

Repression in Pittsburgh in the Aftermath of the George Floyd Rebellion

Report from so-called Pittsburgh on the aftermath of the George Floyd uprising and the need to support those facing repression.

Anonymous, It's Going Down

April 5th, 2022

Compared to some places, Pittsburgh got off to a slow start in protesting the murder of George Floyd. A few activist groups finally called for a protest march on May 30, nearly a week after Floyd's slaying, and several days after intense riots had broken out in Minneapolis, Seattle, Portland, and other cities. Even then, many observers, jaded by years of permitted parades that never seriously challenged the power structure in Allegheny County, weren't expecting a lot. In their request for legal observers, even the march organizers estimated the expected crowd size at only 30 people. It ended up drawing over 100 times that many.

The afternoon of May 30th began in typical fashion. Protesters gathered downtown, organizers made impassioned speeches, while medics and other support folks fanned out and got themselves situated. The only difference was the crowd kept growing. By the time the march left Market Square it numbered in the thousands, and more people were flowing by the minute. The original plan of sticking to the sidewalk was obviously a nonstarter, but marchers were otherwise peaceful as they made their way slowly through downtown and up the hill toward PPG Paints Arena, accompanied by the usual chanting.

It's still not entirely clear how the riot started. Pittsburgh's corporate media rushed to pin blame on one person who allegedly broke a window of a police cruiser, an act that supposedly compelled hundreds of people, most of whom hadn't even seen it, to spend the next several hours rampaging through downtown smashing windows and looting stores. More astute observers pointed out that, if one wanted to assign responsibility for the riots on a single violent act by a lone individual, there was always Derek Chauvin. Regardless, by the evening of the 30th, downtown Pittsburgh was a shambles. Over 70 stores had their windows broken, as did the downtown police substation, and a couple of police cruisers got torched. Many businesses were looted as well. One hapless Cricket dealership resorted to posting a hand-written sign on their door pleading "STORE IS ALREADY ROBBED Do Not Try Again."

The Pittsburgh cops were caught by surprise and deeply embarrassed. They would spend the next year and a half extracting payback for their loss of face. Subsequent protests were met with the kind of brutality more often associated with police departments in Chicago and Los

Angeles, belying Pittsburgh's carefully cultivated reputation as a liberal bastion of free speech. Two days after the riot, a protest march was attacked with tear gas and projectile weapons, for no greater offense than spray painting a building and continuing past the time police had decided it should end. No dispersal warning was ever given. One family just trying to escape the fray with their children were teargassed from a passing cop car. Two women who had been merely filming the action from the balcony of their apartment building were raided and arrested on suspicion of throwing objects down at the cops, although no evidence of this allegation was ever presented. Throughout the summer, demonstrators were subjected to harassment and arbitrary arrests, including one activist who was snatched off the street by undercover cops in an unmarked vehicle. Those seen as leaders were particular targets, with several arrested multiple times for supposed violations that would have excited little comment during, say, the aftermath of a home Steelers game. One demonstrator, who had been blinded in one eye by a "less-lethal" projectile on the 30th, was later charged with several felonies only after revealing their intention to sue the police.

In addition to the spectacular arrests and repression that were obviously designed to suppress activism and protest, the Pittsburgh police also initiated a much quieter effort to identify and arrest anyone who could be identified from video footage protesting on the 30th. Despite no one having been injured that day except protesters, a task force of a size more appropriate to a serial murder investigation was assembled to pursue charges against demonstrators for breaking windows at worst, and in some cases for merely being present during the disturbance. Their goal seems to be to "take attendance" in order to fill up their database of dissidents, as well as ruining the lives of as many activists as possible to discourage further resistance to the ruling order. The task force also seems to have included federal law enforcement, who have singled out a handful of protesters for federal felony charges of Obstruction of Law Enforcement During a Civil Disorder. These charges are more serious than most of those leveled against the January 6th rioters in DC who invaded the Capitol building, showing the usual law enforcement bias in favor of the far right.

Today, nearly two years after the uprising, many of the organizations that organized George Floyd actions have moved on, or dissolved entirely. Activists are doing the proverbial "stepping back to do self care" routine, which is often simply a prelude to retirement. Unfortunately, the criminal "justice" system has a longer attention span. Protesters fighting felony charges do not have the luxury of retirement, and they are being abandoned by the same organizers who called them into the street in the first place. Over 60 individuals have been charged with felonies for protesting police brutality, and most of them are still dealing with their cases in one way or another. Seven are incarcerated, either serving sentences or awaiting trials. They need continuing financial support in the form of commissary money to afford the snacks, toiletries, and other items that make life behind bars somewhat more bearable.

Please donate to the commissary fund. All proceeds will go to commissary and legal support for people facing felony charges for protesting in the Pittsburgh area.

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