Purple cluster got behind the banners, chanting and pushing through three lines of riot police before being blinded and suffocated by tear gas and pepper spray. As the Blue cluster retreated, the Purple cluster scattered amidst the wafting tear gas. The Orange cluster more or less held their position in the street. Many may have been unable to see the clash at all. They gave others a stable crowd to reassemble with or blend into. The clash was more ambitious than the parameters for confrontation discussed at the spokescouncil. Spokes had discussed that if there were multiple lines of riot cops, we would consider alternative routes. We commend the bravery of the Blue cluster, which proceeded until it no longer could, and prevented police from grabbing individuals as we retreated.

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As we passed the fire station, I could see a line of armored riot cops filing into Constitution from the direction of the Internchment Creek Park lot. "They're playing

our game," said one friend. We kept marching, many of us starting to beat our chests and howl like a pack of wolves in unison. Two cops came forward from the main line, seeking to act as negotiators, holding up a peace sign with one hand while the other gripped his riot shield. "Are we doing this?" I asked. "Hell yeah!" someone responded. "Go toward the little one!" yelled another friend, pointing at one of the (still quite large) cops. The first two cops were bounced off the banners like water off a duck's back. Then came the crush of the crowd against the shields and batons. Large men pushing their full weight into 20-year-old women who can't have weighed much over 100 lbs. For a moment, I could hear the logical, risk-averse voice in my head screaming, "Run! They've got you surrounded!" But by that time, thankfully, it was too late. I temporarily ceased to be an individual, became an organism whose only function was to push forward, holding those in front of me and held by those behind me. I dropped my shoulder into it and moved ahead against the resistance, supported by all those around me and awash in the ecstasy of a good mosh pit. Line after line of police fell away. It seemed we were unstoppable, until the banner-holders fell down under fire of rubber bullets and bean-bag rounds. As we promptly lifted them back up, I felt my friend with whom I had linked arms retreating. Only then did I realize I could scarcely see or breathe, having been shielded by the umbrella or the adrenaline or some combination of the two.

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When I saw the line of police, a sense of relief washed over me. I knew that we stood no chance of making it into the construction site when I saw the crowd at the meet-up point. I was worried that all of these people would have come to Atlanta for nothing. The lines of police showed me my concerns were unfounded. While many people prefer to evade the clash, to move around the danger, to stick to the shadows, I have always preferred the front lines, the exploding canisters, the sour smell of the tear gas, the wild crush of the crowd. Real knowledge lives in the body, not the mind. The experience of the mob howling in unison, linking arms, rushing headlong into lines of police, is worth years of speculation and theorizing. If we were more numerous, we would have doubtlessly split into multiple corridors to spread the police response thin. "Be water": such is the fashionable watchword. In that case, I probably would have stayed with the big group, certain that they would be fortunate enough to confront the riot police directly. To my left and right, my friends were shoving umbrellas upward, pushing ahead in the dense throng. For a few moments, it was dark and almost silent. The veil of the umbrellas, the silent heaving, and incredible pressure of the comrades packed together behind the banners is an experience you can't describe easily for those who have never felt it. Eventually, I couldn't breath anymore and I grabbed someone as I retreated. Thankfully we didn't make it past the fourth line of officers. We would have all been arrested.

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For the first hour of the march, I was bored. It wasn't a contemplative boredom but an agitated one. I wasn't nervous but I could tell other people around me were. As we left the park someone yelled, "It's not a march, it's a direct action." If I had

heard that earlier I might have felt better about the character of the march but it was too late. I had no time to adjust my expectations. What I love in crowds was missing. I've walked up the bike path, into and out of the forest, countless times. Sometimes walking my dog, other times evading the police. We walked slow. There must have been thirty photographers backpeddling in front of the banners. If we confront the police now, they'll be the ones having to break through their line. When we turned onto Cherry Valley things started to change. The soundsystem found its way to the front, neighbors came out of their houses, and then the police came into view. The energy was growing. As we got closer the clarity pushed us faster. The indecision, the anxiety, the debate, was over. There was consensus. We are going to clash. There was no talking or even words anymore, just "Ah-ooh" "Ah-ooh." We started to break through the riot police. I kept my head up, looking at the police as they fought to hold us back. One of them pulled a shotgun with orange tape up and pointed it right into my face. I looked down. I was being pushed in every direction and I was pushing in every direction. We are making it through, I could feel it.

