The campaign to defend the forest in Atlanta, Georgia has become one of the most vibrant movements of the post-Trump era, interweaving environmentalism, abolitionism, and the fight against gentrification. Yet as police shift to employing lethal violence and indiscriminate terrorism charges, it has reached a critical juncture. Participants explore how this struggle has developed over the past year, reflecting on the practices that have given it strength and analyzing the challenges before it.

At the time of publishing, more information about the movement can be found at defendtheatlantaforest.com or on social media under the names “Defend the Atlanta Forest” and “Stop Cop City.”
THE FOREST IN THE CITY

“If you don’t read anything else related to the #stopcopcity cause, read this!!!”
—Twitter user @Dejabooharr

“One of the most useful tools for other movements to come out of the fight to Stop Cop City...Thank you so so much to the people who wrote this.”
—Micah Herskind
(Writer)

“The Defend the Atlanta forest movement reveals again the intersection between policing and ecocidal climate crisis.”
—Alexander Dunlap
(University of Oslo)
This text was drafted by heartbroken people in crowded rooms, receiving phone calls and text messages day and night. We offer this humble contribution in the midst of grief and horror at the killing of Tortuguita. We hope to pass on memories and analysis from the fight that Tortuguita joined in April 2022.

To support the arrestees, donate at: atlsolidarity.org
INTRODUCTION

THE STAKES OF THE FIGHT

Our society is at a crisis point. Decades of escalating economic pressure have created rampant inequality and desperation. Rather than addressing the root causes of these, politicians across the political spectrum continue channeling more and more money to police, relying on them to suppress unrest by force alone. This dependance has enabled police departments and their allies to consume a vast amount of public resources. Meanwhile, driven by the same economic pressures, catastrophic climate change is generating hurricanes, forest fires, droughts, and widespread ecological collapse.

In this context, starting in April 2021, a bold movement set out to defend a forest in Atlanta, Georgia, where local politicians and corporate profiteers want to build a police training compound and a sound-stage for the film industry. The training compound, known as Cop City, would be the largest police training facility in the United States. It would devastate the South River Forest, also known as Weelaunee Forest in honor of the Muscogee Creek people who lived there until they were deported in the Trail of Tears.

Resistance is spreading. During the final week of January, protests and vigils occurred in over 20 cities. On February 9, over 100 Georgia Tech students marched around campus denouncing Cop City and attempting to storm administration buildings. Since the beginning of February, rallies, marches, and benefit shows have taken place in Ann Arbor, Washington, DC, Binghamton, New Orleans, Flagstaff, Tucson, Vancouver, Humboldt, and elsewhere.

While Brasfield & Gorrie and their subcontractors continue to push ahead at the behest of the APF, forest defenders everywhere are organizing themselves into local committees and organizing groups to pressure contractors, spread awareness, raise funds, and send delegations to Atlanta for the Week of Action scheduled to begin on March 4.

It is possible that the movement is closer to victory than it seems. It is certainly at a crucial threshold—sure to be the most determinant of the entire struggle. It is up to courageous people to keep pushing for bolder and more creative strategies.
of the movement.

Among those who wish to see Cop City built are the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF), mayor Andre Dickens, and the various corporations that stand to profit on the development. At the same time, thanks to a back-room deal with the city government, real estate mogul and film industry executive Ryan Millsap is preparing to destroy a public park on an adjacent land parcel within the same forest.

Behind the scenes, Cop City has the support of the Atlanta Committee for Progress, a business association involving the region’s most powerful industrial and bureaucratic cliques. Alex Taylor, the former chairman, is also the acting president of Cox Enterprises, which owns various Atlanta media outlets and is among the leading funders of the Atlanta Police Foundation. In order to create a veneer of democratic process and local support, the APF and their supporters have contrived the Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee (CSAC), comprised of members of the Police Foundation and a few residents of Southwest Dekalb. When one of the initial members of CSAC spoke out against the project, she was removed from her position.

These are the forces that are facing off over the forest. On one side, some of the wealthiest and most institutionally powerful figures in the state of Georgia. On the other, a network of local activists and their friends.

During the George Floyd rebellion of 2020, for the first time, it became possible to speak of police abolition as a viable proposal about how to break the cycle of violence that poverty and police militarization impose on our communities. Yet every effort to “defund the police” via institutional means reached a dead end. Under Joe Biden, the Democratic Party has doubled down on unconditional support for police. If there is any hope of limiting the continuous expansion of police infrastructure and state violence, grassroots movements and direct action will have to show the way.

The same goes double for climate change. At this point, practically everyone agrees that humanity is on a collision course with ecological students on February 7, because a week earlier, on January 31, a group of students staged a public disruption of a campus event, during which they demanded that the school divest from the Atlanta Police Foundation and denounce Cop City. At the same time, 20% of Morehouse faculty signed an open letter to the campus administration, strongly denouncing the institution’s involvement with the APF.

During the Q&A on February 7, some students and community members refused to enter the auditorium, chanting slogans and denouncing the event from outside. Inside the event, speaker after speaker criticized the Morehouse President, the Mayor of Atlanta, and the systems of white supremacy and capitalism that terrorize and kill the communities that the school is supposed to educate and uplift. The event was a disaster for the City Government’s public relations strategy.

The following day, on February 8, the Atlanta Police Department released body camera footage of the January 18 raid. This footage was published unceremoniously, with no accompanying statement or press conference. After the GBI had claimed that no footage existed that was relevant to the case, many were shocked by what the video showed.

The body camera footage does not show the killing of Tortuguita by Georgia State Patrolmen. Rather, it shows a few officers walking through the woods when gunfire bursts erupt from nearby. No yelling or commands precede the shooting. One Atlanta police officer says “You fucked your own officer up?” In the footage, which shows many perspectives and moments from the morning, three separate groups of Atlanta police officers seem to be under the impression that the Patrolmen have accidentally shot one of their own. The video also records a single unexplained shot several minutes after the initial volley.

All this seems to undermine the official narrative. In releasing the footage, the Atlanta police were bowing to pressure brought to bear on them by Tortuguita’s family and their lawyers, who had hosted a press conference two days prior. It is also conceivable that they hoped to distance themselves from the actions of the GBI.

In the following days, a massive number of police began stationing around Key Road and inside the North Gate of the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. They escorted Brent Scarborough Company, a Brasfield & Gorrie
and intelligence of a couple hundred people who pushed the envelope continuously from the beginning.

**BLOOD IN THE WATER**

On January 31, Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens and Dekalb County CEO Michael Thurmond held a joint press conference. After inviting all of the local press, the authorities changed their minds at the last minute, closing public access to the event and locking all but two corporate media outlets outside with protesters. They deployed 60 police cruisers around the perimeter of City Hall in order to contain the dozens who gathered to protest the press conference.

Together, the mayor and the CEO of Dekalb County announced a “compromise” between the two governments. The new agreement, which is not legally binding, emerges from a series of closed-door meetings with no public input or transparency. It introduces changes that nobody asked for: for example, supposedly, the new plans for Cop City no longer include an explosives testing site. Presumably, this change is intended to hurry the project through the permitting process. The new permits include an “elasticity clause,” allowing the APF to alter or expand the development once it is underway; this leaves them an opening to underhandedly fulfill their original plan. While the announcement does not represent a victory, it does suggest that a degree of institutional panic could be taking hold.

The Land Disturbance Permit was approved. Throughout an entire hour of lies and half-truths, Mayor Dickens did not mention the killing of Tortuguita a single time.

Meanwhile, Tortuguita’s family had commissioned a private autopsy, which revealed that they were shot at least 13 different times by various officers.

The following week, Mayor Dickens announced his intention to host a question-and-answer session at the Atlanta University Center (AUC). The AUC hosts Morehouse College, Spelman College, Clark Atlanta, and the Morehouse School of Medicine. These are the privately-owned historically Black colleges and universities that Atlanta is famous for.

The Mayor was determined to host this Q&A session with the Black disaster, but institutional efforts to address the situation have accomplished precious little. The movement to defend the forest in Atlanta offers a glimpse of what it would take to defend our communities from the unbridled profiteering and repression that are forcing this catastrophe on all of us.

The Atlanta forest has become a flashpoint in both of these fights. With stakes this high, it is easy to see why people on both sides are dedicating so much energy to this conflict.

