

Republican-run Georgia state government uses racketeering laws to suppress opposition to “Cop City”

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In an unprecedented attack on basic democratic rights protected by the First Amendment of the US Constitution, the Republican-run Georgia state government has used racketeering laws to indict 61 persons involved in the two-year-long campaign against the construction of what has been popularly dubbed as “Cop City.”

The Racketeer-Influenced and Corrupt Organization (RICO) law was originally meant to prosecute organized crime syndicates such as the Mafia, and was used against ex-President Donald Trump for his plot to overthrow the government and overturn the 2020 election.

Now it is being used to criminalize a campaign of peaceful protests directed against the creation of a massive militarized police training center, a joint enterprise of the Democratic Party-led Atlanta city government and the Republican-led state government. Among the indicted are 33 young people in their twenties and one, the youngest, a 19-year-old girl from Massachusetts.

“Cop City” is being built on 381 acres of forested land on the outskirts of the city. The purpose is to give Atlanta police military-style training to enforce “the rule of law” in a city with the worst poverty rate in all of Georgia and one of the worst in the nation.

The 109-page indictment was issued on Tuesday, August 29, at the direction of the Republican state Attorney General Christopher M. Carr, by a grand jury in Fulton County, where the city of Atlanta is located. All 61 defendants are being charged under the RICO law, despite the fact that their only “crime” has been to oppose the building of this militarized police facility and the ensuing destruction of the forest and its complex ecosystem.

Remarkably, the state prosecutors used the same grand jury that indicted former President Donald Trump and 18 of his co-defendants on RICO charges several weeks

earlier. While Republican Party leaders and office-holders generally condemned the indictment of Trump and his accomplices for participating in a frontal assault on American democracy, they fully support using the same methods to suppress First Amendment rights.

The indictment charges that all the defendants belong to Defend the Atlanta Forest Coalition (DAFC) which the indictment refers as a “criminal enterprise.” It describes DAFC as “a self-identified coalition and enterprise of militant anarchists, eco-activists, and community organizers.” Far from being a single organization, however, the DAFC is instead an ad hoc coalition comprising many different groups and individuals.

The designation of these individuals as “Domestic Violent Extremists” (DVE) has been justified by citing a bulletin released on May 23, 2023, by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in other words, by the Democratic Party administration of President Joe Biden.

The DHS bulletin states that “alleged DVEs in Georgia ... [justify] violent extremism, and anti-law enforcement sentiment to *justify criminal activity in opposition to a planned public safety training facility in Atlanta*” (emphasis added).

Notably, the indictment document traces the “Beginnings of the Defend the Atlanta Forest Enterprise” to the high-profile killing of the 46-year-old George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in May 2020. This sparked massive nationwide demonstrations.

The DHS acknowledges that “Nearly all of the demonstrations centered around a message of anti-police violence that arose from a spate of high-profile nationwide police shootings.” Despite this admission, the grand jury indictment suggests that such sentiments are an offense deserving severe prosecution.

The indictment ridiculously defines the opposition to

the “Cop City” as a conspiracy. It states, “Each individual charged in this indictment knowingly joined the conspiracy in an attempt to prevent the training center from being built.”

The indictment also seizes upon scattered acts of violence by some demonstrators, overwhelmingly as a reaction to heavy-handed police actions, to accuse all the defendants of being violent extremists. There is hardly any doubt that the police have infiltrated the protests and that they acted as provocateurs to facilitate the crackdown.

During an angry demonstration on January 28 following the police murder of a young 26-year-old “forest defender” Manuel Esteban Paez Terán on January 18, some violent acts such as setting fire to police cars and stone-throwing occurred. During this protest, in addition to the oversized armed police presence, Governor Brian Kemp mobilized around 1,000 National Guard troops to intimidate and suppress the demonstrators.

Among the 61 defendants charged with racketeering, three defendants are also charged with financial crimes of money laundering and “charity fraud.” These three are part of a group providing help with legal defense to those arrested. Five others have been additionally charged with the entirely bogus charge of “domestic terrorism” and “first degree arson.”

In the course of the protests, as an intimidation tactic the Atlanta city police have arrested at least 41 anti-“Cop City” protesters and accused them of “domestic terrorism.” They threatened activists distributing leaflets with arrest if they don’t cease their activities.

Republican Governor Kemp has resurrected the “outside agitator” language of the Southern segregationists against the civil rights movement, claiming that the opposition to “Cop City” is the handiwork of “out-of-state radicals.” The indictment, in line with this narrative, highlights the fact that out of the 61 defendants, only 13 are residents of Georgia.

Immediately following the indictment, Kemp issued a self-satisfied statement. He said, “My top priority is and always will be keeping Georgians safe, especially against out-of-state radicals that threaten the safety of our citizens and law enforcement.”

Two days after the announcement of the criminal indictment, five activists were arrested by the Atlanta police after they chained themselves, during a rally, to a bulldozer at the “Cop City” construction site. Prosecutors are now trying to figure out what charges to slap them with.

In mass opposition this to year the was strikingly demonstrated when hundreds of persons showed up to express opposition at an Atlanta City Council public hearing. The perfunctory hearing was held to hear public testimony over whether the city should hand out \$30 million of taxpayers’ funds to support the building of the police training center.

Unsurprisingly, the City Council showed its contempt for the public opposition by voting, on June 5 by an 11–4 margin, to hand over \$67 million. This sum is more than double the \$30 million the authorities had long claimed as the city’s share. It is also a significant sum given that the latest city budget comes to \$790 million.

The rest of the funds, purportedly amounting to \$60 million, is to be raised by the “non-profit” Atlanta Police Foundation (APF), a pro-police front for giant corporations such as Home Depot, Delta Airlines, Norfolk Southern Railroad and UPS, which are fierce proponents of “Cop City.”

It is clear that the \$90 million the city had long publicized as the project cost is grossly understated, and it is more than likely that it could at least double.

Both capitalist parties—the Democrats in the city of Atlanta and the Republicans in the state of Georgia—are using autocratic methods to quash every democratic avenue to express opposition. Recently, hundreds of volunteers collected around 104,000 signatures for a city-wide referendum on “Cop City” which is to be placed on the ballot in November.

The city authorities went into overdrive and announced a detailed “verification process” for signatures collected, with the transparent goal of invalidating signatures and blocking the referendum. The city previously had also argued in a federal court filing in July that the referendum is “invalid” and “futile.”

The use of the RICO statute against protesters in Georgia, however, is a breathtaking precedent that will more than likely be taken up by other states to erode constitutionally protected democratic rights.



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