

CHOP Analysis

Glimmers of Hope, Failures of the Left

Black Rose/Rosa Negra – Seattle

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Out of the national uprising in protest of the racist police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis emerged a movement occupied space of 8–10 blocks in the Seattle neighborhood of Capitol Hill. The space began “as an accident” when on the evening of June 7 a man drove into the protests and shot a demonstrator. Quickly the crowds set up barricades at several intersections and an occupy style encampment emerged as the the mayor ordered the evacuation of the East Precinct police station encompassed within the zone. Originally deemed the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) the space was soon renamed Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP) and remained in place until July 1 when Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan ordered police to clear out the space after a series of late night shootings. Written in late July 2020, this critical analysis piece was based on discussions and experiences of our Seattle Black Rose/Rosa Negra comrades.

The Black Lives Matter movement that erupted in May of 2020 has transformed the American political landscape like no other social movement in decades. Since the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police department, in what may be the largest demonstrations in American history, the country has exploded in riots, demonstrations, mobilizations, petitions, corporate campaigns, occupations, social media activism, and other movement activities. More than 4,700 physical actions have taken place in the last month that included more people – between 15 to 23 million according to data analytic firms – than any other social movement in US history. Further, the passive support for movement is overwhelming, with large majorities expressing favorable views of the movement, including even majority support for the burning of the Minneapolis police precinct, something that has maintained a broader degree of support than either presidential candidate. Again, all without precedent in American history.

Although the scale, scope, and popular support of the movement is unprecedented, the pattern the movement is taking is a familiar one in American history. The Black liberation movement has been at the forefront of a broad variety of movements for liberation in the US. For example, in the 19th century the abolitionist movement gave rise to the movement for women’s suffrage, or in the 1960s the civil rights movement planted the seeds for second wave feminism, anti-war, and LGBTQ movements. The current BLM movement marks a continuation of this trend, with the potential to further radicalize and empower other oppressed peoples in the United States. We believe this is especially true as the country faces a series of related but distinct crises from its collapsing empire – on immigration, gender and patriarchy, medical care and health, jobs and unemployment, the pandemic, policing, poverty, drug addiction, homelessness, housing, climate, higher education, public schooling, mass shootings, institutional corruption, loss of legitimacy, militarism and foreign wars – the list goes on.

Along with CLR James, we see Black movements in the United States as an important, if not leading form of revolutionary struggle in the US. James argues that even modest movements for reform from African Americans contain revolutionary potential because of the social position of Black workers and the nature of their confrontation with concentrated power. Because of their “proletarian composition,” James says that “the struggle for democratic rights brings the Negroes almost immediately face to face with capital and the state,” and that because of this it is “a direct part of the struggle for socialism.” This is especially true when a direct aim of the movement is for the diminished capacity for state policing, criminalization, incarceration, and militarism.

Importantly, the current manifestation of BLM has picked up where the last one dropped off, and this has contributed to the radicalism of the moment, the impatience and intransigence of the activists, and the level of popular support for it aims, including defunding the police, and the widespread discussion of police abolition – itself initiated as a revolutionary demand. The peak of the last iteration of the BLM movement came in 2015 and 2016 when the movement articulated various demands. One set of demands coming from the nonprofit sector looked to specific legislative change on a broad set of intersectional issues, like reparations, health care, education, and others. Another, coming from the streets, argued to “Defund, Disarm, and Disband” the police. Unfortunately, with the election of Donald Trump in 2016, movements were set on a defensive footing and the energy for BLM and other social movements dissipated. However, it was these set of later demands that the movement picked up almost instantaneously in the 2020 manifestations.

The Movement in Seattle

With the current iteration of BLM, we are not in a revolutionary moment, but this moment has the seedlings of revolutionary struggle.