After two years of simmering conflict, the situation is escalating. Starting in December, the police began bringing terrorism charges against almost every activist they arrest, citing being in the forest and posting on social media as sufficient grounds. On January 18, Georgia State Patrol Officers killed Manuel Terán, known in the forest as Tortuguita. Tortuguita had been living under siege for almost a year as a beloved part of the small community dwelling in the encampments.

While the authorities seek to crush the movement by any means, solidarity efforts are springing up across the world. Forest defenders in Atlanta are planning another Week of Action from March 4 to 11, inviting everyone to join them.
Images of the police cruiser set aflame on January 21 spread virally online. Both corporate and grassroots reporting highlighted the precision of the vandalism: protesters broke windows only at the bank branches with direct connections to the APF, as well as some APD cruisers and the APF headquarters itself. Judging by the chatter across town and online, the public seemed to understand the targets and the rage of the forest defenders in the wake of the killing of Tortuguita, even if they did not approve of political vandalism in the abstract.

At the same time, the movement’s popularity was exploding. Thousands of non-profit organizations and civic groups joined anarchists, autonomists, anti-capitalists, and revolutionaries around the world in signing a declaration of solidarity with the movement. Among those groups were 350.org, Rainforest Action Network, Center for Biological Diversity, Greenpeace, Sierra Club, Sunrise Movement, No More Deaths, Black Alliance for Peace, National Lawyers Guild, and PEN America—the sort of groups that had previously stood aside from the struggle to defend the forest. Several more drafted their own statements of support for the movement, including the King Center. Many of these groups emphasized the list of secondary and tertiary targets connected to Cop City, calling on their members to pressure those companies to divest from the APF. Soon after the march downtown, three Democratic Party Congresspeople declared their support for the movement.

In less than a week, the movement had confronted an unspeakable tragedy and reoriented the narrative 180 degrees, outflanking the falsehoods of the police, politicians, and corporate media.

If the movement continues on its current trajectory toward mass mobilization and support, it will demonstrate the viability of its strategy, provided that the way that the movement developed in the first place is not erased (as occurred, for example, in the George Floyd rebellion). Specifically, it would show that a small, dedicated group of militant activists can precipitate a large-scale mobilization, not just chase after it. If the movement continues to grow, that will have been because of the dogged determination, flexibility, courage, creativity,
At the end of January 2022, as described in *The City in the Forest*, it seemed almost impossible to slow the pace of the preparations for construction that Reeves+Young and their subcontractor Long Engineering were carrying out. Neither small group actions nor larger protests had succeeded in delaying the soil boring and sampling at the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. The segments of the movement that had previously sought to sway City Council were in disarray, while activists oriented towards direct action were still seeking the leverage they needed.

On March 1, 2022, an anonymous group poured bleach into the engines of five vehicles belonging to Long Engineering. According to an online statement, this action was intended to impose consequences for their participation in “pre-construction” efforts in the forest. On March 19, six machines owned by Reeves+Young, including two excavators, were reportedly destroyed by saboteurs in the Flowery Branch suburb. On April 9, a website appeared listing the names and home addresses of executives in Reeves+Young. This came just a few days after independent researchers discovered that Brasfield & Gorrie had been contracted to build Cop City. It is rare for more than one general contractor to oversee projects like this. What was happening behind closed doors was confusing; the only thing that was clear was that the forest destroyers were moving forward and nothing was stopping them.

And then, unexpectedly and without explanation, Reeves+Young dropped the contract. Seeking to control the narrative, the Police Foundation claimed that the work Reeves+Young had been contracted for was complete and they were no longer on the project. At the time, however, Reeves+Young had hardly done any work. They had sent a representative to escort a subcontractor into the forest a few times, but the surveyor flags and stakes that they had placed had been removed overnight.

TAKING THE INITIATIVE

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They probably did not withdraw as a consequence of the accumulation of actions, nor as the result of any particular action. More likely, it was the feeling that things could go in any direction, that the future of the project could not be predicted, nor the costs reliably calculated.

The entire movement interpreted this as a win. With this small victory, a new period of resistance opened up.

THE SPRING WASOURS

A frenzy of activity followed. Mass meetings, canvassing efforts, media interviews, and sabotage all increased in frequency and focus. Many movements and organizers rely on repression or fear to mobilize supporters; activists defending the forest in Atlanta have sought to maintain a positive and proactive attitude throughout, highlighting confidence and goals even in the face of setbacks, aiming to foster ambitious, solution-oriented mentalities and proposals.

At the end of April, police began scoping out the forest, making half-hearted incursions into the Old Atlanta Prison Farm North Gate on a few occasions. Sometimes these went unnoticed or ignored; occasionally, activists repelled them with stones. Nobody was sure how the situation would develop for those camping in the forest.

Organizers announced a third Week of Action for the second week of May 2022. It seemed likely to bring many more people into the movement than the previous weeks of action. In the lead-up, local organizers began to promote a summit with the Muscogee (Creek) communities in Oklahoma. Building on the Stomp Dance ceremony of November 2021, this was a chance to hear from elders, historians, and activists. A local radio station came to broadcast the presentations live on the air. Several preschools attended the summit along with students, faculty, and parents.

Tying together different narratives, ways of understanding, and forms of knowledge has been a strength of the movement from the beginning. Rather than combining efforts in the name of efficiency, different groups perform the same tasks, reproducing similar infrastructures, efforts, and events. Sometimes, this is intentional, sometimes not. This has created resiliency in the movement, ensuring that power is distributed across the movement.
across many people and projects rather than aggregating in a few hands. When one group burns out, faces repression, loses steam, or slows down, other sections of the movement pick up the slack. The different attitudes, aesthetics, and styles of organizing that comprise this movement are incommensurable, sometimes even mutually unintelligible, but this has made the movement stronger, like the proverbial many-headed hydra.

THIRD WEEK OF ACTION (MAY 2022)

The third Week of Action marked the threshold between one phase and another—no less than when the Atlanta City Council had passed the Cop City ordinance at an earlier decisive moment in fall 2021.

Starting on May 8, 2022, hundreds of people poured into the forest: anarchists, environmentalists, abolitionists, and other direct action-oriented groups bringing tents, hammocks, sleeping bags, and food. Some arrived prepared to operate a field kitchen. Small encampments emerged everywhere, some adopting names for themselves. Clusters of tents and canopies appeared in a patchwork on both sides of the South River—some organized by affinity group, others by chance. It is difficult to take a head count in the forest, as the opponents of the movement have probably also noticed. The kitchen crews estimated that a minimum of 200 people were sleeping in the forest at night; on some days, considerably more people joined the occupation.

The forest remained family-friendly; kids were present in the forest every day of the week, receiving guided tours, making art, or directing their own time under the care of community members. But this was not your standard protest encampment. Many of the participants wore balaclavas. They arrived prepared to take direct action against the Police Foundation and its affiliates, aiming to shift the balance of power.

On the first day of the Week of Action, May 9, forest defenders awoke to the sound of falling trees. At the behest of Ryan Millsap, a small construction crew and a group of Dekalb County Sheriffs working as private security were making their way into the tree line from the Radio Control (“RC”) club on the southeast side of Intrenchment Creek Park. A number of determined people responded immediately,
repelling the bulldozers with a few stones before linking arms and chanting “move back” in unison at the police officers further afield. One courageous person approached an officer and explained to him that the construction crew was engaging in illegal activity. Later, Dekalb County issued a “Stop Work” order, ostensibly following a flurry of calls by lawyers and neighborhood groups tipping them off about the illegal work.

In the following days, amid assemblies, workshops, shared meals, mushroom walks, and informal socializing, those gathered for the week of action endeavored to make the Weelaunee Forest into a cop-free zone. Whenever officers approached the area, venturing into the parking lot or parking their vehicles nearby, activists confronted them. In some instances, several dozen people descended from multiple sides of the forest, rushing police vehicles, slashing tires, smashing windows, throwing rocks.

No one was arrested or injured in these confrontations. They did not disproportionately shape the atmosphere in the forest, either. There was plenty of space in which anyone with objections to or concerns about this kind of action could be confident that they would not be caught in a confrontation. The third Week of Action created a space in which people of many different temperaments and strategies could coexist.

