

Confronting the Nationalists and Their Police

A Full Report from Portland on June 4

CrimethInc.

June 6, 2017

On June 4, shortly after Jeremy Christian murdered two people who intervened when he was harassing two teenage women of color on a Portland commuter train, nationalists organized a rally in downtown Portland, inviting “patriots” such as Kyle Chapman to come speak in favor of carrying out violent attacks on anti-fascists and others. In response, anarchists and other opponents of fascism converged in downtown Portland, despite a massive police operation to reserve the space for nationalists. In this account, one participant offers a full report on the day’s events.

My crew and I were nervous going into the protest against the nationalist “Patriot Prayer” rally in Portland on June 4. We had talked in advance about what could happen; the conversation was a little bleaker than our usual planning discussions. The mainstream media has been reporting nonstop on the killing of two people and slashing of a third who stood up to defend two young women of color from white supremacist Jeremy Christian’s hostility on the commuter train a week ago, and we were all feeling the tension. “Something sketchy is going to happen” was more or less what we concluded. At the minimum, we were expecting a Berkeley-style street brawl between antifascists and alt-right LARPing patriots in gladiator costumes; at the worst, we figured some delusional, Kyle-Chapman-loving, “antifa are the real fascists” white nationalist would throw a grenade and we would lose some comrades. In the end, we decided that any risk we envisioned was outweighed by our desire not to let the nationalists organize openly, as that would embolden more racists to go out and harass, attack, and murder people of color. We prepared for the worst.

When we arrived on the scene, we saw that others had come prepared as well. The black bloc was prepared. The police were prepared. The nationalists were prepared. We passed the smaller labor rally and the timid “no masks allowed” liberal rally on the blocks surrounding the fascists; then we made our war around the lines and lines of police protecting the patriots. We felt a bit safer when we saw that the largest of the four concurrent demonstrations was the one comprised of militant antifascists. It’s hard to gauge the exact number because the participants were spread out around a park the size of a city block, but I think it is safe to say the total was around 1000.

At protests in the northwest over the past few months, police have sought to confiscate anything that could be interpreted as a weapon, essentially disarming protesters early on before anybody gets a chance to make use of them. In Seattle on January 20, the day an antifascist was shot, the Seattle PD kettled the anarchist march after only a block of marching, took all the flags, shields, and sticks, and let everyone go. In Portland, the police were taking people's flags, flagpoles, baseball bats, shields, and anything else they could identify from the edge of the park as protesters entered. A number of people managed to slip through with shields. Plenty of people in the black bloc, and four out of the five people I came with, were wearing helmets and other protective gear. A few friends were wearing Kevlar vests under their hoodies in order not to be the next antifascist shot by a trigger-happy patriot. Based on pictures the police released later, people also managed to carry in a small arsenal of knives, brass knuckles, pepper spray, chains, flares, telescopic batons, smoke bombs, fireworks, slingshots, crowbars, and, of course, cases of Pepsi.

About 50 well-armed cops acted as a buffer between the antifascists and the fascists, with a few more scattered around the edges of the park and a few hundred more at the ready. Behind them, Three Percenters and stick-waving, armor-wearing gladiators formed another line, and behind them, flag-waving, Trump-loving white people who just wanted to listen to alt-right B-list celebrities like Kyle Chapman proclaim things like "Open season on antifa. Smash on sight!" There were a few hundred nationalists. I'd be shocked if anyone put the number higher than 300.

I imagine the police were under a lot of pressure to prevent brawls between MAGA goons and antifascists, and they were mostly successful. With all the media hype, the mayor calling for the federal government to cancel the permits and then rescinding his request, and the wave of escalating antigovernment protests in Portland, their main strategy was to keep all the demonstrations separate. There was certainly no safe way to cross the street as a group or to engage meaningfully with the nationalists. The few alt-right provocateurs who made it into the park with the antifascists were quickly chased out. The sketchy photographers who were walking around trying to get close-ups of people's faces were run off as well.

A lifted pickup driving by got stuck in traffic. Some mischievous individuals confiscated its American flag and "blue lives matter" flags; it was pelted with water bottles and sticks. People brought the "blue lives matter" flag to the front and burned it a few feet from the line of riot cops. One confused Proud Boy in his early 20s was discovered wandering around the park, identifiable by a shirt reading "Proud Boy." I'm not sure if he was trying to be brave or if he was just lost, but he was surrounded by about 40 black-clad antifascists. This kid could easily have been seriously injured, and several comrades were on the verge of letting him have it. As he was contemplating his final moments, trying not to release the contents of his bladder and surely regretting his poor sense of direction, he was told, "You ought to leave." And he did. Quickly.

For three and a half hours, pretty much nothing happened. Every once in a while, someone would get chased off and people would rush over to see what was going on. A few times, some eager young'un with a bullhorn tried to rally people to mass up in one corner of the park in order to somehow march through the line of riot cops and disrupt the fascists. While I appreciate this kind of optimism, the probability of success seemed considerably smaller than the probability of getting beat up by a hundred well-prepared cops. There was some stagnation. And the tension was still there.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the cops attacked the antifascist rally—without any kind of direct provocation.

Now, I'm not much of a fan of the "we were attacked by the cops for no reason, I swear!" line. I don't really think it serves us as anarchists to appeal to the moral outrage of liberals who already hate us. It doesn't make us feel better about getting attacked—and it certainly doesn't make it enticing to anyone to join a group that is constantly getting attacked by cops "for no reason."

