

Atlanta Democratic city government gears up to sabotage city-wide referendum on “Cop City”

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The Atlanta city administration of Mayor Andre Dickens and the city council are spearheading an openly undemocratic drive to suppress a referendum on their determined drive to build a militarized police training center dubbed “Cop City.” This facility is being built in partnership with giant corporations including Coca-Cola, Norfolk Southern Railroad, Home Depot, Delta Airlines and UPS, all donating millions of dollars to fund it.

Since the Democratic mayor and Democratic-controlled city council first approved the plan in September 2021, numerous demonstrations and various other forms of protests have taken place. So determined has been this opposition that it has garnered national and international attention.

In response, both the local Democrats and the Republican state government led by Governor Brian Kemp have unleashed massive repression, which led to the police killing of an unarmed and peaceful protester, Manuel Teran, on January 18 of this year.

In the latest effort to block the plan, community groups involved in organizing protests announced a signature drive for a city-wide referendum a couple of months ago. This referendum drive was announced a day after the city council voted by an 11-to-4 margin on June 6 to allocate a massive \$67 million in taxpayers’ funds to build and run “Cop City.”

The referendum is to ask voters directly whether they want to approve or repeal the 2021 ordinance that authorizes the city to lease city-owned land to the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF) for building this so-called “public safety training center.” The APF is a corporate front created by major companies such as Coca-Cola, Delta Airlines and Home Depot, who are

well aware that “Cop City” is being built for their benefit.

This amount was more than double the \$30 million the city had previously announced as its share of the \$90 million the facility is projected to cost. It is certain that all of the cost-figures coming out the city are deliberately understated and it is not even clear now as to how much the building, if constructed, will eventually cost the city both directly and indirectly.

The petition drive, conducted by hundreds of volunteers, revealed widespread opposition to the massive new police facility, with 104,000 signatures, a huge number in a city with only 500,000 residents. (Far more live in the adjoining suburbs). This is nearly double the 58,203 signatures required to get the referendum on the ballot.

City officials immediately announced an onerous “verification process” for the signatures, a mechanism used by both Republicans and Democrats as tactic to disenfranchise voters. Many Republican state governments are doing this to block abortion rights referendums. The Atlanta Democrats are carrying out a similar attack on democratic rights.

According to a memorandum issued by the city, the signature verification will be a four-step process. It states each page will be individually scanned and “[once] individually designated and scanned, the completed lines will be reviewed to determine a) whether the name and other information present identifies and corresponds to a qualified Atlanta voter.”

It also claimed that this “step-by-step verification process [will be] conducted by independent third parties to ensure a process that is fair, inclusive, and transparent.”

It is not at all clear who these “independent third parties” are to be. Ultimately it is the city officials who will undoubtedly determine the outcome.

Moreover, the city also did not state as to how long this verification process is going to take, raising serious suspicions that they will more than likely use this to block the referendum from appearing on the November ballot.

After this blatant roadblock was announced by the city, the “Stop Cop City” activists announced that they will, for the time being, withhold submitting the signature to the city. They stated that they do not trust the city’s verification process.

The city has also made it clear that it is determined to crush opposition no matter what. In a federal court filing in July, made on behalf of the city by the elite Atlanta law firm Bondurant Mixson & Elmore, the attorneys argued that any referendum on “Cop City” would be “invalid” and “futile.”

In the court filing the attorneys also stated that even if voters choose to revoke the lease authorization ordinance, this would not invalidate the lease agreement itself. This means that the city will contemptuously ignore the democratic will of the voters and proceed with its existing plans.



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