We see this potential playing out and developing in Seattle. Echoing the 2015 demands, on June 6th activists with Decriminalize Seattle initiated the calls to defund by 50% the Seattle police department. These became a central demand for the movement in Seattle and much of the rest of the country. This was a strategic leap forward for the movement here, giving clear demands that could be fought for and potentially won. It gave the movement political direction and enhanced the efficacy of the previous amorphous expressions of anger and grief. And in the aftermath of CHOP these demands now have majority support on the city council.

Although only a part of a much larger movement, the CHOP – the occupied protest zone of the Capitol Hill neighborhood – was the most significant advance in the city. Say what we will about its failures, as we will discuss, the CHOP represents the peak of the early revolutionary potential in Seattle.

For more detailed accounting, we recommend Arun Gupta’s “Seattle’s CHOP went out with both a bang and a whimper” and Micheal Reagan’s “In Defense of Autonomy: Seattle’s CHOP Advanced the Movement for Black Lives.” Here though we aim to present in broad strokes the political significance of CHOP and break down its shortcomings.

In short, through force of combat in the streets, after a week and half of nightly demonstrations with increasing violence from the police and anti-protest actors, the city government was forced to abandon their police station, one of only five for the whole city.

This is a clear movement win with hints of revolutionary possibility. The state was forced to vacate key infrastructure and lost its capacity to exercise power in one section of the city. This was not marginal either, but in the core governmental institution of policing and a central neighborhood. As like what happened in Minneapolis when city and government officials admitted that they “lost control” of the city that led to the destruction of the Third Precinct, the loss of the East Precinct by the SPD represents significant movement power. This kind of withdrawal of government control and the surge of popular power in the autonomous zone is the definition of a revolutionary breakthrough. That power, however, was not capitalized on, and where it had potential was lost when the city retook the station in early July.

Participation by the Seattle local of Black Rose/Rosa Negra in CHOP was individual by our small group but spanned a range of roles such as medics, monitoring comms, participants in mobilizations, GAs, and a range of other activities happening in the space. From the first morning to some of the last days, our coverage gave us a thorough picture of what the movement looked like and informs our analysis below.

CHOP: Limits and Failures

The movement power came from mobilizations in the streets and direct confrontations with the police, rather than any specific organized constituency such as tenant or labor unions or neighborhood based assemblies. Instead there was a diverse collection of activists who nonetheless demonstrated real popular power. And the CHOP helped feed power into movements that made other victories possible. For example, the vote to remove the Seattle police union from the labor council was broadcast from a rally at the chop, with literally hundreds of people Zooming into the meeting to pressure the reactionary labor council to do the right thing. Out of this momentum Seattle schools voted to remove the SPD from their facilities. There were nightly marches from the CHOP zone in the east to the west precinct downtown, which led to that station being put on lockdown every single night for a roughly 40% reduction of policing capacity in the city. This is a real source of popular power developing in the streets of Seattle (and elsewhere).

As we said, the movement could not capitalize on the power of the CHOP, however. There are several internal and external reasons for this. Among the biggest failures we saw were the lack of organization, decision making structure, the substitution of tactics for strategy, the limitations of horizontal and white ally politics when it came to the political necessities of the space, the need for improved movement self-defense forces and external propaganda, and inherent limitations of sustainability of this type of mass popular upsurge and occupation.

No Decision Making Process

The first significant problem was the failure of decision making practice and infrastructure in the zone. Although this improved toward the end of the occupation, we witnessed very poor meeting facilitation and decision making practice. In the first general assembly and for weeks of subsequent meetings, the GA became a space for anyone to talk about any topic they wished. There was no agenda set, no time frame for discussion, no way to follow up in a meaningful way on items from other speakers. For most of the occupation, it was an assembly only in name, functioning in practice more as an "open mic" or "speak out", not a functioning space to carry on political work. As a result, the GA's were prime space for police infiltrators and right-wing disruptors to run textbook counterintelligence disruption operations. (You can see one of these, the person who introduces herself as "MamaBird" in the video linked in this paragraph).