HELL IS EMPTY, ALL THE DEVILS ARE HERE

At the same time, actions targeting the bureaucrats and executives overseeing the destruction of the forest began in earnest. These actions highlighted the forces responsible for Cop City. They are driven by abstractions, victims of a competitive system pitting humanity against all living things. But they are also human beings.

On May 9, several dozen people marched to the suburban home of Shepherd Long, the CEO of Long Engineering, a subsidiary of Atlas Technical Consultants and a subcontractor of Brasfield & Gorrie. This was the first of several such actions during the Third Week of Action.

On May 11, a small crowd gathered outside the suburban home of Keith Johnson, regional President of Brasfield & Gorrie. Protesters scaled the fence and banged on drums early in the morning, chanting

What is undeniable is that Tortuguita (who was also known as Geese, Onka, Cami, Manny, and other names) dedicated their life to defending the forest and its inhabitants, to the planet and all of its oppressed peoples. Despite the escalating violence directed at them, they remained steadfastly committed to resisting the militarization of the police and the destruction of the planet up to the last. This is why the police killed them.

On the night of the killing, around 200 people gathered in Findley Plaza in Little 5 Points. Despite the rain, this crowd assembled to light candles and to defend space for those in grief. Some attendees read statements or delivered speeches. Others stood in silence. Many cried.

Most of those gathered blocked Moreland Avenue. When a police cruiser approached, a few people threw objects at it to send it away. The crowd slowly marched down Euclid Avenue, dragging debris into the street. Someone smashed a storefront window. Eventually, everyone calmly dispersed.

INDOMITABLE RESISTANCE

Over the following days, coverage of the movement reached international proportions. Corporate outlets throughout the Western world ran articles about the killing and the movement to defend the forest. Another vigil was announced for Friday, January 20, in Weelaunee People’s Park. Similar actions and vigils were announced in dozens of other cities across the US and around the world. Some of those vigils were quite large, considering the context and cold weather; the events in Richmond, Portland, New York, Chicago, and Austin drew over 100 people each. Altogether, several thousand people mobilized that weekend in Tortuguita’s memory.

The vigil in Weelaunee People’s Park was attended by around 100 people and a number of undercover police officers. Officers in riot gear were stationed nearby. However, the vigil took place without incident. It was important for people to be able to gather near the site of the killing as a community, to listen to some of the songs Tort had adored,
“Drop the contract!” Johnson is invested with the authority to make decisions for Brasfield & Gorrie—and he is compensated handsomely for this responsibility, judging by the size and location of his multi-house estate.

Brasfield & Gorrie is one of the largest construction general contractors in the Southeast. They are based out of Birmingham, Alabama, but they have offices throughout the Southeast, including one in the northwest periphery of Atlanta, next to the Atlanta Braves stadium, in a district known as “The Battery.” This part of the city, a pseudo-neighborhood recently invented by developers, offers a farcical imitation of urban life. Fast food restaurants, luxury condominiums, corporate hotels, and gas stations fill the area, punctuated by parking lots and storage units. There had never been a protest there, not even in 2020 during the George Floyd rebellion.

On May 12, around 80 people in hoodies and camouflage descended on the Brasfield & Gorrie regional office in The Battery. Demonstrators chanted “Stop Cop City” while some in the crowd painted graffiti and shot fireworks at the façade of the building. After breaching the lawn of the facility, a few determined people began throwing paint balloons and stones at the building, cracking the plate glass windows. Others continued lobbing fireworks. After several minutes, the crowd dispersed into the surrounding streets.

Within a few minutes, police cars encircled the area, pulling over cars and snatching pedestrians off the street. Some people were detained in nearby strip malls and gas stations. In the hours that followed, Cobb County police harassed and intimidated anyone wearing black or “alternative” clothing. By the end of the day, police had arrested five people they claim participated in the action against Brasfield & Gorrie. All were charged with felonies including “Rioting” and “Criminal Damage to Property.” At the time, this was the most serious repression the movement had faced. News coverage of the demonstration spread within left-wing “infospheres” and algorithmically constructed “echo chambers.” In the press release that followed, Brasfield & Gorrie confirmed for the first time what activists had already known: they were participating in the construction of Cop City.

The following morning, in the very early hours, several people in...
white coveralls vandalized the Brasfield & Gorrie corporate headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama. Video released by the company showed the group painting slogans, throwing rocks, and using blunt objects to smash glass doors and windows. News of this action reached the encampment in Atlanta many hours later, when an online claim of responsibility was read aloud to a large crowd around a campfire—offsetting the demoralization some may have felt after the arrests at the Atlanta office.

They Don’t Understand Who We Are

The situation developing in the forest was uncontrollable—and the government knew it. In light of the vandalism, news coverage and internet commentary opposed to the movement began to conjure an image of militancy out of a Hollywood movie. According to this false narrative, the movement was comprised of hardline extremists from other parts of the country. Looking at a beautiful, rambunctious cultural zone teeming with creativity and mutual support, the government described only terror and chaos. In painting this picture, opponents of the movement hoped to prepare the public to support a crackdown.

Rather than reinforcing this caricature of militancy and thus contributing indirectly to the repressive strategy of the local government, the events of May 14—the final day of the third Week of Action—directly contradicted it. This was no ruse: this is in fact a popular movement with widespread cultural and civic support, and the end of the Week of Action was a good time to showcase that.

In the early afternoon, over 100 residents marched in East Atlanta Village, chiefly pre-school children with their parents and teachers. Many children took the megaphone to express themselves. They comprehended the political stakes of the struggle more clearly than its critics: they did not want the forest to be destroyed because they were worried about their futures; they did not want the police to be given control over a large portion of the city because they didn’t want to see more violence-producing infrastructure. There were many photographs of this march, but local media outlets did not circulate them, and likely none appear in the Bureau of Investigations slide-show presentations.
about the movement. Similarly, some segments of the movement have inadvertently participated in the censorship of the schoolchildren by focusing only on militant actions or the progress of the lawsuits, to the detriment of a coherent analysis of the movement as a whole.

A few hours after this march, around 4 pm, another group of over 200 people met in Freedom Park near Little 5 Points. With many participants holding small branches and plants, reminiscent of the soldiers at the conclusion of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, they set off behind banners and drums into the surrounding neighborhoods. Aside from blocking traffic and setting off a few fireworks, those gathered seemed more interested in communicating with the public than engaging in direct action or clashing with police. The atmosphere was jubilant, and countless motorists and local residents stopped to applaud. After an hour, the crowd began dispersing in Inman Park, off Euclid Avenue. Helicopters were circling overhead. Police cruisers were racing up and down all of the surrounding streets. Were the police foolhardy enough to fall into the trap?

After the protest dispersed, frustrated cops sprinted from their vehicles, pouring into the park and shopping district from every side. This was not the fire-breathing mob they had convinced themselves would be laying siege to the area. Still, they were not able to alter their plans. The cultural composition of the protesters matched the bohemian aesthetics of the majority of the pedestrians, residents, and shoppers in the area, rendering it impossible to distinguish between supporters of the movement and people leaving the second-hand clothing shops or health food stores on nearby streets. News cameras filmed neighbors screaming at officers from their lawns. Multiple people were tackled and beaten by officers for their alleged participation in the protest. One journalist was tazed. In the end, 17 people were arrested and charged with “pedestrian in a roadway.”

From one perspective, the protest was a disaster. The crowd was not ready to engage the police in a physical confrontation. On the other hand, it altered the media narrative and the public perception of the movement in favor of the protesters. It is rare to see such a shift shortly after masked activists smash windows and vandalize a corporate headquarters. Instead of a mad clique of violent extremists, the movement
could be seen for what it really was: a popular struggle facing reckless hostility from local authorities. The real art of subversion cannot be reduced to illegal activity or physical resistance. Rather, it is a question of turning systems of control upside down, cultivating a situation in which self-directed activity can flourish contagiously.

Within a few days, all the charges against the 17 arrestees had been dropped. The accused now stand to take home thousands of dollars apiece in restitution for their wrongful arrests. This protest was not planned to produce that outcome, but if it had been, it would have been astute.

