Eight defendants remain in jail on “domestic terrorism” charges

Georgia authorities continue using repressive measures against “Cop City” protests

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Georgia authorities are escalating their attack on opponents of the “Cop City” mega-project, a $90 million dollar military-style police training center that the Atlanta city government wants to build to train police forces to enforce “law and order” in urban environments.

So far, the police have killed a 26-year old environmental activist, Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, and slapped 23 randomly arrested music-festival attendees with draconian “domestic terrorism” charges. The police have refused to release any information to Teran’s family on his killing.

The sprawling “public-safety training center,” if built, will spread across 85 acres in the midst of about 381 acres of forested land. The land is owned by the Atlanta City Government but is located outside the city limits in the neighboring Dekalb County. It will have a mockup of a city with bars and high-rise buildings to train police in urban warfare and will be the largest “police training” facility in the country.

Despite popular opposition to the project, Georgia taxpayers will be made to finance $30 million of the project while $60 million is being raised by the “non-profit” Atlanta Police Foundation (APF), the largest of the 150 such “foundations” raising funds for police forces across the country. The APF whose governing board and trustees are stuffed full of corporate executives, is obtaining funds from giant corporations with major operations in the Atlanta area such as Norfolk Southern railroad, Delta Airlines, UPS and JPMorgan Chase.

The latest salvo in the series of brutal response by the authorities against opponents of Cop City has now come from the Dekalb County administration. On Friday, March 24, the Dekalb County Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Michael Thurmond, issued an “executive order” i.e., a dictatorial style decree, “restricting public access to the [Intrenchment Creek Park] and other adjacent county-owned properties.”

While acknowledging that this is place where “people walk and enjoy nature,” he justified this decision by citing the supposed discovery of “life-threatening” nail-studded boards, booby traps which makes the place “dangerous” to adults, children and pets. This move, far from being taken for the well-being of residents as Thurmond cynically claimed, is directed at further enlarging restricted areas where protests against Cop City will not be tolerated.

He then directed the Dekalb County police to lead a “multi-jurisdictional task force” comprising of a number of police forces to sweep the area and direct “unauthorized persons”, i.e. anyone using the park, to leave immediately and if they do not, they “will be subject to prosecution for criminal trespass and any other violation of law to the fullest extent of Georgia Law.”

Thurmond who heads a county which is riddled with extraordinary corruption, closely consorts with the Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens on this project. Both are Democrats and are united along with Republican Governor Brian Kemp to use all of the powers at their disposal to intimidate and terrorize any and all opposition to the police training center.

This new move comes on the heels of the arrest of 23 people who were arbitrarily swept up by police on Sunday, March 5 at a protest music festival being held one mile away from the construction site. They were subsequently charged with “domestic terrorism.” This

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is in addition to 19 others who were similarly charged previously over the past six months. This criminal charge is a felony and carries a prison sentence of up to 35 years.

These protesters were subsequently thrown in jail. During the first bond hearing two days later, on March 7, the Dekalb County Magistrate A. W. Davis, who was the presiding judge, denied bail to 22 of the 23 arrested.

She claimed the bail-denial was based upon the "seriousness of the charges," ignoring the fact that those who had been arrested were attending a music festival. Moreover the "evidence" upon which the arrests were made includes "mud on their shoes" and legal-support phone numbers scribbled on their hands or forearm. It has been revealed that Davis' husband is the principal tax attorney for the transnational accounting firm KPMG, which has four members on the APF governing board.

In the second bond hearing on March 23, 12 of the 22 remaining in jail were released on "consent bonds," which did not require any payment, revealing the absurdity of denial of bail in the first bond hearing. Two more activists were released on $25,000 bonds and eight others continue to be denied bond, left to languish in jail in horrible conditions.

Micah Herskind, a community organizer in Atlanta, explained in interview with Democracy Now, "The folks who were denied bond were not denied bond for any specific evidence other than, as you said, having mud on their clothes and their shoes, you know, having wet pants."

Three protesters charged with "domestic terrorism" on January 21 have been held in jail without bond for over two months.

The killing of Terán on January 18 while peacefully encamped in the forest where the facility is to be built demonstrates the murderous length to which the authorities are willing to go to construct the police facility.

Soon after the killing, the police claimed that Terán shot at them first and in support of that narrative, they released a picture of a soiled and scratched gun lying on the forest floor covered by pine leaves and cigarette butts. Glaringly, the gun is not shown as lying beside the tent where Terán was shot dead, giving rise to the suspicion that the police may have planted this "evidence" themselves.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), which is in charge of the investigation, has been deliberately withholding information of the circumstances surrounding Teran's killing. In fact, the subsequent body-camera footage released by the Atlanta police indicates that the state trooper was injured by shots fired by a fellow policeman.

A second independent autopsy conducted by Terán's family, the first being the official autopsy conducted by the Dekalb County, clearly revealed that the Terán was sitting cross-legged with hands raised when the police unleashed their deadly hail of bullets.

The local corporate daily, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (AJC), a newspaper owned by Cox Enterprises, which is a major donor to the APF, revealed on March 24 that a Georgia state trooper had first fired numerous rounds of pepper balls into Terán's tent.

This crucial information, which has been deliberately hidden from the family and the public by the GBI, clearly shows that the officers were the first to fire shots, in this case "pepper balls," into the tent. The report also shows that the troopers spoke to Teran for some time before they used their firearms.

All of these developments demonstrate that the authorities will go to any lengths to steamroll public opposition to the "Cop City" project. The police and various government authorities even routinely use the word "terrorists" to describe the protesters.

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