

Protests and arrests follow police killing of environmental activist outside of Atlanta, Georgia

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On the morning of January 18, Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, a 26-year-old environmental activist from Venezuela, was shot and killed by police under still unclear circumstances during a multi-agency “clearing operation” conducted in the South River forest, located in DeKalb County, Georgia, outside of Atlanta.

Since last year, dozens of environmental activists and anarchists have been camped out in the forest protesting the construction of the Atlanta Police Foundation’s (APF) “Public Safety Training Center.”

The massive 85-acre, \$90 million police training complex has been dubbed “Cop City” by its opponents. In addition to the clearing of acres of public forest, protesters and opponents of the training complex, which includes a majority of local residents, have pointed out that the facility will be used to practice “urban warfare” against the working class.

The proposed facility will be a mock-up of the city of Atlanta, complete with shooting and explosives ranges. The APF states that the center is needed to assist in boosting morale and recruiting new police officers. The Police Foundation’s Board of Trustees includes representatives of major corporations such as Delta Air Lines, Equifax, Home Depot, United Parcel Service and Wells Fargo.

On the morning Terán was killed, police from Atlanta, DeKalb County, the Georgia State Patrol, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation were involved in an operation to remove “Stop Cop City” environmental activists from the public forest where the facility is set to be built.

According to the GBI, Terán, who was known as Tortuguita/Tort (“Little Turtle”) to his friends and comrades, was inside their tent in the woods when police engaged protesters. Police claim Terán refused to comply with verbal commands barked by law enforcement to clear the area, and, “without warning,” shot and injured a Georgia State Trooper. Police claim they then returned fire and killed

Terán.

Police have provided scant evidence to support their claim that Terán shot first. Despite multiple local and federal police agencies, including the FBI, participating in the “clearing operation,” police claim there is no body camera footage of the shooting.

An estimated 25 campsites were located and removed following the killing of Terán. The GBI reportedly recovered “mortar-style” fireworks, melee weaponry, pellet rifles, gas masks and a blow torch. Seven people were arrested and subsequently charged with domestic terrorism and criminal trespass, with other felony and misdemeanor charges pending. Those arrested are between 20 and 34 years old.

The only evidence police have provided to back their claim that Terán fired at them is a picture of a pistol produced by the police on January 20, two days after the incident.

Kei Diliza, a Georgia resident and associate of the “Stop Cop City” movement, told CNN on January 19 that eyewitnesses have said the police accounts of the incident are incorrect.

Belkis Terán, the mother of Manuel Terán, in an interview with CNN on January 21 also refuted police accounts of the incident. “They said he had a gun. If he had one, it was for protecting himself against the animals in the forest. That’s what I understand,” she told CNN.

“I never knew he had a gun,” the mother continued, adding that she didn’t think Terán would be capable of firing a gun at police. “He was not a violent person. He was a pacifist. He would tell me that all the time,” she said.

After news of the killing of Terán spread online, protests and vigils against police violence were organized in several cities, including Atlanta; Portland, Oregon; Madison, Wisconsin; Akron, Ohio; and New York City.

In Atlanta on Saturday, some 300 peaceful “Stop Cop City” protesters marched to protest the killing of Terán, chanting, “No bad protesters; no good cops!”

After the march, some of the protesters engaged in vandalism of banks and police cars, provoking a massive police response. Journalist Garrison Davis reported on the ground, “Protesters hit the Atlanta Police Foundation headquarters and a few banks in the area with fireworks and broken windows. Two cop cars had their windows smashed, and then tons of Atlanta police officers arrived from multiple directions. At least a dozen arrests so far.”

On Sunday, the Atlanta Police Department confirmed the arrests of six people, all of whom are being charged with “domestic terrorism,” along with other felony and misdemeanor charges. Since last December, over a dozen “Stop Cop City” protesters have been arrested on trumped-up domestic terrorism charges.

In an interview on CBS’ *Face the Nation* on Sunday, the Democratic mayor of Atlanta, Andre Dickens, backed the massive police response and sympathized with the trooper who was shot. Dickens emphasized that a majority of those arrested were not from Atlanta, in an attempt to smear the opponents of police violence and the new police training center as “outside agitators.”

The mayor, who assumed office last year, defended the multimillion-dollar police project to a national television audience as a necessary “state of the art training center that’s going to allow us to do 21st century policing.” He particularly touted the new “emergency vehicle obstacle course.”

In 2020, as a member of the Atlanta City Council, Dickens voted in favor of a measure that would have withheld \$73 million from the Atlanta Police Department until then-Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms drafted a plan to “reinvent the culture of policing in the city.” The measure failed, and every year since then the Atlanta Police budget has increased. Bottoms has since been elevated to a top position in the Biden administration.

In his appearance on *Face the Nation*, Dickens whitewashed the role of the Democratic Party in suffocating the mass protests that erupted in 2020 following the police murder of George Floyd and appropriating “defund the police” demands to justify increased funding in the name of “reforming” the police. Dickens claimed that “individuals that are protesting against Cop City, they don’t want to see the very thing they asked for, more police training.”

He said the allocation of \$90 million, including \$30 million in taxpayer money, for the new facility was an example of “bringing about the change we wanted to see in 2020.” He warned, “So we are going to develop this training center and those individuals will have to come to a halt.”

Dickens’ comments mirrored those made by President Joe Biden in Washington D.C. on Friday. Speaking to hundreds of mayors, Democratic and Republican, Biden declared, to

applause: “When it comes to public safety, we know the answer is not to defund the police. They need more funding.”

In 2022, police killed at least 1,185 people in the United States, overwhelmingly working class and poor. According to figures from MappingPoliceViolence.us, police in Georgia killed more people last year than in any year in the last decade.

One of the first victims of murderous police violence in 2023 was Tyre Nichols, 29, of Memphis, Tennessee. Nichols was savagely beaten by five African American police officers during a traffic stop on January 7. Nichols, who himself was African American, succumbed to his injuries on January 10.

On Friday, the Memphis Police Department announced that all five officers involved in the beating of Nichols—Tadarrius Bean, Demetrius Haley, Emmitt Martine III, Desmond Mills Jr. and Justin Smith—had been fired. All of them had been police officers since at least August 2020, with Mills Jr. being the most senior, having been hired in March 2017.

The Memphis police department exposes the racist fantasy that having a “diverse” police force will reduce police killings and violence. In Memphis, which is over 65 percent African American, more than 55 percent of the police identify as African American. While there are racists and fascists in every police department, skin color plays a secondary role in the never-ending plague of police brutality and murder across the US.

It is fundamentally a class question. The police are part of the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state, which assumes an ever more openly violent character in carrying out its role as defender of capitalist property and profits under conditions of deepening social and economic crisis, growing inequality and a resurgence of working class resistance.



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