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Perspectives on the August 12 Anti-Fascist Mobilization in DC

Two Interviews with Organizers

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On August 12, Charlottesville fascist Jason Kessler attempted to hold the sequel to last year's "Unite the Right" rally in Washington, DC. It did not go well for him. In the end, 2000 police struggled to protect two dozen fascists from thousands of anti-fascists and other foes of tyranny. To get some perspective on these events, we spoke with David Thurston—arts director for No Justice No Pride, a member of the steering committee of the DMV's Movement for Black Lives, and a core organizer with Resist This—and also with an anonymous anarchist involved in organizing the anti-fascist bloc, among other aspects of the mobilization.

The US government spent \$2.6 million to force the fascist rally upon the people of Washington, DC. Let's do the math: that's over \$100,000 per fascist for a rally that lasted an hour at most. Would the US spend anything like that to protect a rally organized by any other sector of the population? On the contrary, when an-

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anarchists and other advocates of liberation organize public events, the government usually spends millions of dollars to repress us, often breaking its own laws in order to do so. This shows what a farce the “free speech” defense of fascist recruiting drives is—this is not an abstract question of rights, but a concrete matter of the US government asymmetrically investing resources in promoting the spread of fascism.

To put a number on it, then, **the kind of “free speech” that enabled Kessler and his like to recruit someone to murder Heather Heyer is worth \$100,000 per hour per fascist to the US government.** Those are your tax dollars at work.

We were especially inspired by the fierceness with which the black population of DC turned out to face down the police and fascists on August 12. We have some questions about whether it makes sense for anarchists to act separately in a distinct anti-fascist contingent when other sectors of the population are mobilizing so courageously and assertively. It might be more effective for some anarchists to seek to connect with other rebels on the street, in order to bring about an interchange of tactics and ideas. Hopefully, this is already taking place.

We’ve seen some alarmist commentary on the clashes—for example, from the person who posted the following video. Permit us to repeat that the US government is forcibly extorting money from its population to fund the violent imposition of fascist rallies on communities that only stand to suffer from the expansion of white supremacist activity. In this context, it should be no surprise that people defend themselves from police violence.

One more topic bears mention: a few reactionary media outlets have taken this opportunity to accuse anti-fascists of being “violent” towards journalists for discouraging them from filming. This is the same thing they did last year, two weeks after the violence in Charlottesville, when the editors of various corporate media publications attempted to create a false equivalency between fascists

recruiting to carry out murder and genocide and anti-fascists mobilizing in self-defense.

In a time when fascists go through video footage identifying anti-fascists in order to intimidate and terrorize them, and far-right Republican congressmen are attempting to aid and abet them via new legislation, it should not come as a surprise to anyone that anti-fascists discourage people from filming them without permission. If these journalists are really concerned about this issue, they should prioritize helping to create a world in which no one needs to fear being identified and attacked by fascists or police just for attempting to defend their communities. Instead, several journalists have prioritized assisting fascists like Kessler in getting his message out.

Two Organizers on the August 12 Mobilization

What were your goals going into August 12? What did you think a best case scenario would be for the day?

David Thurston: For the past month, I've been working as the arts organizer for the mobilization. My first job was to make sure the rally in Freedom Plaza and the three direct action contingents got the brilliant, vibrant, colorful, and radical banners that the 411 Collective crafted. I also co-emceed the rally with Aiyi'anah Ford of the Future Foundation—we met through the organizing around the National Equality March in 2009. I wanted to see the Nazis vastly outnumbered and I wanted to see DC and DMV activists organize around a synergy and diversity of tactics—allowing us to welcome people into the movement who may never have heard of anarchist theory, but who over time could be introduced to our praxis of non-hierarchical, anti-sectarian, and revolutionary politics.

Another anarchist organizer: I wanted to make Nazis too afraid to come to DC. I also wanted to block their march. The for-

mer did not happen due to some last minute infighting, but the latter did happen.

Overall, I would say the action was an overwhelming success. Anarchists provided a great deal of labor in every aspect of the mobilization.

What did the anti-fascist demonstrators do well? What could have gone better?

David Thurston: We succeeded in overwhelmingly outnumbering our opposition, marginalizing their toxic politics, and putting forward an organizing model that can be advanced upon in the future. There were a number of internal challenges and conflicts that took shape in the lead-up to A12, but for the most part, the various components of our effort worked from a space of deep-rooted solidarity.

Another anarchist organizer: We overwhelmed neo-Nazis numerically, but because of some tactical and intelligence failures, we did not get the chance to actually confront them. But when you have thousands of people mobilizing and holding space, do you really need to escalate when the fascists are already too afraid to come out? The fact that the black bloc did not escalate when there was no reason to do so enabled us to hold space, stay disciplined until the end, and demonstrate an ability to show restraint when necessary in order to accomplish the goals of the movement.

On January 20, hundreds of people were mass-arrested during Trump's inauguration and indiscriminately charged with eight or more felonies apiece. How did the legacy of the J20 case influence planning ahead of August 12? How do you think it influenced those who did not participate in the planning, but came to participate?

David Thurston: The fact that there were absolutely no convictions for J20 defendants was probably a big factor explaining why our city's multitude of police forces were relatively restrained. My

ing to intimidate them or cast a pall on the vision of black liberation that this movement was articulating.