We personally witnessed many of these instances. In one, on the night that the mayor announced intentions to retake the precinct, an impromptu meeting was held to make decisions on what to do. A young Black woman organized the meeting and was attempting to get people to decide whether to hold the space and if so, how to do it. Repeatedly, an older Black man with a sidearm disrupted and derailed the meeting. He would take the bullhorn multiple times, talk about his experience of racism in the US and the need for peace, and prevent the meeting from moving forward with making a decision. This was when it was believed that a police raid was

imminent and there were still hundreds of supporters in the CHOP. It was later revealed that this man was a private investigator with photographs of himself with SPD officers. Clearly, this lack of structure and experience in large group facilitation not only allowed this type of disruption to take place, but also enabled a practice of patriarchy where a talented Black woman pushing for political clarity was sidelined. There were many similar moments.

Strengths and Limitations of Horizontalism and Individual Action

This overall lack of decision making also meant that there could be no politics in the space. This we call the problem of horizontalism. Everyone worked on individual projects, with little to no ability to coordinate between one another, to develop a political agenda for the occupation, or to even agree on demands or purpose of the occupation. Numerous small formations issued varied sets of demands. Many questions could not get answered. Was the point to seize and reclaim the precinct or not? Questions as obvious and simple as this could not even be explored. The result was that hundreds of individual projects emerged contributing to the flowering of movement activity and was part of the reason we characterize this moment as having revolutionary characteristics. This facilitated the mass participation in that any one and everyone could bring whatever their passion and interest was into the space. Therefore community gardens, art projects, nightly marches, music concerts, film screenings, nightly attempts to seize the building, attempts to protect the building from seizure, meetings, discussion groups, and more were all happening simultaneously. This is not a bad thing. It contributed to movement power. But we argue we need this diversity, but also that we need a way to cohere these activities in a clear political direction. Not only was a meeting facilitation practice for the general assembly needed for this, but also we needed the discipline to shut down and remove people who were disrupting.

Failure of White Ally Politics

The next major problem in the space was the limitations of white ally politics that contributed to this confusion. White activists in the space literally looked for whatever any Black person would tell them to do, which could mean many things, including everything from random personal favors, to wearing shirts that read “when the shooting starts, get behind me.” This dynamic also led to much tokenization of Black individuals, as well as inaction by white activists in times of urgency. The vacuum of Black leadership meant that a whole variety of political traditions and Black perspectives pulled people in different directions. Did deferring to black leadership mean listening to the liberal Black voices who were making alliances with the police and directing people away from the occupied space? Did it mean following Black voices who called for developing Black capitalism and buying Black (many of these claims made by local Black business owners)? Did it mean following the Black voices who rejected the “autonomy” of the cop free zone, or those who supported it? This meant that when Black people got up, some of them police infiltrators, white activists could not counter harmful narratives and return meetings to more principled Black leadership and facilitation. This exacerbated the logistical and infrastructure problems in the space. But it is also a clear failure of white ally politics and highlights that it is the politics that are important to articulate and discuss in that space.

This is not to say that the question of how non-Black radicals should participate in a movement for Black liberation is a simple one. Surely, like most organizing, it requires not only solidarity,

but humility, nuance, respect, and trust. But we have clearly observed the failure (and weaponization) of “white-ally politics” in practice. As militants, we need to clearly articulate a theory and practice of revolutionary anti-racist solidarity as an alternative.

Tactics in Place of Strategy

In this political morass, the occupation itself became the point of the struggle. We see this as a clear substitution of movement tactics for strategy and a continuation of the movement failures before the CHOP to work on questions of political strategy. With no demands, clear political objectives, or ability to navigate political differences, the CHOP was reduced to its lowest common denominator, and that was merely holding the space. This was happening elsewhere in the movement in Seattle as well. Nightly marches to occupy the freeway were a demonstration of movement power, but not part of a larger strategic framework and without a clear goal, target, escalating campaign, etc. The tactic of the occupation had become a substitution for the hard work of developing a collective political strategy.

