

23 charged with domestic terrorism over protest against proposed Atlanta, Georgia police training center

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9 March 2023

In an attempt to intimidate those who have been holding demonstrations against the building of a massive military-style police training center in Atlanta, law enforcement authorities arrested and charged 23 people on March 5 with “domestic terrorism” under the state statutes. Over the past several months 18 others have also been charged with the same offence, bringing the total number facing these grave charges to 41. This draconian charge is a felony and carries a prison sentence of up to 35 years.

Demonstrations against what the opponents of the training facility have dubbed “Cop City” have been ongoing since 2021 and have gathered significant momentum and international attention after police killed a protester in January.

The growing protest has rattled city and state authorities who are now resorting to increasingly repressive measures to suppress this opposition. On Wednesday, Atlanta police threatened about a dozen activists with arrest if they continue to distribute leaflets opposing the facility on city sidewalks.

Atlanta’s Democratic mayor Andre Dickens and the city council are determined to steamroll the opposition so as to proceed with the construction of the military-style training facility. Dickens took over the reins of the city in January 2022 with “law and order” as a central feature of his mayoral campaign just like in the recent Chicago mayoral primary election and in New York City in 2021.

The police claim that those arrested last Sunday were “violent agitators” who mounted a “coordinated attack” against police officers and construction equipment at the sprawling construction site just outside the southern limits of the city. According to the

police, multiple protesters entered a construction site and burnt construction equipment while they threw bricks, Molotov cocktails and fireworks at the police.

The claim that they arrested “violent agitators” is belied by the fact that those arrested were scooped up after the police stormed a music festival that was being held in a park outside the construction site. The peaceful event attended by around 1,500 persons, including families with children, was to kick off a “week of action” comprising of demonstrations, cultural activities and various family friendly events the organizers have planned against the facility. The organizers include a group of clergy, environmental activists, members of the Stop Cop City coalition, and residents of the area where the facility is to be located.

Masked anarchists have participated in the protests and it is more than likely that some of them are either police agents or are working with police as agents provocateurs. The police in turn are using the violent tactics of some in this group as a reason to use extremely violent methods and repression against overwhelmingly peaceful protesters.

This latest repression comes on the heels of Georgia state troopers shooting dead 26-year-old environmental activist Manuel “Tortuguita” Esteban Paez Teran on January 18.

Teran was camped out in the forest where the police facility is to be built when he was shot dead with about a dozen bullets by a group of state troopers. The brutal killing of Teran was justified by the police using the highly questionable claim that Teran, an avowed pacifist, shot at them. Subsequent body camera footage released by the Atlanta police showed that a trooper who sustained a gunshot wound was more than likely

shot by a fellow cop.

After Teran's killing set off week long angry protests, Georgia's reactionary Republican governor Brian Kemp issued an "emergency order" activating 1,000 heavily armed Georgia National Guard troops to "subdue riot and unlawful assembly."

Those initially arrested Sunday at the music festival numbered 35 but subsequently 23 were charged with "domestic terrorism." Most of those arrested are young people in their mid- to late twenties and most of those charged are from outside Georgia. The protesters have charged the police with deliberately selecting those from outside of Georgia to fit with the authorities' right-wing narrative that the opposition to Cop City is being fomented by "outsiders."

In the subsequent bond hearing Tuesday for the 23 charged with domestic terrorism, bail was denied for 22 who are now languishing in jail. Eli Bennett, an attorney representing some of the defendants, commented to The Intercept, "We haven't seen a charge for arson or interference with government property." He also observed that Georgia's domestic terrorism statute is "laughably unconstitutional."

If built, the sprawling "Cop City" police training center will spread across 85 acres in the midst of 381 acres of forested land. The facility will contain a mockup of a city with bars, high-rise buildings and such so that the police can undergo training to wage urban warfare.

Democratic Party politicians have taken the leading role in pushing for this military-style police training facility. It was first announced by then-mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms in April 2021. In September 2021 the Atlanta City Council, with Mayor Dickens, then a councilperson, voting for it, approved leasing the land. The forest to be demolished had been deemed environmentally significant by the government of Atlanta as one of the "lungs" of the city.

The city is leasing forested land it owns to the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF), a private organization that promotes pro-police propaganda and solicits corporate funding for police.

The building of the facility is set to cost \$90 million, \$60 million of which is to be raised from corporations and private philanthropy. The remaining \$30 million is being financed by the city.

Numerous corporations with corporate headquarters

in Georgia, including Coca Cola, Norfolk Southern, Home Depot, Delta Airlines and UPS, have eagerly chipped in. The increasing militarization of the police is for their benefit, as these forces will be deployed to suppress any sign of social opposition, including demands by workers for higher wages and better working conditions.

The corporate executives and the politicians in both parties who they fund are keenly aware that the growing level of social inequality in the US requires them to prepare for a mass eruption of social struggles. It is not yet clear as to how much money the APF has raised from from these companies but it is estimated to be in the tens of millions.



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