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The march did not retreat at the first use of police munitions or force. In fact, the wedge faced police batons, pepper spray, pepper balls, rubber bullets, beanbag rounds, and teargas from the first moment of contact with the skirmish line. The first canister of tear gas was shot above the Blue cluster, landing in the middle of the Purple group. The preparedness of some people in the front, including those who brought umbrellas and goggles, went a long way in limiting the consequence of those munitions and batons on the Blue and Purple clusters. The use of heat-resistance gloves by a single person in the Purple cluster allowed them to throw the canister of noxious gas away from the crowd.

While the clash was unfolding up front, two people in black clothing, one of them wearing a camouflage baseball hat, attacked someone pushing a sound system in the middle of the crowd. They screamed "the hyenas were right, fuck you guys and fuck your plans." They are certainly referring to a few bloggers who have spent the better part of the last 10 months publishing strange theories and gossip online. We do not think that the hyenas themselves would have ever participated in this kind of action against the march. At least one interpretation of their writings have allowed two people to justify attacking anarchists who were trying to push through lines of riot police. This was misguided and cowardly. We don't know what these two people were thinking, but we hope they reflect on their actions with humility and clarity instead of doubling-down on their obscene, authoritarian, decision. The two opportunists were not up front with the action. They fell back in fright when the tear gas and concussion grenades began landing in the road after the eventual retreat of the wedge.

It is quite possible that had more people from the Purple cluster rushed for-

ward to fill the space we cleared, the march could have continued past the first lines of police. Given the number of marchers and the overwhelming reinforcements staged farther down Constitution Road, continuing ahead would likely have resulted in many arrests and more injuries. Nobody can say for sure if pushing through would have necessarily allowed us to get on the site. Given that the Police Foundation already cancelled construction for the day in anticipation of the march, occupying the site at all costs would have been a fool's errand. We feel good about the crowd's decision to retreat when it did, with no arrests and only minor injuries.

After the long retreat, out of harm's way, hundreds of people broke out into small groups and discussed ways to continue fighting Cop City in the coming hours, days, weeks, and months.

While we reject the idea that direct action can or should always be safe and scripted, we felt satisfied with this action, which was able to engage in a frontal clash with the police without serious negative consequences.

ON PARAMETERS

We applaud everyone who took initiative to organize this convergence. We know that the punishment for taking initiative is the gossip, animosity, bitterness, resentment, and shit-talk of spectators, jealous people, diehards, and ideologues. We do not want to add our voices to the obnoxious chit-chat. The following reflections should be read with a convivial and light-hearted tone, the tone of people reviewing a collaborative art piece, or members of a band reflecting on their collecive performance.

In general, we disagree with the setting of nonviolent parameters. Frankly, we disagree with tactical parameters in general and with the minutely "organized" coordination of events, although we recognize that this type of attention to detail makes some people feel more confident and brave. We believe that the march would have been more successful at breaking through police lines and potentially breaching the site had it been able to use projectiles. We also recognize that it is impossible to know if this crowd could have even materialized without the parameters. We do not believe that it is possible to know if the "nonviolence" language in the promotion helped or hindered attendance without conducting a thorough interview with attendees before the action occured. It is our unprovable suspicion that it did not increase participation much, and that it only shifted it from one segment of the population to another. It is also concievable that a high percentage of those in attendance would have attended if the event was only branded as a "mass direct action." We did not put in the energy to organize a convergence of this nature, so we cannot be sure of all the details and considerations informing the discoursive framing of the event.

Without the parameters, we may have seen a more militant and experienced crowd. Perhaps it would have been smaller, but more capable. We do not know if this is true either, judging by the small demonstration following Tortuguita's murder, and the small crowd that assembled for the 6th Week of Action. Regardless, given the forces we had and the terrain (which is currently much more favorble to police than protesters), it made sense to pull some of our punches.

Perhaps an intention of the organizers in setting these parameters was to re-establish trust with the socialist and abolitionist Left, factions of which used March 5th as an excuse to distance themselves from the direct action-oriented segments of the movement. In our experience, though they support bold action abstractly, these parts of the local Left never really show up to actions they do not organize. This does not mean they are untrustworthy. We also respect and understand efforts to build alliances, because we believe that the real nature of politics is war, and the side with greater alliances can ultimately marshall the greater force. That said, we don't think the mobilization worked to build those alliances as intended. We hope to be proven wrong.