They didn't attack us for no reason, though. They have a hundred good reasons to attack us. As anarchists who are fighting against the rise of fascism, who are on the news for disrupting white nationalist events all around the country, who burn limousines and punch Nazis during important transitions of government power, who fight cops and break windows and march without permits, who advocate the dismantling of government and police and prisons, who have no respect for authority, who want to abolish hierarchy, whose ideas and tactics are gaining traction among a growing population of people who are feeling angry and need an outlet to vent their dissatisfaction and disillusionment... there are plenty of reasons police would choose to attack us.

Their official line was that unidentified people in black were collecting bricks from the top of a park bathroom, so they moved in to prevent the throwing of bricks. Conveniently, they timed their attack on the antifascist rally to take place half an hour before the nationalist rally was set to end. The park in which the nationalists were gathering was surrounded on all sides by counterdemonstrators. Presumably the police concluded that the only way to prevent roving street brawls was to push back the most militant opposition, opening space for the patriots to disperse safely.

The police came in firing pepper balls, rubber bullets, tear gas, concussion bombs, pepper spray, and something they referred to as "aerial distraction devices," all to the delight of the equally surprised fascists they were protecting. Demonstrators responded with rocks, sticks, water bottles, bricks, full Pepsi cans, and anything else that could be thrown. As people pelted the cops in riot gear making their way into the park, unarmored bike cops stood in the street to the side of the *mêlée*. It can be difficult to make split-second decisions in such circumstances, but on reflection, the bike cops were probably more vulnerable than the cops clad head to toe in expensive body armor.

A crew of well-prepared folks in black bloc were able to hold out a little longer, but most people were almost immediately pushed back by the gas, and medics were on the scene immediately treating people with eye flushes and treating various injuries. One medic I talked to treated someone who caught a brick to the cheek, presumably from friendly fire (aim better next time, comrades!). After a few rounds of less-lethal weaponry and police charges, the park was cleared and the bloc started reforming about a hundred yards back, across the street in the next section of the same park. Chants of "Walk! Don't run!" kept the atmosphere oddly calm and dissuaded a lot of people from panicking. By this point, about half of the participants had dispersed.

The nationalist rally was now a full block away with a ton of aggressive cops blocking access to it. A barricade of construction signs and newspaper boxes appeared in the street to prevent any further police advance. As people mingled, a few in black started calling for people to regroup in bloc and march. About a hundred or so people took off chanting down the street, while the rest stayed in the park or at the barricade. The march made it about two blocks, but was outmaneuvered and turned back by riot cops who were riding around holding on to the exterior of customized personnel-carrying SUVs.

The march swung back by the park and almost everybody else joined in, swelling the numbers to somewhere between 300 and 500. It seemed like something might have been possible, but I

could sense the hesitation of the group I was rolling with. The march made it another block, then was again outflanked by the police on the SUVs and we had to make another turn. After another block, we were turned away yet again by a different group of cops. I could see more cop SUVs loaded down with riot cops zooming ahead from the side streets.

The city isn't made of cobblestones, there weren't any nearby construction sites, just about everything was bolted down, and almost all the flags and many of the shields had been confiscated a few hours earlier. It felt like we were being corralled. With limited means to engage, my buddy and I decided to disengage, so we made our way up a side street to de-bloc. At the time, we had mixed feelings about leaving; the size and anger of the crowd suggested that it might have some potential. Unfortunately, it turned out that our instincts were right. The march only progressed a couple more blocks before being kettled, trapping about 200 people on a city block without escape routes.

When people realized they were trapped, a giant pile of black clothing, helmets, knives, rocks, and other weapons materialized and a group of sweaty, plaid wearing Portlanders meandered about, waiting to find out what would happen. A few people managed to ascend a high wall to escape into a parking garage before the police caught on and started blasting them with pepper balls, shooting over the heads of a few disapproving bystanders. The cops began slowly processing people, letting them go after photographing their IDs. As this was taking place, the nationalist demonstration was ending and the participants were dispersing right in front of the family-friendly liberal rally.

Altogether, there were 14 arrests, and around 200 people were IDed from the antifascist march. The day didn't feel like a defeat, but it didn't feel like a success either. A lot of people came together to fight back against the police, but with limited resources and effectiveness. The alt-right rally was completely surrounded by people who opposed them, but it was largely unaffected by the counterdemonstrations. The police were most effective when they were acting as a buffer between the demonstrations and when they were corralling the marches. On at least two occasions, Three Percenters actively aided the police in arresting antifascists. The antifascist contingent was most effective and felt the most inspiring when we were able to maintain a space free of police, however briefly.

At the end of any major confrontation, my comrades and I ask ourselves questions and discuss what could have gone better. Could we have held space longer even under assault from heavily-armed police? Were there other ways to disrupt the nationalist rally? How can we fight in a sterilized and controlled cityscape? What would have helped us prevent the kettle? Could we have been more prepared? Helmets felt essential, and sturdy flagpoles would have been nice—but what could have transformed the fight to something that felt winnable? More shields to protect against police projectiles? Hammers to break up material? Smoke bombs? What lessons can we draw as we move forward? I hope to hear conversations like these happening as people strategize about what we can do, individually and collectively, to be smarter, fiercer, and more effective the next time we engage.

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