THEY TRIED TO BREAK US: POST-WEEK RAID

After the third Week of Action, many expected police to seek revenge. The easiest way to respond would be to attack the encampments in the forest. Although the media coverage that Atlanta police had received for their excesses in Little 5 Points had shifted public attitudes, it probably did not substantially alter the eagerness of law enforcement agencies to use force. Since today’s media landscape tends to show consumers only what they already believe, it is likely that law enforcement and their allies only saw coverage confirming their own perspectives.

On May 17, the frustration and bitterness of the police, which had accumulated for a week, was unleashed on those living in the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. In the early morning, dozens of police vehicles, helicopters, and drones encircled the forest. Atlanta Police Department, Dekalb County Sheriffs, the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Natural Resources, the Atlanta Bomb Squad, the Joint Terrorism Task Force, and possibly other agencies mobilized their forces and prepared to raid.

Police entered the forest around 10 am from Key Road. Most officers were wearing helmets or other forms of protective gear; some sported camouflage and masks. The agents and officers involved in the operation immediately set about destroying food, shelters, and protest infrastructure. One officer used a sledgehammer to smash a generator. Others worked with arborists to destroy unused tree houses or sat beneath the occupied tree sits threatening to do violence to the activists.

INJUNCTION OVERRULED

After the destruction of December 21, legal advocates filed a request for an injunction against Ryan Millsap with the Dekalb County court. The appeal highlighted the continuous abuse of the land by Millsap and his goons and the persistent violations of the terms of the land-swap deal struck between Millsap and Dekalb County, including his repeated attempts to close access to the park and his decision to tear up the bicycle path connecting the trailhead he claims to own to several other parks that he makes no legal claim to.

On December 28, the judge denied the appeal, groundlessly associating it with the protests and brazenly asserting “the damage being done to the property by those folks inhabiting it is far worse than anything anybody else is doing at this point.” She was parroting a cliché often repeated by other opponents of the movement—right, left, bureaucratic, and grassroots alike—that the protests were doing more harm than good. Protesters had not clear-cut trees, destroyed public infrastructure, or blocked public access to the park.

In her closing remarks, she made it explicitly clear that Ryan Millsap was free to continue destroying the forest however he liked, regardless of agreements with Dekalb County or anything else. The Dekalb County Office of Planning and Sustainability had rejected this idea when they issued their Stop Work order on December 22. At present, as consequence of that order, Millsap cannot continue destroying Weelaunee without permits. But as a consequence of the January 3 ruling, he is free to apply for the permits that would allow him to do so.

The truth is, nothing will prevent Millsap from resuming the destruction of the forest except the bold, creative resistance of ordinary people.

JANUARY 18, 2023

During the first half of January, the situation in the forest encampments had changed, but activists were adapting to it. Outside the forest, organizers were also strategizing, trying to figure out how to respond to repression while regaining the initiative. Almost every organizing cluster
“belonging” in the movement included camping in the forest, being in the forest during a raid, posting about the movement on social media, and protesting against the destruction of the forest. Prosecutors falsely claimed that the Department of Homeland Security had “classified” the movement as a Domestic Violent Extremist Group.

Once again, this was a falsehood. Homeland Security internal documentation on criminal action is simply that: internal memos regarding actions and events. Even if they had classified the entire movement as a domestic terror group, that would have been a clerical matter, not a legal one. But DHS does not classify movements, as seen in their rejection of Donald Trump’s absurd demand that they categorize “Antifa” as a terrorist group.

To discourage continued attacks on the forest and rebuild morale within the movement, people began organizing daily vigils in the ruins of the parking lot. Early each morning, dozens of people met to eat breakfast and drink coffee in the former parking lot of Weelaunee People’s Park. This positioned them to learn immediately of police interventions or the arrival of heavy machinery.

No contractors or police showed up on the mornings of the vigils. Without more data points, we can’t know whether the morning vigils impacted the timeline for the destruction of the forest. In the future, perhaps similar creative tactics could be used to mobilize those who cannot sleep overnight in the forest, assuming the land itself remains a contested zone.

On New Year’s Eve, hundreds of people converged in the forest. Neighbors, ravers, and activists assembled beneath a new gazebo that had been covertly assembled over the course of the day in a section of the park just barely outside of the zone that Millsap claims to own. Glow sticks illuminated a walking path through the destruction toward the sound of thumping music. A local queer collective organized the party, which was a major success.

For many people, returning to the forest had become fraught and stressful. Many attendees said they hoped that this party marked the turning of the tide against those who wished to destroy the forest.

Meanwhile, other activists engaged in proportional responses to the police operation. An abandoned truck caught fire, as did barricades made of wood and unused tires. Small groups and individuals engaged in hit-and-run actions. While the police employed state-of-the-art equipment, armor, and weaponry, forest defenders used rudimentary structures, ragged hoodies, sticks, stones, and fireworks. On more than one occasion, forest defenders used Molotov cocktails to prevent further police incursions, presumably seeking to prevent the invaders from doing serious harm to the defenseless activists who were occupying the trees. Those devices were only used in clearings where the results could be easily predicted. Pro-police advocates spent many months making a fuss about a few improvised bottles of flammable liquid. Surely, the police would not prefer to face the flash balls, tear gas, pepper spray, heat-seeking helicopters, and K9 units that they have routinely used against forest defenders.

After several hours, police began to withdraw from the area. On the other side of the forest, Dekalb County police officers entered Intrenchment Creek Park and arrested the first eight people they encountered, charging them all with “Tresspassing” in a park in broad daylight. These parkgoers may or may not have been participants in the movement, but they almost certainly were not the same people engaged in defense at the Prison Farm on the other side of the river, nearly a mile away.

Precision was not the point, however. These arrests were an essential component of the policing strategy. To this day, news reports claim “eight protesters were arrested after activists threw rocks and Molotov cocktails at police,” strongly implying that the arrestees were themselves charged with taking such actions. In fact, no one engaged in combative protest tactics was arrested in the course of the raid. In the end, despite the damage to camp infrastructure, the raid was a failure.

**FULL-COURT PRESS**

Without the defensive actions that had taken place in the forest, including rock-throwing and other forms of direct action, it is possible that those living in tree houses or tents would have suffered significant
injuries, or that the forest itself would have fallen into the hands of the police. Other interventions took place that day, as well. While the confrontation in the forest was still ongoing, a network of activists and organizations sent out a press release announcing a press conference at 4 pm.

The police operation ended upon the arrival of movement supporters and corporate media at the edge of the forest. The speakers denounced the police operation, but they did not confine themselves to commenting on repression. In front of the news cameras, they focused the assembled crowd on the need for direct resistance, on the stakes of the struggle against climate chaos, racism, gentrification, and colonialism. Footage of the statements played on television news in the metro area, which is usually the sole domain of reactionaries and police spokespeople—who were mostly silent about the movement for several months afterwards.

This was a direct inversion of the usual media landscape. Opting for silence and obscurity did not help the police, just as it has rarely helped subversive movements in the past.

SPEAKING FOR OURSELVES

Nowadays, it is unusual for anarchists or other aspiring revolutionaries to address the corporate media. Over the past several decades, radicals have developed many theories about the role of corporate news

many people in the movement felt a bit of temporary relief. Yet there was nothing preventing police from entering the forest to remove encampments or to attack movement infrastructure.

REGAINING CONFIDENCE

In the final weeks of December, the movement worked hard to rearrange priorities and regain confidence. The encampments in the Old Atlanta Prison Farm held firm in the face of the repression. Local musicians and artists organized a “Rock Against Repression” fundraiser for those facing terrorism charges; several hundred people attended. Jail support and legal aid teams worked tirelessly in a superhuman effort to assure the safety of the accused. Activists and lawyers from around the country offered assistance along with advice distilled from previous eras of repression, including the Green Scare.

The movement was drawing national attention, especially from outlets like Motherboard that were concerned about the politically-charged prosecution of forest defenders. Far-right trolls also took notice, siding with the authorities by organizing doxing efforts and smear campaigns targeting the accused.