Need for Collective Self-Defense and Effective Propaganda

One of the most disturbing and important lessons from the CHOP is the need to develop well-organized and effective collective self-defense. On the night of Juneteenth, there were literally thousands of people in the space, many of them tourists and party goers. In the early morning hours, a verbal fight escalated and led to the shooting death of a young man. Later that night, another young Black man leaving the zone was attacked and shot by a mob of white men yelling racial slurs, and survived. The first shooting was not the result of vigilante anti-protest political violence but violence that sprang from sources internal to the CHOP zone. In the days that followed, several more shootings took place in and around the zone. Though the shooters and motives are largely still unknown, it appears likely that a majority of the shootings were the result of interpersonal violence and gang retaliation. As our comrades in Decriminalize Seattle wrote at the time, when we live in a profoundly violent and heavily armed society, it was likely that this type of violence would emerge in the CHOP. The last major incident involved a vehicle which attacked the zone and shot into a crowd. After running a barricade, the driver and passenger were shot, killing the driver.

There was an informal security team formed at the CHOP, mainly in response to right wing threats, which coordinated volunteers for night watch, bike brigade lookouts and barricade defense teams. Members of the John Brown Gun Club were a regular presence. From day one there were constant threats from rightwing militias and racist groups, as well as acts of provocation by the Proud Boys and others. As Trump threatened to intervene, thousands of “patriots” signed up for a July 4th Facebook event to evict CHOP by force and return the precinct to the police.

The lack of overall organization in CHOP also led to a separation of this self defense work from the broader political project. This left CHOP particularly vulnerable to internal conflict, and street brawls which did not always involve a clearly defined threat. This coupled with a lack of clear parameters for acceptable behavior in the space, led to much confusion and chaos, some of which could have been avoided if the project had better organization and more political cohesion. While the efforts of the security teams were significant, this experience (and the string

of attacks around the country) has exposed the serious need for our movements to be prepared for effective, responsible, and accountable self-defense.

In many ways, the shootings spelled the final knell for the CHOP. Firstly, it drove supporters out of the space as few were willing to risk fatal violence in the support of an occupation with unclear aims. But the violence was also used by the enemies of the movement to discredit the CHOP and BLM. The violence became a justification for police reoccupation and the role of the police in society in general. It is possible this could have been countered with better outward facing propaganda and internal inoculation. Decriminalize Seattle tried some effort in this direction, but the continued violence night after night, the growing chorus in right wing media making use of the violence, and the political machinations of the mayor to use the violence to reclaim the space were too much to overcome.

Inherent Limitations of Occupations

Another shortcoming of the CHOP was the inherent limitations of the occupation tactic. Street occupations of this type typically have one of three potential outcomes. The first is to become a revolutionary movement. Like the Tahrir Square occupation, this requires moving the disruption out of the streets and into workplaces and other institutions to force further crises on the structures of power. The second option is that they become institutionalized, given over to non-profit management that can tame and redirect the disruptive power of the movement. The third is that they are crushed with the resurgence of the violence of the state.

Building Power: A Conclusion

It is important to note that the way to transition a moment with revolutionary potential like we saw in CHOP into a revolution is to take the power of the movement into the institutions of civil society. Spreading from the CHOP into workplaces, schools, hospitals, and other sites of governance and administration could have spread the disruptive power of the CHOP and built social power outside of the state. Although there were moments when organizers tried this (kicking the police union out of the labor council is one, removing SPD from public schools was another), these were limited and fractured. They largely were coming from activism outside of the space, and indeed, the majority of the BLM movement in Seattle was engaged in work outside of the CHOP. Its downfall is by no means the end of BLM in Seattle.

Nonetheless the CHOP and other moments like the burning of the Minneapolis police precinct demonstrate high water marks for the BLM movement in the last month. Our task as anarchist revolutionaries is to build on that power, mostly by providing better meeting facilitation, better movement infrastructure, and better processes for movement strategy, politics, and decision making, and to spread that movement into the institutions that govern our lives.

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