

Day One: University of Texas Austin Students Take the Lawn

A Report

Anonymous, CrimethInc.

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On April 24, students, faculty, and community members assembled on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin to demonstrate against the complicity of the university administration in the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Fearing a repeat of the upheavals that have taken place at Columbia University and elsewhere around the country, campus authorities mobilized a massive number of police in response. Yet despite arrests and violence, the demonstrators ultimately outlasted and outmaneuvered the police. In the following report, participants describe what they learned.

Student-led solidarity actions at universities have been taking place for six months already. In the last week, however, they have escalated, with encampments and walkouts at over 40 campuses across the country. Students as far away as Australia, Italy, and France have organized their own encampments and other protests in solidarity. In the last 48 hours, new encampments have appeared on at least fourteen US campuses, including at least three encampments—in Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC—that are cross-institutional collaborations. Police have evicted some of these, but others continue to hold their ground. Over that same period of time, at least six schools have hosted walkout demonstrations. Two school encampments took over campus buildings.

In the wake of the events described below, UT faculty members published a courageous statement in support of the demonstrators and joined some of the student organizers who were arrested yesterday in organizing a massive rally for today, which drew 2000 people to the South lawn. In speeches, some of the student activists directly connected the ongoing movement to the nationwide uprising that took place in 2020 in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others.

Defending specific territory gives a movement a place to cohere and opens up a space in which the participants can build relationships and go through a process of political development. At the same time, it provides adversaries a fixed target against which to direct pressure. Defending encampments in the open is more challenging than defending indoor occupations, even if the latter can entail greater legal risk. In both cases, what happens outside and around the police response usually determines the outcome at least as much as what occurs inside the occupation. As the building occupation at Cal Poly Humboldt demonstrated, police can only besiege and evict occupations if they are not themselves besieged.

Current campus organizers might benefit from reading participants’ reflections on the “autonomous zones” of the 2020 uprising:

Even if our goal is simply to hold a particular physical space, we have to prioritize carrying out offensive activities throughout society at large that can keep our adversaries on the defensive, while investing energy in the activities that nourish movements and spaces rather than focusing on defending particular boundaries. We should understand occupied spaces as an effect of our efforts, rather than as the central cause we rally around.

It might also be instructive to consult the experiences of the student occupation movement of 2008–2010.

Centrist media outlets have dishonestly portrayed the participants in these demonstrations as “anti-Semitic,” intentionally obscuring the fact that a significant plurality of the organizers are anti-Zionist Jews. In fact, only four months ago, leaders of the Republican Party of Texas

voted against barring members from associating with Nazis and Holocaust deniers after a prominent Texas Republican hosted a well-known white supremacist and anti-Semite. Those who are repressing these demonstrations are the ones with ties to organized anti-Semitism. As students chanted yesterday in Austin, *“APD, KKK, IDF they’re all the same!”*

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu maintains that the Israeli military is still determined to carry out a ground assault on Rafah, where over a million refugees are currently crowded. If the events of the past six months are any indication, should such an invasion take place, it will result in the deaths of at least tens of thousands more Palestinians, disproportionately impacting women and children. This is the horrific scenario that demonstrators are mobilizing to prevent. **Everyone who aspires to stand in solidarity with Palestinians should be thinking right now about what they can do to prevent Netanyahu from ordering a ground assault on the people in Rafah.**

Students assembling with umbrellas on the night of April 24 to defend the Gaza solidarity encampment at Emerson University. Police carried out a massive raid shortly afterwards, arresting 108 people and leaving blood all over the pavement.

University of Texas Austin Students Take the Lawn

On April 24, 2024, students, faculty, and community members converged at the University of Texas at Austin campus (UT) to protest the ongoing genocide of Palestinians. The initial protest, a walkout from classes and a Popular University spearheaded by the Palestine Solidarity Committee, drew several hundred people to the area surrounding the Gregory Gymnasium. At the behest of the University President Jay Hartzell, an unprecedented array of militarized police immediately attacked the protest, including mounted police officers, heavily armed state troopers (some bussed in from Houston), and officers from the Austin and the University of Texas police departments. Over the next six hours, thousands bravely confronted the police officers, playing a game of cat and mouse across campus that culminated in an hours-long standoff in the South Lawn. Eventually, the police were forced to withdraw and the crowd won control of the Lawn.

Unable to countenance any resistance to the ongoing acts of violence they sponsor, US authorities have deployed police to universities across the country, including New York University, the University of Minnesota, the University of Southern California, Emory, and Emerson. UT Austin was no outlier to this emerging dynamic. Before the protest even began, the University was prepared to deploy police in large numbers.

As soon as people assembled, police wasted no time charging and snatching people from the crowd, clubbing and pushing without provocation. The crowd persevered, repeatedly routing officers or surrounding them in larger and larger concentric circles. On multiple occasions, small clusters of officers found themselves enclosed on all sides by crowds that outnumbered them by an order of magnitude. In the end, it was the police who gave up and left campus in defeat.