Dekalb County District Attorney Sherri Boston and police spokespeople were arguing that affiliation with the Defend the Atlanta Forest movement was itself a legitimate basis for the terrorism charges. According to the government, some of the acts that “affirmed” one’s
organizations, the effects of mass communication on the popular imagination, and the consequences for movements that consent to be represented. Informed by these analyses, many people have developed alternative and underground media projects including websites, journals, zines, and podcasts to circumvent censorship and address audiences on a more horizontal basis. Though mass struggles have erupted year after year, those on the front lines have usually opted not to try to explain themselves to the hundreds of millions of people who learn about the world chiefly through the corporate radio, newspapers, magazines, and televisions.

The experience of revolt itself can transform the consciousness of those who participate in it, shifting their vantage point on reality. But actions are not enough when a society is as filled with false narratives as ours is. As long as the most ambitious and courageous participants in these struggles are not able to address people on their own behalf, bureaucrats, liberals, reformers, and academics have a free hand to misrepresent them. Often, this means portraying them as foot soldiers for other groups who are willing to explain the situation to mass audiences according to their own politics.

Hoping to break this pattern, the movement to defend the forest has taken on addressing corporate media as one of its core activities. Some people know this movement as Defend the Atlanta Forest, others as Stop Cop City. Both of these slogans describe more or less the same constellation of groups, tactics, goals, and woodlands, but they speak to slightly different demographics. Understood as a whole, the movement operates a sophisticated social media infrastructure including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Mastodon, TikTok, and Telegram, as well as websites, media kits, and publicly-listed emails. These platforms ensure that the movement can communicate with those who already support it and perhaps with those immediately adjacent to them.

When journalists contact one of the movement’s platforms, activists coordinate to ensure that someone within the movement can engage with them. It is usually proponents of radical social change who assume this responsibility, including abolitionists, Black autonomists, anarchists, or other aspiring revolutionaries. Rather than presenting themselves as leaders or spokespeople, activists answer journalists’
questions, give them walking tours, offer them information packets, provide them with research, and supply them with insider perspectives, leads, images, quotes, and narratives suitable for their assignments. This work is unpaid and largely invisible to media consumers.

All of the most accessible sources and platforms associated with the movement have refused to denounce direct action or radical politics. While different platforms present their own perspectives in a variety of different tones, none of them have veered so far away from the others as to offer the news outlets rifts to exploit. During interviews and press conferences, commenters from the movement speak in clear and concise sentences. Ideally, every single sentence should stand on its own as a soundbite, so that it is impossible for an editor to mutilate them. When journalists ask questions about complicated or unexpected topics, activists do not hesitate to say simply “I don’t know about that right now, but maybe we can follow up later.”

Journalists do not expect everyone to know everything, but they want other people to do as much of their jobs for them as possible. As long as participants in the movement are willing to hold their hands throughout the process, writers or photographers will often offer them sympathetic coverage. If radicals do not take on this time-consuming work, liberal organizations will take it up in pursuit of their own agendas. If the stories are not coherent or interesting or timely enough, news agencies will go with pro-police rhetoric or else invent false stories from whole cloth.

Because corporate media coverage is the primary means by which the authorities prepare popular opinion to accept the repression of protesters and poor people, it can be dangerous not to intervene in it. Movements should never gratuitously portray themselves as more powerful or destructive than they actually are; it is much better to be underestimated than to give your adversaries an opportunity to mobilize others against you. Likewise, they should not miss any opportunity to humanize the participants and frame the narrative themselves.

At the same time, doing so involves a host of challenges.

It can be tempting, for instance, for media spokespeople to water down their messaging so that it appeals to the broadest possible audience. However, this will not prepare audiences to understand the activists breached the police line by walking into the edge of the forest, bringing news crews with them to photograph riot police in the ruins of the Weelaunee Café and park gazebo.

Footage from the press conference played repeatedly on local television. Another person was arrested in the vicinity of the forest and charged with “Domestic Terrorism.” Nonetheless, the police operation failed to remove the remaining tree-sitters and the other activists who remained in the forest. Over the following days, national coverage of the repression appeared on Democracy Now!, CNN, and other outlets.

All of the various organizations and tendencies involved in the movement came together to defend the accused. Other groups, including socialists and others who had kept distance from the movement for whatever reason, stepped up to denounce the repression of the six young arrestees.

On December 16, the Dekalb County government denied the “Land Disturbance Permit” required to begin the destruction of the Old Atlanta Prison farm. This was the fourth time that an application for the permit was denied. The next day, 200 people gathered in East Atlanta Village. At that point, this was one of the biggest local protests in the context of the movement. Speakers from local Black liberation organizations, a pre-school, a solidarity organization, and within the movement denounced the repression. “We cannot allow six young people to rot in prison for taking actions we all agree are necessary,” one person declared to a cheering crowd. The whole crowd shared the sense that this attack on the forest occupants constituted an attack on the movement as a whole.

After an hour of fiery speeches, the crowd gathered behind a banner demanding that Brasfield & Gorrie drop the contract with the APF and another declaring “We Are All Forest Defenders.” They marched around the business and residential area for an hour, drawing applause and cheers. In many ways, the police assault had fostered sympathy with the movement, not paralysis.

For their part, the police claimed that this was a long and dangerous confrontation “finally coming to a head,” implying that the movement was over. Nothing could be further from the truth.
Activists withdrew to treehouses or hiding spots or else fled the forest altogether. Since there were no subcontractors present, few chose to resist the operation; forest defenders did not want to be caught in conflicts with police that did not actually delay construction. Previously, this had seemed like the wisest idea, especially after the symbolic sweeps of the forest began. But this was an extraction mission: rather than escorting excavators or subcontractors or making a symbolic appearance, the police intended to make arrests and destroy camps. In hindsight, if more people had arrived to resist, things might have turned out differently. Some people in the forest did clash with officers, mostly by throwing stones and erecting barricades.

The police wrecked dozens of tents and campsites. They bulldozed the Weelaunee Café. They used chainsaws to demolish the warming station along with hammocks, tables, medic stations, water bottles, and makeshift stages. A cherry picker entered the forest; arborists used it to destroy unoccupied tree houses. Officers who were able to locate forest defenders positioned in the trees stood beneath them, insulting and threatening them. Police pointed firearms at tree-sitters; they shot them with pepper balls, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Atlanta police unleashed attack dogs on activists moving on foot through the forest.

By the end of the day, five people were under arrest. All of them were slapped with felony charges including “Domestic Terrorism.”

WE ARE ALL FOREST DEFENDERS

The movement responded immediately. A press conference met on December 14 outside Weelaunee People’s Park. The park was temporarily closed off by police, who illegally closed access to the land with their vehicles during a second day of operations in the forest. They had not successfully evicted all of the tree houses, so they returned to complete their goal. While Dekalb County cops were in the forest shooting pepper balls at Tortuguita—at the time, known only as an anonymous activist occupying a tree house—activists and community members gathered outside of the park to deliver speeches to the local news media. This did not end the raid, as the press conference in May 2022 had, but it did draw away police resources to the parking lot, especially after tactics or priorities of the movement, nor the stakes for which they are fighting. The most important thing is not to generate favorable coverage so much as to structure the popular perception of the movement, setting the terms of debate.

If participants in combative movements are unwilling to appear in the press under their legal names or at least with their faces visible for fear of state and vigilante violence, corporate outlets will usually not work with them. The risks are real enough; indeed, even liberal leaders who denounce radical tactics may still be targeted by far-right trolls and police who associate them with a fierce movement. Fortunately, 21st century social media outlets have given grassroots activists some leverage against this form of corporate censorship by breaking down some barriers to mass communication. If editors fear that they will miss a chance to generate revenue by refusing to ease their policies regarding anonymity, they will sometimes make exceptions, even platforming balaclava-clad demonstrators if the latter can credibly present themselves as participants in powerful movements. More often than not, however, news outlets will simply move on to covering other stories.

Ambitious movements should seek to maintain a full-spectrum media interface. They should be prepared to work off the record with sympathetic journalists and documentary filmmakers, to operate round-the-clock social media strategies, to have some participants available who are willing to show their faces, others who are willing to air their voices, and more who are willing to answer written interviews. For the sake of reciprocity, anti-capitalist, abolitionist, and anarchist groups should not needlessly criticize more moderate groups.

Some might object that all of this energy is better invested in other tasks. Surely, there are more pressing issues than the way that the movement is perceived by those who are not even taking part in it. Often, it is career-oriented opportunists who end up handling media operations. This leaves front-line participants at the margins of public attention, rendering it almost inevitable that they will have to invest countless hours and sleepless nights struggling to unmask or outmaneuver self-defeating and divisive reformist perspectives. In the end, it can be more time-efficient to start out with a proper media strategy.
than to play catch-up late in the game.

In the movement to defend the forest, activists in local and national press openly support direct action, encourage diverse participation, and advocate for radical social change in clear language, without hyperbole. In this case, it is the careerists who are left complaining about “imbalanced” coverage. When journalists ask leading questions, attempting to goad activists into denouncing each other, this is almost always rejected outright.

There have been exceptions. One participant stupefyingly denounced the movement as “more disappointing than Cop City itself”—surely music to the ears of the APF. Such critics often frame politics via spatial metaphors, describing coherent identities and boundaries between inside and outside. Rather than contributing freely in a field of open play, some rush to associate themselves with or dissociate themselves from specific tendencies or perceived factions, while others watch from the sidelines, passing judgment or waiting for instructions.

The urge to denounce the struggle seems to grip some people especially tightly during moments of brutal repression. Some people even posted cynical “I told you so” criticisms after the killing of Tortuguita. At the same time, these people do not hesitate to associate themselves with the movement when it provides them social capital. Despite individual smear campaigns like these, however, corporate media and law enforcement have failed to foster rival factions to pit against one another.

The stalemate broke in December.

In fall 2022, it was not uncommon to hear activists speculate that the winter months would see the police and their allies regroup—especially in the forest, where tree cover and foliage would be reduced. But no one was prepared for what transpired.

Following weeks of propaganda, a massive inter-agency raid encircled the forest on December 13. Under the direction of the Georgia Bureau of Investigations, officers from the Atlanta Police, the Dekalb Police, the Bomb Squad, and the Department of Homeland Security entered the forest from Key, Constitution, Fayetteville, Bouldercrest, and West Park Place. They advanced on foot from Constitution and Fayetteville. Drones hovered overhead and helicopters circled above the trees with thermal cameras trained on the encampments. Officers in riot gear equipped with off-road vehicles invaded the Prison Farm through the North Gate with firearms at the ready.
If movements cannot tolerate differences among their participants, they must be able to address them internally, directly or through mediators. If that is not possible, the conflicting tendencies or groups should ignore each other. Clarity about differences is important, but drawn-out conflicts between rival camps almost always benefit the authorities most of all. The more divisions in a movement, the more emboldened the authorities will be to target the most effective currents within it; when rivals post on social media about each other’s errors or vulnerabilities, this can assist the authorities in strategizing or building a narrative to justify repression. Often such conflicts needlessly polarize entire movements, as everyone is compelled to take sides; many ideologies justify this kind of behavior, to everyone’s misfortune. Unfortunately, contemporary social media platforms often incentivize this sort of conduct.

**MOMENTUM BREEDS RESISTANCE**

Across the country, at least twenty acts of direct action followed the police raid of May 2022. With morale high after the third Week of Action, movement participants outside Atlanta were determined to preserve the initiative. Cultivating winning strategies is not simply a question of using the right tactics, nor of accumulating actions against a target. Rather, the strategy of targeting the logistics of the development on a decentralized basis has succeeded because it is empowering: it has enabled many people to participate in the movement on their own terms. At the same time, the whirlwind of different events and tactics has confused the Police Foundation, their bureaucratic supporters, and their contractors.

**PREPARING FOR A CLAMPDOWN**

Meanwhile, throughout the fall, the forest destroyers were developing a new media strategy, as the Georgia Bureau of Investigations, the Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee, the Department of Homeland Security, and Georgia Governor Brian Kemp got involved.

After the fourth Week of Action, these groups began experimenting with openly criminalizing the movement. Sharon Williams, Allison Clark, and various law enforcement agents began using the phrase “eco-terrorist” in their meetings and press briefings. They worked with
and ironic detachment serve to excuse them from convincing people, working well with others, or carrying out courageous deeds.

At demonstrations, press conferences, and assemblies, in written statements, participants in the movement to defend the forest regularly exhibit an attitude of confidence. Stating that they intend to win this fight is not arrogant—it is a decision driven by real conviction. That conviction emerges from something greater than individual will.

**THE TREE PEOPLE**

Several activists had established tree houses (“tree sits”) in the forest beginning on January 19, 2022. This was one of several interventions during a difficult period for the movement. At that time, Reeves+Young was still the general contractor for the Police Foundation. Their subcontractor, Long Engineering, was conducting surveying efforts and soil sampling excursions and activists were confused about how to stop them. Four months later, in May 2022, the situation had changed completely.

Coming out of the third Week of Action, movement groups dedicated to on-site resistance needed to innovate their form of struggle. If the news media continued broadcasting footage of hooded people throwing Molotov cocktails, that could embolden the police to utilize levels of force that few were prepared to resist. The tree sits made it possible to reframe the narrative.

At least half a dozen treehouses were constructed on the Old Atlanta Prison Farm and a section of Intrenchment Creek Park in late May 2022. The residents and architects gave them names and decorated them according to their tastes; some tree houses co-existed with adjacent ground camps. In the weeks following the raid, activists living in these tree houses drafted statements, gave interviews to the press, and took photographs documenting their determination. By June, the majority of news coverage—including in national press such as The New Yorker—had shifted to an almost anthropological interest in the exotic, romantic tree sitters.

The strategy of those who were seeking to destroy the forest also changed, though this took longer. At first, it did not seem clear to the remove the burned remains of Millsap’s truck. After a brief altercation, his truck also caught fire. Later, he told the media he had no idea what was happening, and that he was simply victim of violent crime. On another occasion, an annex building belonging to Shadowbox/Blackhall caught fire. Several pieces of heavy machinery parked in an area near the forest were sabotaged, perhaps in response to information connecting them to the planned developments. Finally, in November, someone sabotaged the electrical powerlines serving the police shooting range located in a section of the forest, disabling the entrance.

While all of this was happening, most segments of the movement seemed inert. The tools that the movement had developed were simple, but they weren’t proliferating. Nature walks and community events were still being organized with the pre-schools; weekly dinners were still taking place in the park, as well as workshops and trainings, rallies and press conferences, concerts and parties. Yet none of these had broken through the imperceptible wall that kept the movement on a plateau.

One group of amateur builders constructed an incredible kitchen in the parking lot of Weelaunee People’s Park, dubbing it the “Weelaunee Café.” For weeks, potlucks and meetups took place there. Elsewhere in the forest, a team dedicated themselves to building a visually stunning warming shelter. The movement hardly lacked moral support or passive sympathy.

Still, no form of large-scale activity emerged in this period. Only the self-directed activity of large numbers of people can mobilize the kind of collective potential that can prevail over structures of authoritarian power. This is the strength that mass uprisings, general strikes, and insurrections are able to bring to bear that activist campaigns are not. The movement had made strides, but it had not broken out of the political isolation that limits so many movements.

Perhaps specialization contributed to this impasse. Focused groups working tirelessly on particular tasks can accomplish many things. They can operate counter-surveillance teams or maintain camps; they can oversee legal initiatives and attend civic hearings; they can conduct interviews and advise journalists; they can organize meetings or canvassing teams; they can work tirelessly on jail support or legal aid; they
GRIDLOCK AND INNOVATION

Because it was difficult to gather up-to-date information, activists could not tell whether their strategy was working. Beyond the apparent stalemate in the forest and the persistence of the camps, it was unclear whether pressuring contractors and subcontractors was having an effect. Ironically, this scenario resulted from the victories that defensive groups had achieved on the ground, as well as the Stop Work order for the Prison Farm.

The few statements that law enforcement made to the press suggested that everyone was passing the buck: Dekalb Police were deferring responsibility to Atlanta Police, who were deferring to the Georgia Bureau of Investigations, who were deferring to the Department of Homeland Security, who were waiting for the CSAC to establish their priorities, who were waiting on reports from police. Because no one was sending workers into the forest and none of the companies were making statements to the press (aside from whistleblowers inside a few companies leaking information to movement researchers), it was impossible to judge the effectiveness of the strategies at play.

