Berkeley police encourage harassment of anti-fascist protesters

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On Sunday, the Berkeley Police Department (BPD) posted to its Twitter account the names, ages, photos and cities of residence of fifteen anti-fascist protesters who were arrested earlier that day during a counter-protest to a far-right rally.

The decision of police to publicize the personal information of those arrested is a transparent call for right-wingers to harass and assault those named. None of the people arrested had been charged with a crime or had their cases referred to the district attorney for prosecution when their information was posted.

The protests on Sunday were in response to the "No to Marxism in America 2 / Exposing Communism" event that was called as a provocation by the "alt-right." The rally organizer stated the event would expose "the violent communist movement taking place in this city." She specifically described Antifa and other Bay Area political groups as "traitors and treasonous trash."

Divisions within the alt-right led to some groups disavowing the rally beforehand. As usual over the past two years, the alt-right rally of a few dozen was dwarfed by the hundreds of counter-protesters which the BPD estimated at 500. Under guidelines from the city, the BPD set up an exclusion zone around the protest where carrying anything "that is generally considered an 'implement of riot'" is illegal, a law so vague as to give police complete discretion in detaining protesters.

Although the BPD press release described "an extremist element" that caused "significant damage to city property," only one person arrested was accused of vandalism. A search of the county court records lists no charges so far in that case.

Most of the protesters whose information the police publicized were arrested for having undisclosed "banned weapons." Photographs of confiscated items posted by the BPD include helmets, a bicycle lock, rocks, pepper spray and short sticks.

The BPD defended its actions publicizing the personal information of those arrested, with police spokesman Byron White telling reporters "People are coming from out of town and bringing weapons and are committed to violence... We don't want people to be able to do that with anonymity." The claim is on its face a lie. All but one of the people exposed was from Berkeley or its immediately neighboring cities. Moreover, the police only accused one person in their list of a violent act, battery.

Most damning is the presumption of guilt. None of the people the BPD declared were "committed to violence" had been charged, let alone convicted, of a crime. By publicizing their information and slandering them, the BPD was appealing for extrajudicial repercussions.

The Democratic mayor of Berkeley, Jesse Arreguín, has refused to criticize the police, telling the *Guardian* newspaper only that "We need to look into this and discuss whether this is an appropriate practice going forward."

Following a public outcry and negative international press, the BPD removed the tweets in question Tuesday afternoon. As of writing, the BPD has not explained their decision or responded to the WSWS's request for comment.

Berkeley has historically been used as a testing ground for right-wing provocations and police repression. Ever since the free speech movement of the 1960s the city has had a reputation for radical politics. The same police department that fired buckshot at protesters then, killing one student, is now testing how far they can roll back the right to political protest.

Last year, UC Berkeley spent $800,000 on security for a "Free Speech Week" by far-right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos which failed to materialize, and then used that expense to increase the number of undercover police on campus and give the police department veto power over student club meetings and protests.

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Far from being impartial defenders of free speech rights, the police have repeatedly collaborated with and supported white supremacist and far-right elements. In Portland on Saturday, police attacked anti-fascist demonstrators, hospitalizing two while leaving the neo-Nazi Patriot Prayer rally untouched.

An ongoing court case against anti-fascist protesters stemming from a 2016 street fight in Sacramento has exposed direct collaboration between the California Highway Patrol (CHP) and neo-Nazis. Police records revealed in court show that the CHP sought to protect the identity of armed neo-Nazis.

CHP investigator Donovan Ayres filed an internal report including the names and photographs of five members of the Traditionalist Workers Party (TWP), a neo-Nazi organization, who had knives at the 2016 rally. None of the five were charged, and far from publicizing their identities the CHP assured them that they considered the TWP to be victims needing protection.

When someone filed a public information request on the TWP's permit to hold a rally, Ayres told the neo-Nazi on the form "I'm gonna suggest that we hold that or redact your name or something."

Officers interviewed a TWP member specifically accused of stabbing anti-fascist protesters, hoping he could identify Antifa members involved in the fight. "We're pretty much going after them," they said, "We're looking at you as a victim."

Ayers wrote in his report on one counter-demonstrator who had been repeatedly stabbed that social media posts showing him holding up his fist in a "black power salute" as well as his "anti-racist activism" showed his "intent and motivation to violate the civil rights" of the TWP. Ayres recommended charging the man on 11 offenses.

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