

Proud Boys, fascists terrorize drag shows across United States

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18 December 2022

Over the weekend, drag shows held at bars and restaurants were terrorized by Proud Boys, Christian nationalists and other neo-Nazi elements, leading to the cancellation of at least one event in Austin, Texas.

Emboldened by Republicans who have made anti-LGBTQ incitement a pillar of their right-wing program, fascists around the country were allowed to threaten counter-protesters and business owners without police interference.

On Sunday, The Little Darlin' bar in Austin, Texas reported on its Facebook page that a previously scheduled Drag Queen Story Time event had been canceled. Candice Bernd, senior editor and reporter at *Truthout*, reported that the event had been subjected to threats from the New Columbia Movement, a Christian nationalist militia group that has protested at several LGBTQ events in Texas recently.

While dozens of antifascist, left-wing and technology journalists remain banned from billionaire Elon Musk's Twitter for allegedly violating terms of service, the New Columbia Movement's Twitter account, which has repeatedly incited violence against non-Christians, LGBTQ persons and socialists, is freely operating as of this writing.

In the weeks leading up to the event, the account repeatedly shared the address of the establishments where the show would be taking place and called on followers to join the New Columbia protest in person, writing on December 15 that if "perverts in Austin... think they can get away with" a "fetish session... on the Lord's Day, they thought wrong."

After the event was canceled, the fascists gloated on their Twitter account: "Another day, another victory!"

This was the second event against which Christian zealots from the New Columbia Movement had organized over the weekend. On Saturday, members of the group protested another drag show in Grand Prairie, Texas. However, unlike on Sunday, counter-protesters, some of them armed, showed up outside the

theater in defense of the drag queens, allowing the event to proceed.

Bernd, who attended both events, reported that at the Saturday event there was at least one Proud Boy present along with a representative from Alex Jones' *Infowars* and members of several other fascist groups, including Nazis from the Aryan Freedom Network.

In addition to their fascist signs, at least one member of the Aryan Freedom Network was photographed carrying a flag with the group's emblem, which features a Totenkopf, or "death's head" skull, popularized by Hitler's SS brigades.

On Sunday, in Jacksonville, Florida, roughly 30 Proud Boys protested outside the Tepeyolot Cervceria bar. Known locally as Tepey's, the bar had previously hosted a drag show event every month without incident. However, prior to Sunday's event, the bar's owner, Luis Melgarejo, reported to police and local media that members of the Proud Boys had sent him threatening emails and harassing phone calls demanding that he cancel the event.

Melgarejo shared with local news outlets an email he received accusing him of hosting an event that allowed the "grooming" of children. Speaking to "Action News Jax" on December 15, a bartender at Tepey's, Joe Lapointe, said he had received a phone call from someone who said "we deserve to be shot" for hosting the event.

The threat of fascist violence did not deter local residents, who packed the bar on Sunday. In addition to a small police presence, physical barriers and people wearing "peacekeeper" vests were deployed ahead of the show, keeping the Proud Boys at bay.

The protests over the weekend are part of an ongoing mobilization of far-right elements in the wake of former president Donald Trump's failed coup. A December 6, 2022 report from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED) found that "far-right activity in 2022 is on track to exceed the level of activity reported in 2021," exploding claims

by some media pundits that the defeat of high-profile pro-Trump candidates in the 2022 midterm elections would usher in a “return to normalcy.”

The biggest drivers of “far-right” activity, according to ACLED, were “white nationalist/white supremacist” groups and “anti-LGBT+” extremists. From the beginning of the year through December 6, ACLED recorded approximately 750 far-right events, including demonstrations, acts of political violence, fascist banner drops, vandalism and leafleting. This is only 30 fewer than the 780 events recorded by the group in all of 2021.

ACLED found that 21 percent of the demonstrations organized this year by far-right groups advanced an explicit neo-Nazi, white supremacist or anti-Semitic program. These demonstrations were led by groups such as Patriot Front and Goyim Defense League.

The “second most salient driver” of far-right activity according to ACLED is “anti-LGBT+” mobilization. While only 3 percent of far-right demonstrations in 2021 were organized against gay and transgender persons, 14 percent of right-wing demonstrations in 2022 were organized against LGBTQ+ persons and events.

Of the at least 150 incidents of political violence tracked by ACLED, more than 20 specifically targeted the LGBTQ+ community, three times more than the seven recorded in 2021.

One of the more recent events that did not turn violent, no thanks to the police, was a drag show in Columbus, Ohio that was scheduled to be held on December 3. Leading up to the event, the Columbus chapter of the Proud Boys and other fascists threatened event organizers and performers. On their Telegram channel, members of the Columbus Proud Boys said they looked forward to inflicting violence on attendees.

On Friday December 2, the day before the show, the performers pulled out due to safety concerns, and the event was canceled.

Even though the event was canceled, on December 3, dozens of Proud Boys, members of Patriot Front and other Nazis paraded through Columbus, some of them armed. A handful of cops showed up, one of whom was observed giving a “high-five” to a Proud Boy.

In a video posted on social media, a woman confronted the cop, who identified himself as Steve Dyer, over the friendly gesture with a member of the fascist militia group which, along with the Oath Keepers, spearheaded the attack on Congress on January 6, 2021.

“We saw you high-five these guys,” the woman said.

“Yes,” the cop responded.

“Seriously?” the woman said. “What is that all about?”

“Building relationships,” Dyer replied.

“With fascists?” the man recording the video asked incredulously.

“Well, I’m not supporting their cause,” Dyer responded, “I’m connecting...”

Some of the “connections” between the Proud Boys and the Columbus police were revealed in an article published this past Friday in the *Nation*.

The magazine reported that on the same Columbus Proud Boys Telegram account that threatened violence prior to the drag show, one user seemed to indicate that he was not only a member of the fascist militia group, but also a cop in the Columbus Police department.

“I heard the [commanding officer] is gonna give you guys some wiggle room,” wrote the suspected cop below an advertisement for the Columbus rally that was posted on the channel. The *Nation* noted that the same user “repeatedly identified himself as a member of law enforcement.”

Speaking to the *Nation*, Cheryl Ryan, manager of the First Unitarian Universalist Church and Red Oak Community School in Columbus, where the event was slated to take place, said she was forced to cancel the show due to indifference the police showed to her safety concerns leading up to it.

“I spent a week calling our police department and leaving voicemails about the reports we had seen,” Ryan told the *Nation*. “I was told we could hire a special duty officer, who may or may not show up because they’re understaffed.”



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