

Police descend on Georgia city, arrest anti-Nazi protesters under anti-Klan law

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On Saturday, hundreds of police descended on the town of Newnan, Georgia to protect a small rally of neo-Nazis from anti-fascist counterprotesters, arresting several protesters under a 1951 law designed to prevent the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan (KKK) from demonstrating in public.

The rally, which took place Saturday afternoon, drew only about two dozen members of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement, who stood in black clothing on a platform chanting “White Power” and giving the “Heil Hitler” salute while police stood guard nearby.

Seven hundred police officers from 42 different agencies descended on the small city 40 miles southwest of Atlanta Saturday, dressed in full riot gear and carrying military-style assault rifles.

At least 100 people showed up to demonstrate in opposition to the rally, including some members of Antifa. Some of the counterprotesters wore bandannas or masks to hide their identities. Before the anti-fascist protesters could get near the white supremacists, however, they were headed off by heavily armed police units.

Around 2:30 p.m., police began pointing their assault rifles at counter-protestors and threatening them with arrest. One SWAT officer shouted: “State law requires you to remove your masks right now. You will do it right now or you will be arrested.”

Within minutes, police started grabbing those wearing masks from the crowd, slamming them to the ground and placing them in handcuffs, yelling “Remove your masks!” Horrified protesters held up their hands and shouted “Hands up, don’t shoot.”

“They were trying to find any pretext to shut us down,” Daniel Hanley, who was arrested for “blocking a pedestrian roadway,” told the *Atlanta Journal*

Constitution. He said he believed that he was singled out for carrying a megaphone and leading the crowd in chants. Hanley continued, “The moment we stepped foot there, they intimidated us and strategically tried to target people.”

At least 10 anti-fascist protesters were arrested, most for wearing masks and a few others for “obstructing roadways” or similar offenses. Tellingly, not a single one of the neo-Nazis was arrested and police never made any attempt to confront them. The police presence, which outweighed by several times the combined numbers of the neo-Nazis and counterdemonstrators, was a clear attempt to intimidate the counterprotesters in support of the white supremacists.

In arresting demonstrators for wearing masks, the police cited a 1951 Georgia law known as the “Anti-Mask Act,” which was designed to curtail public gatherings of the Ku Klux Klan. The law prohibits a person from wearing hoods, masks, or other items to conceal the person’s identity while on public property or even on private property without the permission of the property owner, under most circumstances. Exceptions are carved out for theatrical productions, sporting events, holidays, and civil emergencies.

One of the central justifications cited by lawmakers in support of the law’s passage was an incident two years prior in which a KKK rally on the eve of an election prevented 400 African-American voters from going to the polls on election day. Over the following decades, the law was primarily employed against white supremacists demonstrating in public.

Several court rulings upheld the law citing the need to curtail masked vigilantes from engaging in public intimidation, obviously referring to the KKK and other groups whose explicit goal is to terrorize minority

groups and their defenders into submission.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, 18 states enacted similar laws during the 20th Century, mostly between the 1920s and 1950s.

However, in recent years so-called “anti-mask laws” have been employed almost exclusively to arrest and prosecute left-wing and anti-fascist protesters in several states. New York used its own anti-mask law as a pretext to arrest Occupy Wall Street demonstrators wearing Guy Fawkes masks during the crackdown on the Occupy protests coordinated by the Obama administration in 2011 and 2012.

In 2016, eight demonstrators were arrested at a white supremacist rally in Georgia for wearing masks while protesting a similar neo-Nazi rally at Stone Mountain Park. Last year, police in Alabama employed a similar law against Antifa protesters arriving at an event hosted by the notorious white supremacist figure Richard Spencer.

The use of anti-mask laws to break up demonstrations against white supremacist and far-right organizations is highly significant. By standing the intent of the laws on its head, the state is creating a precedent for the repressive tactics that will be employed to suppress popular protests and strikes as the working class enters into mass struggle.

The use of anti-Klan laws to protect fascist groups marks yet another step in the international drive by the ruling classes of all capitalist nations toward authoritarian forms of rule in preparation for the wars and revolutionary struggles to come.



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