On a personal note, I encountered a brother named Amir who introduced himself to me at the rally. I didn't recognize him, but Amir told me that he was one of three young black men who tried to mug me near my neighborhood in DC. Amir apologized for his actions. I was so moved and thanked him, letting him know that I wish him the best, and never wanted anyone to go to jail for something as petty as trying to take \$10 from me. To see him in the struggle for a radically different future on A12 made an impact on my psyche that I have a hard time adequately explaining.

We are living through perilous times. If we organize creatively and synergistically, radicals can lay the foundation for movements that could, within a decade or so, lead to revolutionary transformation in our country and around the world. But if we fail, the threat of global political, economic, and ecological cataclysm is immense. I have friends working hard to elect left-liberal to social democratic candidates for public office, and friends whose focus is on direct action and community-based organizing. We need to build a radical tent broad enough for all of the above if the revolutionary potential of this moment is to be realized.

inkling is that someone above or in the orbit of Chief Newsham realized that it was not in the city's interests for local police to play the role of being the extreme right's de-facto storm troopers. That said, the massive deployment of state power was obscene. My guess is that a few million dollars of city money probably went into massive police overtime.

There may have been some folks who were afraid to come out, but my opinion is that that was probably because of what the neo-Nazis represent, and not because of anything that went down with J20.

Another anarchist organizer: We thought long and hard about how to avoid isolating ourselves from other social movements and argued against others trying to marginalize radicals. Considering that our movement had set up the tech support, website, security, trainings, and other essential aspects of the mobilization, it was impossible to isolate us on the sidelines where we would be easy targets for police violence.

Did it make sense to call for a distinct anti-fascist bloc, when so many people turned out to oppose the fascist rally with their own ways of being militant? Why or why not?

David Thurston: I think it was great to have an anti-fascist bloc that could plan direct action based on the worst-case scenario of a sizable far right turnout. It was also good to have a space where the lessons of prior direct actions, especially J20, could be debated in depth.

In practice, there was a lot of synergy between the direct action contingents and the two permitted rallies, even though the permitted rallies gave voice to ideas more in line with traditional left liberal thinking.

Another anarchist organizer: I think the strategy of the bloc that day was to be able to

1. defend our communities
2. show a specifically radical presence that day.

A year after the Charlottesville “Unite the Right” rally, what do the events in DC tell us about the current political situation in the US?

David Thurston: I think last weekend’s events make it clear that the far right is in political, ideological, organizational, and interpersonal disarray. After the debacle of Jason Kessler’s pitiful mobilization, he went on a Twitter rant attacking the rest of the self-proclaimed alt-right, calling them cowards for not mobilizing, and describing them as would-be Nazis living in their parents’ basements. While trying to get a permit in Charlottesville, Kessler managed to dox his own followers by turning over encrypted Signal threads, emails, and more to the state.

But we can’t rest on our success last weekend. While joining a proto-fascist organization remains a marginal idea for the millions of white people who voted for Trump in 2016, specific neo-Nazi proposals and talking points—especially around immigration, border security, and global imperialist hubris—remain appealing to wide swaths of low-income, working-class, and lower-middle-class white folk in our nation.

The radical left has immense potential to grow if we can shed the baggage of years of being fairly marginal to political debate. Anarchists need to organize creatively, finding space to work in alliance with left-leaning liberals, but also with socialist groupings with whom we have significant differences.

Another anarchist organizer: I think the rally on August 12 shows that militant anti-fascism works. A year ago, there were 500 fascists marching in the streets of Charlottesville. This year, less than 25 showed up because they were afraid. At least on the East Coast, anti-fascism has demobilized the far right.

So we’ve pushed back on-the-ground white nationalists... but as a movement, how do we use that strategy to disrupt other forms of organized white supremacy? How do we scale that strategy up to take on local right-wing lobbyists, local Republicans, police union officials, the Chamber of Commerce, DHS, and ICE officials?

The fascistic turn of the United States has been a 30-year process, and there are local people with local power who are marching us there. We need to figure out how to demobilize them.

Trump did not come to power because of the “alt right”—the alt right was able to use Trump to enter mainstream politics. Now our social movements need to identify the leaders who pushed our local communities to the right, and destabilize their political power.

The chief takeaway from this weekend is that even if we did not push the limits of the struggle, we did push a mobilization that was specifically anti-fascist. Anarchists and anti-fascists wrote the original call to action for the mobilization, provided experience, and pushed a strategy that allowed for numerous communities to come out and confront fascism.

The most challenging dynamic we had to navigate was engaging with liberals who wanted the day to look like “Boston” [the massive anti-fascist mobilization that took place there in response to a fascist rally a week after “Unite the Right” in Charlottesville] but did not emotionally prepare for the real possibility that the fascists could have mobilized hundreds.

Do you have any particularly instructive anecdotes to share from August 12?

David Thurston: My favorite moment was when the permitted march from Freedom Plaza entered the periphery of the “Rise Up Fight Back” contingent anchored by Black Lives Matter DC. They organized a block party near Lafayette to celebrate black joy and resistance, making the point that no neo-Nazi mobilization was go-