The dedication and creativity of these demonstrators is worth celebrating. Our contemporaries at encampments in universities across the country have provided us with their own hard-earned insights and reflections. In return, we send warm greetings to them and humbly offer a few reflections on yesterday’s events for our comrades struggling at UT Austin and to those elsewhere who are still planning their next moves.

Bold Actions, Bold Words—Courage Is Contagious

All of the police tactics aimed to instill fear: large numbers, riot gear, horses towering over the crowd, vague commands, snatching protestors one by one.

Demonstrators did not succumb to fear—and were rewarded for their courage. When police grabbed the first person, students surged forward chanting “Let them go,” encircling the police cruisers and lining up face to face with helmeted police. Bold actions resonated broadly in the crowd. The crowd took space forcefully, eventually kettling the police on the walkway. It was tense and sweaty, with a steep learning curve, but five hours of facing off with the police made the crowd more confident, not less.

No More Wait and See!

Twenty minutes into the action, the march became headless. But it was never directionless, and its refusal to be controlled was a strength.

Moments of stagnation, imposed both from within and without, repeatedly gave the police the opportunity to make the first move. In these moments, the words and improvised gestures of individuals enabled the crowd to develop its collective intelligence. Whenever the cops succeeded in splitting us between police lines, on opposite sides of a thoroughfare, on opposite sides of a building, our calls to action flowed like water around them.

Proposals spread throughout the crowd. Some fizzled out. Others caught on, sparked enthusiasm, and spread like wildfire until the whole crowd shared a goal. *The lawn! We’re taking the lawn!*

Students succeeded in achieving the goal of taking the lawn by choosing not to wait for instructions and by getting creative, finding and showing each other back routes to it. Police attempted to block the march on a main road, but participants split up and dashed through alleys, hopped down stairs, ducked around bushes and into buildings. Doors were propped open and hundreds poured through them onto the unguarded lawn. Passing through these buildings was a baptismal moment.

In Europe, this strategy of breaking up and reforming on the other side of obstacles is called **five fingers make a fist**.

Keep Moving, but Don’t Run Away

The march was most successful when the participants maintained the initiative, moving before the police moved them. In the most inventive moments, the crowd remained mobile, responding to dispersal orders and impenetrable police lines by spontaneously redirecting the march.

Sometimes, in protest movements, crowds simply flee from confrontations in hopes of “remaining flexible.” Thankfully, this is not what happened at UT. There is a balance between confronting obstacles and remaining unpredictable. While it is necessary to make the best of moments when we are forced back or out, in the long run, movements need to be able to force out the police. Instead of engaging in protracted face-offs and waiting to be dispersed or moved, we should take this lesson from Thursday to heart: **fight where it is possible; where it isn’t, remain mobile.**

Surround Them

Despite their heavy-handed tactics, the police failed to control the crowd. They had the lawn, but we had everything else. All afternoon, students, faculty, and community members flowed into and around the South Mall. Police got themselves surrounded repeatedly, and eventually had to push through the crowd to obtain access to food and water. Protesters could have done more to take advantage of that moment. Spatially speaking, as long as the police occupied the lawn, we had the upper hand.

While they had to defend their precarious position against wave after wave of students, we could come and go, regroup, take breaks. When horse-mounted cops rushed the crowd in order to sweep the sidewalk, they weren't attempting to control the crowd or push us anywhere in particular. They were trying to escape.

Make Space(s) Worth Defending

To sustain momentum, especially the momentum of an occupation, people must have a vision of what they are fighting to defend, what they want to create together. Spaces of joyful imagination and exuberance give us momentum and direction even when there is not a line of police or enemies to confront. Chanting can keep spirits high during the direct confrontations, but nobody can shout all day, and the energy of the space dies along with the chant. Blankets over the lawn become supply depots, where the distribution of pizza or hand sanitizer becomes a site for the collective reproduction of our lives. Office supplies become the ingredients for a direct-action training. These efforts reproduce themselves in ways that words alone cannot.

As soon as we occupy a space together, we should fill it up. Every friend, classmate, coworker should be called to join us, bringing things to sustain the space and refresh the front lines. Food, water, games, activities, and music can provide an anchor for our resistance. What we do together in these moments will shape what we will be capable of doing with the rest of our lives.

With a little more initiative, small organized groups could have taken advantage of the situation to greater effect. Much of the campus was left vulnerable. That being said, the confidence built by yesterday's events was obvious to anyone who remained on the lawn. It will only continue to grow. For now, some university faculty have declared "No classes, no grading, no work," and will be gathering at noon to pick up where yesterday left off. [*Editor's note: at the time of publication, this had already occurred; see the introduction for details.*] The concession of the lawn by the administration represents a definitive win.

What happens next will be determined by those who are willing to continue taking bold action. The circumstances demand it of us. Do what is necessary to stop the genocide in Gaza. Defeat is not an option.

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