

Florida anti-war protesters attacked, arrested in police provocation

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Five protestors taking part in a demonstration against the Trump administration's illegal bombing of Syria were arrested in Jacksonville, Florida on Friday afternoon and charged with multiple felonies, including inciting a riot. Video of the arrests and eyewitness testimony clearly show that the incident was provoked by the police in concert with a well-known right-wing provocateur.

The police assault was initiated when Gary Snow, a right-wing activist well-known for his frequent provocations, attempted to disrupt the protest by mounting the area used as a stage for the speakers with his own megaphone to shout pro-Trump slogans. Snow was allowed to do this by the police, who had at least a half a dozen officers surrounding the immediate area.

When one speaker, Connell Crooms, confronted Snow offstage with a sheriff's deputy standing between them, he was shoved by Snow. Jacksonville police then began their assault on Crooms.

The video shows at least four officers pile on Crooms, who is deaf, violently dragging him to the ground. As Crooms was pinned to the ground by three officers, one of them repeatedly punches the incapacitated man in the ribs as the others hold him down. Snow can be seen standing unmolested over the dogpile of police officers as they viciously beat Crooms.

Crooms, who frequently participates in anti-war and anti-police violence protests in Jacksonville, was hospitalized for his injuries. Witnesses told the *Folio Weekly* that police could be seen dragging the limp body of Crooms into a nearby ambulance. Police absurdly charged him with two felonies: inciting a riot and resisting an officer with violence.

As the outraged crowd gathered closer and shouted at police to stop their assault, the sheriff's deputies turned

on the crowd and responded with brutal force. Toma Beckham, another local activist, was slammed to the ground and arrested. When another nearby activist, Christina Kittle, came to their aid she too was assaulted. The video shows a large sheriff's deputy slamming the woman face down onto the ground and violently twisting her arm behind her back into a joint lock before arresting her.

Kittle was charged with two felonies: battery on a law enforcement officer and riot/incite or encourage. Beckham was charged with a felony count of resisting an officer with violence and a misdemeanor count of affray (fighting).

William Wilder, a 74-year-old man, was beaten by another large deputy as he attempted to prevent him from assaulting another protestor. In a Facebook post from the Jacksonville sheriff's office, the police admit punching the elderly man in the face "several times to obtain compliance," after Wilder allegedly knocked the radio off of the deputies shoulder. Wilder was charged with two felony counts: aggravated battery on a law enforcement officer and depriving an officer with means of communication.

David Schneider, a local activist, was charged with a felony count of inciting a riot. Schneider was on the outskirts of the protest when police launched their assault on demonstrators.

The Jacksonville Sheriff's Office (JSO) Facebook post that attempts to whitewash the arrests justifies Schneider's arrest thus: "During the protest suspect David Schneider was identified to be the primary organizer of the protest. He was observed organizing and rehearsing chants with the crowd that they later repeated on his command during the time he addressed the crowd with an electronic megaphone. Mr. Schneider was also the main person observed engaging

and coordinating with most of the s. The decision was made to detain the organizer of the protest. Suspect Schneider observed police looking at him and began to cross the street and leave. Police yelled multiple times to stop and he did not comply. An officer ran after him and grabbed his arm and told him he was being detained. Suspect Schneider was arrested for Inciting a Riot (felony).”

The JSO indicts themselves with their own words. They arrested Schneider for organizing the protest, exercising his constitutionally protected rights of free speech. Nothing in the preceding protest, which consisted of peaceful chanting and speeches, could be rationally seen as inciting a riot.

It is clear, however, that the JSO allowed a friendly provocateur to start a fight which they then used as a justification to assault the activists.

The fact that Schneider was targeted despite the fact that he was not in the immediate vicinity of the police assault suggests the arrests were planned in advance and the s were illegally targeted for their politics. Kittle, Beckham, Crooms, Wilder, and Schneider are all well-known activists who frequently participate in local anti-war and police violence protests.

A recent article in the *Florida Times-Union* exposed the JSO’S routine surveillance of demonstrations. Going back to at least 2015 the *Times- Union* established that sheriff’s office had a contract with the social media monitoring service Geofeedia. They used the service to notify them of any planned protests, particularly against police violence. The article also reveals that the JSO would film demonstrations, zooming in on the faces of speakers so as to better identify them. The article states that the JSO has access to facial recognition software, suggesting that they used the software to identify and target protest organizers.

On Saturday family members and friends who attempted to visit those arrested were turned away from the Duval County jail. Some had traveled from out of state to visit their imprisoned family members. Rather conveniently, the jail had been placed in lockdown and visitation canceled.

The provocateur, Snow, is also a frequent presence at local protests. He is known for provoking and intimidating protestors in his attempts to disrupt peaceful demonstrations and promote his right-wing ideology. At a rally at the Jacksonville courthouse

Sunday in support of the imprisoned s, speakers called for his arrest, and several noted that at previous demonstrations the police had separated the counter-demonstrators from the main protest. The fact that they failed to do this at Friday’s protest indicates probable collusion between the police and Snow.

Further evidence of this can be seen in video from the incident. As the police scatter the terrified crowd, Snow can be seen sitting on the hood of a nearby police cruiser, calmly talking with officers.

The arrests in Jacksonville must be taken as a stern warning to the working class. Police collaboration with fascistic elements like Snow in assaults on workers is a frequent tactic of authoritarian dictatorships. As opposition to war and inequality grows, the state will increasingly rely on such methods.



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