

Rejecting popular opposition, Atlanta City Council approves millions in public funding for “Cop City” police training complex

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Ignoring hours of impassioned pleas from residents, lawyers, and activists, early Tuesday morning the Democratic Party-dominated Atlanta City Council approved a measure allocating \$31 million in public funding to the private Atlanta Police Foundation for the construction of “Cop City,” a multi-building militarized police training compound first approved by the council in 2021.

The final vote, conducted around 5:30 a.m., was 11-4 in approval. As the vote was announced, nearly all those in attendance drowned the council in chorus of boos.

The Cop City project, slated to be built in DeKalb County’s South River Forest, currently calls for a helicopter pad, a mock village (to conduct militarized SWAT training raids), an urban vehicle assault course, a burn tower and a shooting range. \$1 million of the \$31 million allocated by the City Council on Tuesday will also go towards the construction of a new gym for the police.

The council also approved a provision, which they knew about since 2021 but kept hidden from the public until recently, which will require the city to pay \$1.2 million a year over 30 years to the Atlanta Police Foundation, to use the facility.

The Atlanta Police Foundation was created in 2003 by major corporations headquartered in Atlanta such as the Home Depot, Coca-Cola, Norfolk Southern, Delta and UPS, with the mission of “providing support to the Atlanta Police Department.” Some of this “support” included handing out \$500 bonuses to every Atlanta police officer on June 18, 2020 as a “thank you” and to “boost morale” in light of the mass protests that erupted nationwide following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

In total, public funding will account for at least \$67 million out of the proposed \$90 million cost of the project. This is on top of the over \$235 million the city of Atlanta has allocated to the police and department of corrections in the 2023 city budget.

In addition to having the support of the Democratic Party-dominated city council, Cop City has also been vociferously backed by Democratic Mayor Andre Dickens and Georgia Republican Governor Brian Kemp. It underscores that more than three years after millions of workers and students of all races marched together in opposition to unending police killings, both parties of big business are immune to and indifferent to any appeals, no matter how peaceful, plentiful or loud, to “defund” or “reform” the police.

This was demonstrated again at Monday’s meeting. In addition to erecting barricades, police in conjunction with the City Council forbade any member of the public from bringing in any food or liquids into the building, including water. Before residents and speakers were even allowed to enter City Hall to submit their comments, they first had to consent to an invasive security screening conducted by the Atlanta Police. While over 350 people signed up to provide comments, hundreds more were barred from entering the building at all due to alleged “capacity concerns.”

In an interview with *Democracy Now!* Rev. James Woodall, one of hundreds of people who came to voice his opposition to the construction of Cop City, spoke on the militarized police presence summoned in response to massive public opposition to Cop City.

Woodall said that there were several police with bomb sniffing dogs and AR-15 rifles. “We had folks in riot gear,” Woodall said, adding, “We couldn’t bring in any food or water.”

In the face of police intimidation, for nearly 16 hours, hundreds of people voiced their opposition to the planned facility, citing not only the outrageous cost, but the violent character of the police and the training that would be conducted at the facility.

Several speakers brought up the January 18 police killing—and ongoing cover-up—of Manuel “Tortuguita” Paez Terán. Tortuguita, a 26-year-old environmental activist from Venezuela, was shot 57 times by police while peacefully

protesting Cop City in the Atlanta-area forest. An autopsy conducted by the family after his death found that Tortugueta was seated on the ground with his hands raised when he was shot multiple times by police, none of whom have been charged nearly half a year after the killing.

Other speakers pointed to the role of the police in capitalist society. Curtis Duncan, a resident of south Atlanta, told the council that “from the beginning we have been told a lie. The lie that police make us safer...and that more police training will reduce police violence.” Duncan added that the police exist to “maintain inequality” and “for the rich to oppress the poor.”

Gary Spencer, a lawyer at the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, said the council was voting for “a military facility to propose a compound to make a mock city for training in urban warfare tactics.” The “policing promoted by this facility will not make Atlanta safer,” Spencer said, “in fact, it will put our communities...in significant danger.”

None of these comments, nor the hundreds of others, appeared to have an effect on the council members, many of whom were seen playing on their phones or looking generally disinterested throughout the entire affair.

After the funding measure passed, Atlanta mayor Dickens released a statement Tuesday morning hailing the vote as a “major milestone.” He said that the new 85-acre facility would serve as a “national model for police reform with the most progressive training and curriculum in the country.” Dickens added that he was “committed to building trust, and my administration looks forward to continuing the conversation in the weeks ahead.”

Far from “building trust,” workers and students in Atlanta, and throughout the world, are increasingly hostile to the police and their fascistic tactics, which include the militarized raid of members of the Atlanta Solidarity Fund last Wednesday.

After spending over 48 hours in the Dekalb County Jail, on Friday, Judge James Altman granted \$15,000 bonds to Adele MacLean, 42, Marlon Scott Kautz, 39, and Savannah Patterson, 30. All three board members of the Atlanta Solidarity Fund are facing politically motivated charges of charities fraud and money laundering for publicly supporting protests against the construction of Cop City.

Speaking to Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now!* on Tuesday, Kautz described the police raid of his home as “terrifying.”

“We woke up to the sound of our door being broken down by a battering ram and our house being surrounded by dozens of SWAT officers,” Kautz recalled, adding that at first he thought

it must have been a mistake.

“Naively, I thought this was the kind of thing that couldn’t happen to organizers like us, but once I saw the automatic weapons, the body armor and I heard police discussing throwing a flash bang into our living room I realized that these police had come prepared to kill us, in the same way that police have come prepared to kill activists protesting in the forest, and in fact did kill Manuel Tortugueta Terán.”

“We were arrested in our pajamas and taken to jail,” Kautz said, adding, “If this kind of police violence can be brought even against organizers like us, who do nothing more than make sure that activists have access to lawyers and make bail if they can’t afford it themselves, if this kind of violence can be brought against people like us, who is safe in this city? What does it mean for the right to protest? And democracy?”

Kautz characterized the charges leveled him and other opponents of Cop City as “malicious political prosecutions that have nothing to do with enforcing the law or keeping the public safe. What they really have to do is bringing the force and violence of police and prosecutors to suppress a political movement, and suppress political speech.”

Commenting on the indifference of leading Democratic Party members to the persecution of Cop City protesters, Rev. James Woodall concluded the interview saying, “we have Senators (Raphael) Warnock and (Jon) Ossoff who weighed in only after immense pressure on behalf of organizers who are pissed off that they refused to say anything at all.”

The silence of Senators Ossoff and Warnock is not a mistake. The Democratic Party, no less than the Republicans, defend the police because they are the front-line soldiers of capital, imbued with extraordinary legal powers to kill for virtually any reason those who challenge them with almost complete impunity. The Socialist Equality Party stands for the abolition of the police, which can only be accomplished through the mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system they defend.



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