One consequence of this stalemate was a tendency towards less precisely targeted actions. Some people even advocated this. Aside from the regular sabotage of Flock Safety cameras in the area, some individuals apparently sought to turn the forest itself—previously a zone of defensive operations—into an offensive front. From September to November, a number of actions occurred targeting infrastructure around the forest, including some incendiary attacks. There is no evidence to suggest that anyone living in the forest was involved in any of these actions, though the police later attributed all the actions to them specifically.

On one occasion, equipment was torched that belonged to Norfolk Southern, a funder of the police foundation (and incidentally, the corporation behind a train derailment and toxic chemical catastrophe in East Palestine, Ohio on February 3, 2023). On another occasion, in early November, a man showed up with a flatbed trailer and began antagonizing parkgoers and forest defenders, insisting on his right to authorities that the raid of May 17 had failed. This only became evident when contractors with Long Engineering entered the forest near Constitution and Old Constitution Road on June 2. The construction crew arrived with a piece of tree-felling machinery, but without sufficient police detail; about ten activists easily repelled them. Aside from yelling and waving their arms, a few of these forest defenders tossed firecrackers in the direction of the work crews in order to get their attention. Work was canceled for the day.

For the next six months, no work took place inside the perimeter of the forest without considerable police protection.

NEW OPENINGS

This was the beginning of a spiral of paranoia for the police agencies. On June 6, 2022, a convoy of police officers accompanied a work crew on Key Road. Workers with Boyette Brothers Construction Rental were knocking down trees at the side of the road. This was intended to be a part of the pre-construction phase of development that was meant to include the erection of an 8-foot security fence. Protesters approached the forest destroyers unarmed. Blowing whistles and waving their arms, forest defenders sought to enter the vicinity of work crews in a fashion likely to induce them to halt work. Without hesitating, police officers drew their weapons and pointed them directly at the protesters. Withdrawing into the woods, forest defenders managed to save their own lives, but they were not able to halt the destruction. By the end of the day, the workers had felled dozens of trees.

Later that evening, however, the machines they had used to destroy the trees were in ruins. An anonymous online communiqué stated that the company had been identified and their facilities located in Conyers, GA. The greater part of their fleet was vandalized, some of it burned. The online statement read “If you build it, we will burn it.”

On June 10, a few days later, the Dekalb County Government posted a “Stop Work” order at the entry gate to the Old Prison Farm, likely because of phone calls to various departments and commissions. Evidently, the aforementioned work had been undertaken without the proper permits, which still had not been approved by the county.
government. After the sabotage and Stop Work order, not a single day of “pre-construction” work was attempted for nearly five months on the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. Other potential subcontractors who normally work for Brasfield & Gorrie may have been unwilling to bid on this contract in light of what took place at Boyette Brothers Rental.

Throughout the summer, initiatives to defend the forest continued to occur across the country. Acts of civil disobedience occurred at a Brasfield & Gorrie office in Charlotte, North Carolina. Protesters distributed fliers at the homes, neighborhoods, and churches of executives associated with the project. There were also acts of sabotage and vandalism at the offices of subcontractors. Every week, there seemed to be new statements and news articles.

New constellations and groups emerged within the movement during this time. The group of teachers, preschool students, and associated organizers who had organized the march in May continued to host walks, community events, and gardening days that brought children to the forest. Their participation as an organized group—the Weelaunee Coalition—enabled supporters with children to participate in the movement without having to commit to risky actions or find childcare for their kids. Such groups are not auxiliary forces that serve only to tidy up the movement’s reputation. They preserve their own strategic autonomy and discourse, engaging as all the other participants do, shaping the movement and taking responsibility for it in their own ways.

**LURING THEM IN**

Political strategy develops as contending forces act and react to one another in a creative circuit, each identifying weaknesses in the opposing strategy and exploiting it. Strategies that solve one problem often produce another.

Throughout June and July and continuing well into fall, police began carrying out ritualistic “sweeps” of the forest, specifically the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. These sweeps typically involved five to twenty officers from the Atlanta Police Department. Because they were operating outside of their jurisdiction and were therefore unable to perform that is funding the APF, used industrial lawn mowers in a section of Weelaunee People’s Park to create an easement via which they could perform maintenance tasks. Given the chance to destroy a community garden built by pre-school children a week earlier, however, they opted to go around it.

It was hard to tell what was happening. But it was clear what was not happening.

The operation was not attacking tree sitters. It was ignoring them. It was not felling trees, nor was it constructing a fence. After weeks of expectation, however, it was hard to not perceive all of this work as connected to some sort of repressive operation in the forest. And perhaps it was. Perhaps the Dekalb County contractors were there on behalf of the APF, or Millsap, or other corporate interests aiming to increase carrying capacity of the roads for the sake of large machinery, or the capacity of the electrical grid for the future Cop City infrastructure. Some of the companies had paper sheets taped over their logos. Was that because they didn’t want to be identified as subcontractors for Brasfield & Gorrie? Or because police had misled them to believe that everyone in the area was in danger of imminent harm at the hands of vicious protesters living in the woods?

To this day, we don’t know. Over the following months, the situation remained confusing. Every week, coverage of the movement appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *The Guardian*, CNN, Vice, the Intercept, NPR, Fox, MSNBC, the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post*. The movement had reached a new threshold of publicity, almost all of which was favorable.

At the same time, what had been an innovative movement seemed to be stabilizing into its simplest and most reproducible elements. Since the deforestation had definitively stalled, it was difficult to identify exactly who was working with Brasfield & Gorrie—though that didn’t stop activists from trying to figure it out. Call-in campaigns, home demonstrations, and other actions continued, especially against Atlas Technical Consultants, the parent company of Long Engineering, which worked under Reeves+Young.
day.

By nightfall, hundreds of concert-goers were pouring into the park for the festival’s final evening. Many of them took pictures with the remains of the truck or decorated it with graffiti. As the show picked up momentum, a joyous throng moshed as a series of hardcore punk bands took the stage. Then they were swaying and bouncing to the sound of post-punk indie rockers, then gyrating to the disco-influenced beats and repetitive thumping of the late-night DJs. Midway through the night, it began to rain. The tarps covered all who wished to stay dry, but some chose to soak themselves in the water descending through the tree canopy above.

Between sets, people read aloud from fliers and handbills. Some performers led chants of “Stop cop city!” and “Defend the forest!” Organizers repeatedly took the microphone to explain the movement’s goals, emphasizing its autonomous and decentralized nature, enjoining everyone assembled to take personal responsibility for giving life to it.

Many concert-goers affirmed that this was one of the greatest experiences of their lives.

FALL

Many participants in the movement, especially those who lived in the encampments, expected the fourth Week of Action to be followed by a massive raid, just as the third one had been. The Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee was spreading lies about the alleged use of firearms against a Flock Safety worker. A feeling of dread dominated some sections of the movement.

Four days later, on August 3, 2022, a large operation did indeed occur around the forest. On Bouldercrest Road, Key Road, Fayetteville Road, Constitution, and Old Constitution—all of the streets adjacent to the section of forest that was occupied—construction workers and utility companies initiated work, accompanied by police officers and security guards. Some of these workers were doing electrical maintenance; others were working on the plumbing beneath the street, or potholes, sewage maintenance, or other municipal projects in the immediate vicinity of the forest. Georgia Power, the electrical company

arrests, these interventions were chiefly symbolic. On Tuesday mornings and sometimes Wednesdays or Fridays as well, officers would enter the so-called “North Gate” on Key Road. They would assemble for an hour or so before boarding Utility Task Vehicles (UTVs) or All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs).

Guessing that these sweeps were chiefly symbolic, activists refused to engage police during them. Hiding, running, climbing into tree houses, or otherwise remaining distant from officers became the defenders’ primary response, while the cops engaged in slashing tents, dumping out food, stealing water, and loitering. During this period, police agencies were being lured, consciously or not, into fruitless entanglements in the forest. With the activists obstructing their efforts, they could not move forward on the project, but they also could not find the well-hidden forest defenders.

The higher-ups received updates to the effect that protesters had abandoned the zone, which they passed along to the Atlanta Police Foundation. Apparently, the APF spread this misinformation to the Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee (CSAC), an organization contrived by the Atlanta Police Foundation and their advocates for the purpose of rubber-stamping Cop City under the pretense of democratic feedback.

Two people, Sharon Williams and Allison Clark, began to use CSAC as a platform to spread increasingly paranoid and far-fetched myths to the media. They were among the very first to denounce activists as “eco-terrorists.” As popular opinion turned against Cop City, the opinions of CSAC became more important to the project, as it was the only public group willing to stand in front of news cameras to defend it.

THE FOURTH WEEK OF ACTION

Local groups announced the fourth Week of Action for the end of July. With such short time since the last Week of Action, it wasn’t clear what they could organize on a large scale. On the other hand, a construction timeline released by the Police Foundation expressed their intention to begin “Clearing and Grading”—a euphemism for felling trees and disturbing the land—before the end of summer. If the third Week of
Action had essentially been an exercise in mass convergence and direct action, the next one would have to be something else entirely.

THE SOUND OF MUSIC

New ideas rarely arise from politics; they are merely translated into it. Innovations in thinking and language do not emerge from reflection and conversation alone. Just as some professional athletes take dance classes in the off season, rebels and aspiring revolutionaries have long drawn inspiration from literature, poetry, art, and music—perhaps the only form of human activity that immanently channels the shared vibrancy and intensity common to all beings and systems in the cosmos.

Black liberation movements have always had a generative relationship with Black music. This relationship nourishes the struggle, helping to transmit cultural and political knowledge, lessons, and awareness. Music plays a similarly important role in many Indigenous struggles. By contrast, some predominantly white movements do not ascribe a comparable role to music and art. Some participants attempt to compensate with militant fantasies, or uncritically consume cultural innovations without understanding what is powerful about them. Some activists may even cynically conceal themselves in cultural circles, biding their time until the “real” action can begin.

Happily, the movement to defend Weelaunee is not one of those movements. This struggle constantly replenishes its connection to music, arts communities, and cultural events. It would be difficult to overstate the impact this has had on the longevity and creativity of the forest defense, both in the woods, downtown, and around the region.

When the fourth Week of Action was announced, an autonomous organizing group declared that they would be coordinating a free music festival in the forest. Within a few days, a local folk artist popular with alternative Black youth announced his intention to organize one as well. Artists and musicians began reaching out. Soon, full lineups were assembled including performers from the regional dance, indie, folk, hip hop, and hardcore punk music scenes. Other people announced additional workshops and actions. Music journalists began reaching out return. The crowd, which had grown to about 100, slowly dispersed back into the forest or returned to town. Activists listened to presentations or prepared for the final night of music.

Eventually, after everyone had dispersed from the parking lot, someone set the truck on fire. The smoke billowed above the tree line. The park is across the street from a fire station, and a fire truck doused the truck from the street. Some feared that the sight of the charred truck might deter people from attending the workshops or music events, which were intended to draw locals to the forest who had no prior experience in movements of this nature and who might already have been cautious about participating.

“We don’t know what will happen,” one long-term forest occupant enjoined others. “Let’s see. Let’s not freak out.”

In the end, that person was right. The truck became a monument to the fortitude and courage of the movement. People did not hesitate to attend the presentations that historians and academics offered that
to local organizers, expressing the desire to camp out with the protesters and attend the music events.

WEELAUNEE PEOPLE’S PARK

In the days leading up to the Week of Action slated to begin on July 23, Ryan Millsap of Blackhall Studios began to work with Dekalb police to block access to Intrenchment Creek Park. Over the previous weeks, Blackhall Studios had been renamed Shadowbox Studios following its acquisition by Commonwealth Asset Management, an investment firm that Millsap sits on the board of. Millsap believed that this sale nullified his agreements with the Dekalb County government to develop a nearby clear-cut (which he had already destroyed) into “Michelle Obama Park” in return for building a soundstage complex. Via this ruse, he hoped to legally steal about 40 acres located in and around the Intrenchment Creek Park trailhead, including a section of the PATH Foundation bicycle and walking trail, the RC Field, and some of the forest.

Ongoing lawsuits coordinated by activists with the South River Watershed Alliance were one of the only things preventing this land grab from moving forward. According to the terms of the lawsuit, the forest was not to be substantially disturbed and the park was to remain accessible to the public until the case was resolved in court. While those pursuing the lawsuit and related efforts to arrive at courtroom solutions were operating at a distance from the rest of the movement, most of the activists occupying the forest or pressuring contractors considered these strategies to be legitimate means of defending the land.

The City of Atlanta government had adopted “The South River Forest Vision,” the vision of the Watershed Alliance, as the official purpose for this land before shifting to the Cop City proposal after the George Floyd rebellion. The teams working on the lawsuits serve the forest as a defensive bulwark, exemplified by the Stop Work order of June 10, but they also constitute one of the offensive fronts of the struggle. If the movement wins, that will likely manifest itself as a decision in the courts.

On July 19, Ryan Millsap violated the agreement to keep the park
accessible to the public. This was hardly the only time he did so. Legal defense is an important part of a holistic strategy, but it will not suffice to prevent the destruction of the land.

Late on the afternoon of July 19, contractors accompanied by Dekalb County Sheriffs erected concrete barriers in the driveway of Intrenchment Creek Park Trailhead, blocking access to the parking lot. Presumably, Millsap believed that this would keep people out of the park during the Week of Action. With hundreds of people preparing to camp in the forest and bands expecting to play there, it seemed urgent to remove the barriers and reorient around this section of the forest for the time being, since pre-construction efforts in the Prison Farm had come to a halt.

On the night of July 21, a group calling themselves “100 Cute Little Ants” moved the heavy barriers to the side, opening enough space for one or two cars to enter at a time. The new placement of the barriers allowed civilians to enter with ease, but made it difficult to operate large machinery or vehicles in the small entranceway facing West Side Place. People redecorated the gray barriers with pink paint and slogans.

The Week of Action launched on July 23 with a ribbon-cutting ceremony that drew over 100 people. A lovely official-looking sign was planted in the ground reading “Weelaunee People’s Park” on one side and “South River Forest Park” on the other. After cutting the ribbon, the assembled crowd chanted “People’s park, people’s park!” while cars and equipment began loading in. By afternoon, hundreds of people filled the area.

While parkgoers and forest defenders set up camps and listened to the first live performances, others organized home demonstrations. Beginning on July 25, protesters visited the homes of various Brasfield & Gorrie executives, chanting and holding banners. Police response to these demonstrations escalated over the course of the week, creating an atmosphere of danger at what were in fact legal protests.

On the other side of the forest, a surveillance technology startup named Flock Safety began to install security cameras on small towers. On July 25, two days into the Week of Action, a group of forest defenders confronted a work truck associated with Flock Safety. The worker inside had just installed a new surveillance camera on Key Road. Activists chased off the truck by throwing gravel at it, breaking one of its windows, and dismantled the new camera. This action in which no one was injured contributed to the spiraling paranoia of law enforcement.

Over the following days, Sharon Williams and Allison Clark of the Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee (CSAC) worked with bureaucrats in the police department to spread the falsehood that activists had fired a gun at the Flock Safety worker. The only “evidence” they offered was a random bullet casing on the side of the road. Enterprise community members placed fliers refuting this claim in mailboxes throughout the surrounding neighborhood.

Ordinary police officers are not immune to police propaganda. To this day, many of them still believe that forest defenders shot at a construction worker. Right-wing trolls and the local District Attorney repeated this lie at every opportunity. Thanks to this lie publicized by Williams and Clark, the temperature increased.

THE KIDS WILL HAVE THEIR SAY

The music festival began on July 28. The promotional materials promised three days of “Peace, Love, and Anarchy.” Musicians performed on a makeshift stage beneath tarps strung between poles and trees. The sound system was powered by generators. Attendees could help themselves to pamphlets and other informational materials as well as clothes, water, and food.

Over the first two days, hundreds of people passed through the area, listening to the music pulsing through a small clearing in the pines. Tents and small encampments popped up everywhere. The crowd was diverse by any measure, bringing together people from different ethnic backgrounds; the styles of music were not segmented into distinct days or blocs, but flowed in and out of each other exclusively according to the principle of starting slowly and picking up steam. Together, the attendees created a transformative experience, far from the corporate venues and controlled musical experiences most were used to.

On July 30, the final day of the Week of Action, campers woke up to shouting: “They are going to tow your car! Everybody wake up! A tow truck