

Federal agents, local police crack down on left-wing protests in Portland, Oregon

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With the full backing of Democratic mayor Ted Wheeler, local police and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agents brutally cracked down on left-wing demonstrations last week in Portland, Oregon. The events are part of a continuous thread of militarized police repression against protests that have persisted in the city since the murder of George Floyd last summer.

On Thursday, a small crowd of demonstrators gathered near the downtown courthouse, where dozens of DHS agents and Portland Police Bureau (PPB) officers were dressed in full riot gear. The police pushed back the line and remained on the perimeter of the government building. By dusk, officers began firing huge quantities of tear gas, pepper balls, flash grenades and potentially HC (hexachloroethane) smoke grenades.

The next protest began in the downtown Pearl District on Friday night. Minutes after the demonstration began, police and DHS officers began “kettling” the protestors, encircling the entire block to detain over 100 attendees and threatening to use crowd control weapons against anyone that tried to resist, including journalists and legal observers. The attendees were being detained for an “investigation of a crime,” but the nature of the alleged crime was not specified.

Police forced protesters to provide their name and birth date one by one, wrote the information on duct tape, and made protesters wear the tape on their chest. Police commanded protesters to remove their face masks and photographed them. Police were caught on video pepperspraying any protester who stepped beyond the perimeter. Tear gas was used to such an extent that visibility was reduced to a few feet. Protesters attempted to resist being detained by locking arms and legs and sitting, but they were forcefully

taken away one at a time.

The Oregon Justice Resource Center, the Council on American-Islamic Relations of Oregon and the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon all condemned the police actions. The organizations stated, “under the authority of Mayor and Police Commissioner Ted Wheeler and Police Chief Chuck Lovell, what PPB did last night — kettling — is an aggressive and indiscriminate police tactic of surrounding and boxing in a group of people and blocking off all exit points.” They make the essential point that with regard to the “kettling” tactics used by police Friday and during 2017 anti-Trump protests, “in neither case has the court approved of or found constitutional this abusive tactic.”

Mayor Wheeler expressed his full support for the PPB’s tactics at a press conference on Monday, posturing as if the city were at war, declaring “We want you to know that we’re aligning our resources, we’re revising our tactics, and we’re fighting back with everything that we’ve got.”

The recent police crackdown is reminiscent of summer 2020, during which federal agents were deployed by the Trump administration to carry out an unprecedented assault on anti-police violence protests. Portland was the first city in which plainclothes agents grabbed individuals off the streets and threw them into unmarked vans, driving them to centers for questioning. On September 10, Trump directed US Marshals to execute Michael Reinhoehl, a self-described “antifa” sympathizer, after he shot a right-wing militiaman and fled to Lacey, Washington.

This time around, Wheeler himself brought in the DHS agents to erect a fence around the Hatfield courthouse and assist PPB with crowd control, demonstrating the continuation of Trump’s “law and

order” policies under the new Biden administration and Democratic Party as a whole. Despite their professed commitment to “diversity,” “racial justice” and “police reform,” Democratic politicians seek to criminalize left-wing opposition and build up the police apparatus in preparation for the inevitable mass protests and strikes that lie ahead.

Since Biden’s election victory, Wheeler has intensified his campaign against “violent antifa and anarchists” as he stated at the beginning of January. He declared at that time his intention to “develop clear plans to address anarchist violence both here in Portland and throughout the state.” He went further, demanding increased penalties against protesters. Wheeler then encouraged police to broaden mass surveillance and “gather intelligence on these small groups of organized criminals.” Similar policies have been implemented further north in Seattle, Washington.

Wheeler and the local Democratic Party are seizing upon trash can fires and broken windows, which are ultimately harmless crimes, to justify suppressing left-wing demonstrations as a whole.

The Portland protests have been generally peaceful, full of young people expressing their anger over a range of issues including police brutality, poverty, homelessness, the detention of immigrants and the lack of social assistance during the pandemic. While these demonstrations are deemed “criminal” and subject to relentless attacks, the involvement of Pacific Northwest-based Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer members in Trump’s January 6 attempted coup at the US Capitol has been largely ignored.



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