We also recognize that an innovative and misleading form of political queitism is re-emerging at this phase of the movement. Some people have taken to over-emphasizing the violence and capacity of the police, hoping to lead people to believe that only extremely disciplined, clandestine, and destructive force is adequate for the task at hand. This framework is lodged energetically somewhere in the political Venn-diagram connecting the "we keep us safe" community organizer world, the "nihilist" environmentalist subculture, and the militarist orientation of left wing militias. Because proponents of this framework cannot be held accountable for following through on their proposals (since it would be an unjustifiable security risk to inquire), we believe that for most (but not all) proponents of this theory, it is just the latest and most fashionable way to retreat from real confrontation with Cop City and its supporters. We are not a part of this tendency.

We hope the disproportionate police response dispelled the narrative that pacifism can keep us safe from police violence, while re-broadening the definition of "nonviolence" back to where it was during the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-War movement of the 1960s and 70s. More than that, we hope that some of those who participated feel encouraged to take confident and bold initiative moving forward, with whatever means or tactics they prefer. Fight peacefully, fight forcefully. However you are willing, just fight.

THE CONSEQUENCES

We will not know the real consequences of this experiment for at least a couple weeks or months. For our part, we feel that the BCC action did well to "break the spell" of the RICO indictments and general atmosphere of repression. Some of us had grown wary of public demos, extremely fearful of arrest and long-term legal consequences despite being seasoned participants in the riotous events of the George Floyd Uprising and prior. Police arrested only one person during the weekend. They were not in the crowd or in the march. That person was charged with misdemeanor obstruction. If we were to guess, we think that the movement has created circumstances in which the state feels it can no longer charge people with Domestic Terrorism and RICO, for to do so weakens the initial case. The last ten people arrested in the vicinity of the forest or even on the construction site have only received misdemeanor charges. This may be a higher level strategy of the prosecutor to illustrate that they have a discriminate strategy of law enforcement, and are only charging "actual terrorists" with terrorism. Only more action can clarify this matter.

We hope to see self-directed action taking place in cities across America continuing the protracted struggle against Cop City. The paths proposed in the "What's Next" info session on Sunday–chiefly the "Uncover Cop City" campaign targeting insurance providers Nationwide and Accident Fund–should be undertaken with the same tenacity as was the campaign against Atlas Technical Consultants, who dropped out of the project after "you guys smashed all our windows," according to an executive.

NOTE ON "HIERARCHY" & "DISMISSIVENESS"

In a final debrief session following the action, one participant noted a tension within the reflections of many other attendees: on the one hand, people decried organizers for not taking more responsibility for keeping everyone safe (e.g. through mass purchase of respirators and goggles); on the other hand, they criticized organizers for being hierarchical. When they say "hierarchical," we think they must mean that there was some discretion and secrecy about the route and the anonymous group who intended to break down the perimter fence. We can't really think of what else they could have meant, because the organization of the weekend was gratuitously, painfully, democratic. We would have preferred a slightly less democratic weekened, even. We do not think that secrecy is a true hierarchy, but we understand that hierarchies do often involve an element of secrecy.

We also do not think that debate and principled disagreement are forms of "dismissal", as has been claimed elsewhere. From time to time, individuals or groups make objections or claims with the tone of someone who has

been silenced or harmed, even if they have not. If their concern or idea is not immediately adopted by everyone, they claim to be "silenced." This, we feel, is the real authoritarianism we see in movements time an again. We also believe that those who act this way do not always realize the effects their actions have on others and probably do not intend to consolidate influence for themselves, even if their actions do often come across that way to others.

During the Block Cop City weekend, several of these contradictory positions were frequently expressed by the same small group. The comrade who pointed out this tension later did so in a kind and thoughtful manner, suggesting that this represented a sort of dialectical awakening of autonomy in the heart of each individual. We all have to confront the terrible burden of autonomy and freedom head-on.

> In the end, there is only anarchy and the fear of anarchy.
> Let's keep pushing ahead by every single means at our disposal.
> Smash their windows with rocks, break their lines head on.