

Ignoring overwhelming opposition, Atlanta Democratic mayor welcomes “Cop City”

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Atlanta Democratic Mayor Andre Dickens, who has spearheaded a law-and-order campaign against the residents of Atlanta, inaugurated on April 29 the sprawling 85-acre militarized “public safety training center” popularly known as “Cop City.”

The sprawling complex will be used to train the state’s numerous police forces in urban warfare. Firing ranges, mock buildings and city streets have been constructed, providing police the “training” they need to violently raid people’s residences and to crush protests or rebellions the state and city authorities target. According to American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), “43% of the training at Cop City will be for officers outside of Atlanta, including military training with the infamous Israeli [sic] Defense Forces.”

Speaking before a select audience, which included arch-reactionary Georgia Republican Governor Brian Kemp and the CEO of the privately funded Atlanta Police Foundation (APF), Dave Wilkinson, Dickens triumphantly declared the building and opening of the police training center as a singular achievement of his three-year-old administration. Both Kemp and Dickens have worked in close coordination to unleash ferocious police violence against peaceful protesters by the state, city and county police forces.

He lambasted the widespread and overwhelming popular opposition in the city for “spreading lies and indulging in violence.”

“Getting here has not been an easy journey,” stated Dickens. Speaking before the audience numbering around 1,200, he disparaged opponents of Cop City for “The lies, the misinformation, the disinformation, the very real violence.”

Dickens then declared that the building of this militarized-training police facility was a great public

service to city residents. “Our perseverance to see it through for the people of Atlanta now and for the future cannot be denied,” he said.

In response, local activist and Cop City opponent Micah Herskind wrote on X, “Cop City is officially opening today, made possible only through extreme state violence,” and called the facility “a police compound that will serve as the infrastructure of fascism.”

Completely absent from Dickens’ speech was any acknowledgement of, let alone any responsibility for, the brutal murder of 26-year-old environmental activist Manuel Esteban Paez Terán by Georgia State Patrol (GSP) on January 18, 2023. Paez Terán, who was popularly known as “Tortugueta (Little Turtle)” for his love of turtles, was savagely killed in a hail of 57 bullets by a group of GSP officers. He was killed in cold blood while peacefully encamping in the forest to protest its upcoming destruction.

In an effort to suppress the widespread opposition of city and state residents, both Dickens’ administration and Kemp’s office have run roughshod over basic democratic rights guaranteed by the US Constitution. City authorities have consistently muzzled any form of dissent, including arresting people handing out leaflets opposing Cop City.

In March 2023, police swooped down on a peaceful music festival organized as a part of the protest against Cop City. They then roughly manhandled attendees, arresting 35 of them. Subsequently, 23 were charged with “domestic terrorism” and were imprisoned for months without bail. Ultimately, 61 people were charged with domestic terrorism. As of this writing, their cases are in legal limbo 20 months after being indicted under Georgia’s Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) law.

The sprawling police center is spread across 85 acres of land in the midst of about 381 acres of forested land deemed crucial for the city's ecology and environment. Initially, the facility was projected to cost \$90 million. The mayor had claimed that \$30 million would be financed by city's taxpayers. The city has over 500,000 residents, with a poverty rate of 17.7 percent as of 2025, significantly higher than the national average of 12.6 percent.

The rest of the \$60 million was to be raised by the "non-profit" APF, the largest of 150 such foundations raising funds for police forces across the country. The APF, whose governing board is staffed by reactionary corporate executives, could easily obtain such funds from giant corporations such as Norfolk Southern Railroad, Delta Airlines, UPS and JPMorgan Chase that will benefit from the construction of Cop City.

When the Atlanta City Council met in June 2023, it voted to approve \$30 million, plus another \$1 million "public safety impact fee," to build a gymnasium at the site. This was in addition to a massive \$247 million allocated to the city's police forces, which amounted to 30 percent of the general city budget of \$790 million in 2023. Mayor Dickens described the public funding approval by the subservient city council a "major milestone."

Additionally, the city council also approved a "leaseback agreement" between the city of Atlanta and the APF for \$1.2 million annually over 30 years, for a total of \$36 million. According to the city council, these funds "will exclusively be used to cover the center's operational and maintenance expenses, as well as the principal and interest of APF's \$20 million loan."

Now the city and APF claim the total cost will be \$117 million, a \$27 million overrun, which is to be largely funded by the city.

In addition, Dickens has also sabotaged a referendum demand by community organizations and activists to ask Atlanta residents directly whether they want to approve or repeal the 2021 ordinance that authorizes the city to lease city-owned land to the APF for building this so-called "public safety training center." In support of a referendum, Cop City opponents conducted a petition drive, involving hundreds of volunteers, that gathered 104,000 signatures, amounting to over 20 percent of Atlanta's

population. The referendum initiative remains in a legal limbo to this day.

Police and various government authorities have routinely used the word "terrorists" to describe peaceful protesters.

In March of this year, Governor Kemp's office issued a statement proudly announcing that the state is partnering with the Trump administration's unconstitutional kidnapping and disappearing of immigrants:

At the direction of Governor Brian P. Kemp, Department of Public Safety (DPS) Commissioner Billy Hitchens has requested U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) train all 1,100 sworn officers under his command through the 287(g) Program to better assist in identifying and apprehending illegal aliens who pose a risk to public safety in the state.

The violent suppression of Atlanta's Cop City opponents is a stark reminder that both Democratic and Republican politicians will close ranks to ruthlessly suppress the most basic democratic rights whenever opposition erupts to their policies.



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