

Police arrest journalist and counterprotesters at far-right Proud Boys rally in Michigan

Joseph Lorenz
18 August 2020

A rally organized by the far-right Proud Boys drew fascists from across the country to Kalamazoo, Michigan on Saturday where they violently attacked a homeless resident and counterprotesters. Police intervention was delayed and to a large extent friendly to the Proud Boys and their supporters.

As early as July 27, antifascist activists were calling attention to social media posts from Proud Boys accounts advertising for a rally to be held at Arcadia Park in downtown Kalamazoo where many homeless people live.

Although the plans for the rally could not be confirmed even as late as August 13, social media was used to organize a large, diverse counterprotest that included an armed “antiracist” organization and religious pacifists.

Nathan Dannison, a pastor at a local church, organized a peaceful vigil, filing for a permit at the park where the social media posts had directed the Proud Boys and working in close collaboration with local police. There was a contingency plan to end the vigil at the first sign of violence and to allow police to sweep the area.

On August 13, Deputy City Manager Jeff Chamberlain released a statement acknowledging the social media posts and the planned counterprotest which concluded, “the City is prepared to act quickly if necessary.”

In a public Facebook post, Dannison recounted that on the day of the rally, he met with a representative of the homeless residents of the park who requested peer support specialists and mental health counselors, a request which he passed on to city officials and which, he explained, never materialized. “At roughly 1:30 p.m. the Proud Boys began marching toward the park. When the Proud Boys arrived, there were still several

homeless people standing on the sidewalks/streets, trying to ‘see’ what was happening. I don’t think many of them understood what was happening.

“I watched as the Proud Boys surrounded the same man I had been speaking with earlier, and when he touched one of their shoulders they began assaulting him with bats and other makeshift weapons that they had disguised as flag poles.

“This is the moment when several residents of Kalamazoo very bravely dove into the crowd in order to extricate the man who was being assaulted. I was certain that we were about to witness a lynching, and I am grateful that these members of our community helped save him.”

Samuel Robinson, a reporter for MLive, documented in real time on Twitter as “Proud Boys [attacked] counter-protesters, spraying pepper spray. I have been hit and sprayed.”

A thread of Robinson’s tweets shows an important timeline. At 1:30 p.m., a video shows the Proud Boys marching on the periphery of the park. Four minutes later, a video with the caption, “Hell has broken loose,” shows street fights erupting after a group of Proud Boys surrounded a black man and counterprotesters dove into the crowd after him. After two more videos of violent clashes between fascists and counterprotesters at 1:41 p.m. and 1:46 p.m., a tweet at 1:49 p.m. reads, “There have been no police present.”

Robinson’s next tweet was posted over three hours later from jail after he was arrested. In the video of the arrest, which has been released by MLive, he clearly states he is with the media while he is pushed to the ground by police in riot gear. His charge of impeding traffic was subsequently dropped, and the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety issued an apology.

MLive reported, “Based on videos [sic] footage and

first-person accounts, including that of Robinson, it appears there was not a strong police presence until 20-30 minutes after the initial violence began.”

This cannot be explained considering the contingency plan that the police had supposedly agreed upon. Pastor Dannison’s Facebook post relays, “At 1:42 p.m. I texted Asst Chief Coakley and said, ‘Clear the park,’ ‘100% of my people are out.’ The violence continued.”

Kalamazoo Public Safety Chief Karianne Thomas boasted that the police response used 111 officers from five jurisdictions. It resulted in the arrest of nine, none of whom were Proud Boys, but one was a journalist.

In fact, several eyewitness accounts describe the police protecting the Proud Boys from the larger crowd of counterprotesters as they retreated into a parking garage and then exited the city in their vehicles. One Twitter post shows a caravan of cars leaving with the caption, “Police suited up in riot gear are in the tunnel/underpass doing absolutely nothing to confront the Proud Boys driving off... Lots of out of state plates on the cars that still have them. Indiana, Kentucky, Georgia...”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with one of the counterprotesters who was arrested. He explained the scene when he arrived downtown after the Proud Boys had marched to another park three blocks away from the site of the peaceful vigil.

“In only a few minutes, they walked a block north to a parking structure. They got inside and continued their shouting from the higher levels of the ramp, some of them presenting a Nazi salute, most flashing a common white-power hand signal, as the counterprotesters shamed them from the street.

“The crowd of counterprotesters moved to the back entrance of the parking structure, where many of the [Proud Boys’] vehicles were making their exit. After several cars, many with out-of-state license plates and many more with no plates at all made their exit, I noticed a handful of police pull up across the intersection.

“A few minutes later, I felt hands on my shoulder and wrist from behind me. I was told that I was being arrested. ... As I was being put in the incredibly hot police car, I saw what looked like a few dozen more police in riot gear emerge from beneath the parking ramp’s overhang and descend on the crowd.

“Since the [Proud Boys] had mostly made their getaway at this point, it seemed obvious to me that the counterprotesters were likely to disperse on their own if left to chant for a few more minutes.”

The police response to the Proud Boys rally contrasts sharply with the violent repression that was meted out on residents protesting police violence in early June, when a massive wave of protests against police violence swept across the world following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

On the evenings of June 1 and June 2, police forcefully dispersed peaceful protests in downtown Kalamazoo. Protesters lying on the ground were sprayed with pepper spray. Those attempting to flee the crackdown were shot with rubber bullets. Tear gas canisters were used indiscriminately. In justifying the attack on protesters, police made claims about the size and violent character of the protests that were directly contradicted by video evidence but nonetheless parroted by the local media organizations.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact