

# **The Long Struggle against Fascism in DC**

**An Incomplete History of Anti-Fascism inside the Beltway**

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# Contents

Shutting down the “American Renaissance” Conference . . . . .	3
Post-Occupy . . . . .	4
Ferguson, Baltimore, and Beyond . . . . .	4
The National Policy Institute . . . . .	5
The Trump Era Begins . . . . .	5
Confrontation at the Deploraball . . . . .	6
The Punch Seen ’round the World . . . . .	6
After J20 . . . . .	7
May Day 2017 . . . . .	7
A Hard Summer . . . . .	8
Abolish ICE . . . . .	8
Unite the Right 2 . . . . .	8

In Washington, DC, at the heart of the white settler-colonial state, local communities have long defended themselves against many different forms of oppression. In the following historical overview, we trace the roots of anti-fascist organizing in DC through the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Like our earlier text, “How Anti-Fascists Won the Battles of Berkeley,” this text offers some important background as anti-fascists in Washington, DC prepare to confront the second “Unite the Right” rally this coming August.

Fascism is a pressing threat here in the capital of the so-called United States on occupied Piscataway land. Days before the first Unite The Right, the deadly white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, Nazis brandishing guns and Confederate flags rode through southeast DC, a historically black neighborhood. Two months later, in October 2017, Richard Collins III, a black University of Maryland student, was murdered by a fascist. Meanwhile, in the suburban communities around DC, police and sheriffs cooperate with ICE through 287(g) to kidnap, imprison, and deport immigrants. In plainclothes and in uniform, fascism grows when we ignore it.

In 1982, hundreds of DC residents responded to the first Ku Klux Klan rally in 57 years. The New York Times reported on the press conference with which the Klan opened the day:

“Mr. Robb, raising his voice to its best pulpit level, declared that illegal aliens were ruining America. ‘When you say aliens, are you talking about E.T.?’ shouted one reporter. Another asked, ‘Will you accept protection from black police officers today?’ While Mr. Robb was coping with the press, the other Klansmen quietly disappeared to accept the police offer to escort them quietly to Lafayette Park through the back streets.”

The rally lasted only 15 minutes. The Klansmen were escorted out by federal police under a hail of stones and bottles. Afterwards, anti-racist demonstrators attacked businesses, police, and symbols of capitalism. It was not the last time that DC residents showed the far right that “DC means *don’t come*.”

So the anti-fascist movement in DC didn’t start as a reaction to Donald Trump. It was already present in the 1960s when black communities organized for liberation. It was present in 1991 when the Latino neighborhood of Mt. Pleasant rose up against police. It was present in 2007 when DC Anti-Racist Action confronted the Klan in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

The current round of anti-fascist work began during the recession, following the collapse of the anti-globalization and anti-war movements. Activists began asking how to shift from the summit-hopping model to focus on localized conflict.

The emergence of the Tea Party generated concern, but it did not provoke an anti-fascist response. Temporarily incapacitated by Obama’s electoral victory, anarchists could only muster small pranks such as passing out signs that said “privatize military hospitals”—now a serious policy proposal of the right—and leading chants of “Tea Bag on this lawn, all day long.”

At the time, few could read the tea leaves to see what the future held.

## **Shutting down the “American Renaissance” Conference**

“It took us years to climb back from the humiliation of being canceled.”

-Jared Taylor, referring to the 2010 conference

In spring 2010, anarchists involved with the Self-Described Anarchists Collective (SDAC) led a research team and social media campaign to shut down the white supremacist American Renaissance conference. Anti-fascists had protested the conference for years already; in the end, a coordinated call-in campaign finally forced the conference organizers to leave DC.

Hotel after hotel shut their doors to neo-Nazis as anti-fascists called around, asking if a booking had been made and beseeching the venues to cancel the conference. SDAC shut down every space in DC that fascists attempted to reserve. In the end, the conference took place in a restaurant in Virginia—yet instead of hundreds of suit-and-tie fascists mingling, their numbers were reduced to less than 20. It took the far right years to recover.

Fascists were not able to regain their foothold in DC until 2015.

## **Post-Occupy**

Smash Racism DC (SRDC) formed in response to a march called for by the Aryan Nations in September 2012 on the theme “Stop White Genocide [sic] in South Africa.” A small group of veterans of the Occupy movement came up with the name and called for a meeting to plan a community response. Held at Howard University, the first meeting brought together a mix of students, religious congregants, anarchists, and socialists.

At the time, anti-fascists did not have an organized presence in Washington, DC. Community members largely avoided the label “anti-fascist” because few people believed that fascist activity could pose a significant threat.

Through community outreach that included congregational organizing, public lectures, flier-ing, and old-fashioned door-knocking, Smash Racism DC was able to mobilize about three hundred counter-protesters against the 20 white supremacists who showed up. Activists created sit-down blockades to slow the Nazis, who were surrounded by phalanxes of riot police. It took the Nazis two hours to reach the Capitol Building. They left after 20 minutes of being drowned out by counter-protesters.

For the next three years, Smash Racism DC existed largely as a social media presence, highlighting instances of racial and gender inequity as well as anti-fascist resistance. In fall 2015, anti-racists confronted a Confederate flag rally, seizing flags from fascists and ripping them to shreds inside Union Station.

## **Ferguson, Baltimore, and Beyond**

Black Lives Matter protests emerged in DC during the Ferguson uprising. At the high point in fall 2014, protests took place at the end of every workday; one shut down the 14<sup>th</sup> Street bridge. Black-led organizers organized to end the formal practice of MPD’s jump-out squads. Organizers led campaigns to implement the NEAR (“Neighborhood Engagement Achieves Results”) Act in hopes of reducing police presence.

Then, in spring 2015, DC’s sister city Baltimore went up in flames following the police murder of Freddie Gray.

The struggle against police is intertwined with the struggle against fascism. Every day, police act as an occupying army. In DC, the city’s police gun recovery unit openly wore white

supremacist symbols at court. Members of the same unit were caught selling weapons in Southeast DC. As we noted earlier this summer, MPD has committed three murders since May 2018.

## **The National Policy Institute**

Even after Trump announced his candidacy, few people in DC took the threat of fascism seriously. Yet white nationalists were openly organizing in Towson, MD, while towns like Frederick, MD elected sheriffs tied to white nationalist movements. Fascists around the US were emboldened, as evidenced by Gamergate, Blue Lives Matter memes, and Islamophobic demonstrations at mosques.

“On Halloween, the 31<sup>st</sup> of October [2015], the neo-Nazi American Policy Institute (NPI) [sic] Convention met at the National Press Club. Many well-known white supremacists were in attendance. To get in, they had to run a gauntlet of anti-racist protesters who not only called them out on their racism but also sprayed them down with Silly String.”

-DC Direct Action News

On the evening of the NPI conference in 2015, white supremacists outnumbered protesters 10 to 1. This was ominous: in the past, small numbers of anti-fascists usually outnumbered Nazis by at least 3 to 1. This time, white supremacists were able to threaten anti-fascists without fear. At one point, an NPI attendee kissed the swastika on the anti-fascist banner.

But the alarm bells had been sounded. Some in the activist community realized that the era of neo-fascism had begun. In Greece and other European countries, the far right had been expanding for over a decade, with fascists like the Golden Dawn Party gaining seats in the government. DC anti-fascists set out to learn about their new enemies in the US.

The fascist Matthew Heimbach had visited Europe to witness some of the tactics that European fascists were using. He began to circulate ideas within the League of the South, and later founded the Traditionalist Workers Party. Richard Spencer, a wealthy fascist whose family received millions of dollars in subsidies from the US government on account of owning plantations in Louisiana, spent a fortune trying to build the “alt-right” brand and turn it into a right-wing street movement. Milo Yiannopoulos taught fascist fanboys how to out trans women on Twitter and use the #UndocumentedAndUnafraid hashtag to call ICE on Dreamers.

A few months later, on March 5, 2016, the NPI organized a mini-conference at the Reagan Building in DC. Anti-fascist organizers, anticipating a growing fascist presence in DC, focused on building coalitions to draw a larger crowd of protesters than had previously come to NPI actions. With roughly 100 protesters, they succeeded in holding territory at the event. Between a rally with speakers and a line interfering with white supremacists as they entered, protesters utilized a diversity of tactics that set the stage for more actions later that year.

## **The Trump Era Begins**

Endorsed by former KKK leader David Duke and others in the growing “alt-right,” Trump’s candidacy caused a rise in fascist organizing and attacks. For Richard Spencer and the National

Policy Institute, this was a sign of their movement's success and legitimacy. When Trump won the election, nooses were hung at American University and in a black neighborhood of DC.

In response to Trump's victory, thousands took to the streets the day after the election and held rallies and marches throughout that week. The following Friday, anarchists organized a rowdy night march that blockaded I-395, a major regional thoroughfare. Two weeks later, hundreds participated in direct action trainings.

The NPI planned to hold a dinner November 20, 2016, followed by a two-day conference. However, the venue cancelled following a call-in campaign organized by Smash Racism DC. Protesters then followed the Nazis to a Maggiano's Italian Restaurant in the suburbs of DC, where fascists had booked a room under a fake name. Protesters stormed the building after the fascists entered, to cheers from ordinary restaurant customers. The next day, hundreds protested outside the conference itself. When a Nazi attacked one protester, anti-fascists knocked the fascist down and protected his target, sustaining no arrests.

At the time, Richard Spencer was courting the media as the face of the "alt-right." When conference attendees were seen making Nazi salutes at the Maggiano's dinner and the NPI conference, this received national media coverage, confirming the protesters' message that "alt-right" was a rebranding of fascist.

As Trump's inauguration loomed, the challenge of responding to increasing fascist activity compelled people to form the DC Anti-Fascist Coalition (DCAC, later changed to DC Anti-Fascist Collective) to provide an ongoing organizing space for anti-fascist action.

## **Confrontation at the Deploraball**

The DCAC organized a protest against the Deploraball, a fascist ball at the National Press Club on January 19, 2017 celebrating Trump's Inauguration. Over a thousand people were in the streets to decry the Deploraball as "alt-right" media personalities, "men's rights" activists, and other Trump supporters came out of the ball to sneer at protesters.

Fascists in attendance, such as *Vice Magazine* founder and right-wing personality Gavin McInnes, threw punches at protesters before fleeing behind police lines. This sort of coordination between police and fascists has become all too familiar in the months since.

Police used pepper spray and tear gas on protesters and threatened to kettle them, foreshadowing their tactics the following day. The action ended in a black bloc march that enabled protesters to exit the scene and disperse safely without arrests.

## **The Punch Seen 'round the World**

Thousands of people from all walks of life participated in the demonstrations against Trump's inauguration on January 20, including Black Lives Matter, Mijente, Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), climate justice activists, indigenous leaders from Standing Rock, anarchists, socialists, communists, LGBTQ people, feminists, and more. The day of resistance began with demonstrators blockading almost every checkpoint into the inaugural parade. Later that morning, flying squads intervened when Alex Jones, Richard Spencer, Bikers For Trump, and others attempted to pass through groups of protesters. Many of the stands at the inauguration remained empty.

The tension heightened as the Anti-Capitalist/Anti-Fascist march tore through the business district of downtown DC. Frantic police scrambled to respond, ending in the mass arrest of over 200 activists. While the official march was broken up within an hour, street confrontations in downtown DC lasted well past nightfall. In the ensuing chaos, one enterprising individual punched Richard Spencer as he tried to give an interview, producing one of the most popular memes of the century. A limousine torched nearby became a nationwide symbol of anti-fascism.

10,000 people marched in DC at the Festival of Resistance. Over 5000 people participated in the blockades, and several hundred took part in the Anti-Capitalist/Anti-Fascist march. Numerous other cities also held demonstrations against Trump under the banner #DisruptJ20. The Women's March the next day was the most widely attended protest in US history to date.

## After J20

Following J20, DCAC focused more on outreach, education, and providing security at other actions.

While dealing with the immediate aftermath of J20, anti-fascists bravely confronted Richard Spencer on two occasions. The first was the evening of April 8, 2017, following Antifa Unmasked, a day of workshops including black-led anti-fascism, anarchism 101, and a discussion on the black bloc. That day, Richard Spencer planned his own gathering in front of the White House, presumably thinking that anti-fascists would be busy. On the contrary, anti-fascists mobilized to confront Spencer and his flunkies there, chasing Spencer for blocks as he fled, frantically searching for a taxi to take him to safety.

The next week, at "Antifa Unmasked Part 2," participants discussed security culture and legal solidarity. Once again, Richard Spencer held a demonstration in front of the White House—smaller this time. Counter-demonstrators were not able to respond in time and instead decided to go to his home in Alexandria. Old SHAC chants were brought out of retirement: "*Richard Spencer, we will fight, we know where you sleep at night!*"

Police quickly responded to break up the small noise demonstration outside of his home. Anti-fascists stuck together and withdrew without arrests. Despite the warning from police, this was not the last time that anti-fascists went to Spencer's home to hold him personally accountable for right-wing violence.

## May Day 2017

As deportations ramped up, anarchists organized for May Day in solidarity with immigrant workers. Hundreds of immigrants went on strike. Restaurants all over DC shut down in protest of racist immigration policies. Demonstrators marched on restaurants that didn't shut down or were accused of wage theft. DC organized two contingents—one led by a coalition of immigrants, the other by a collaboration between the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the DC Anti-Fascist Collective.

On May Day 2017, the anti-fascist contingent also confronted and contained "Pizzagate" conspiracy theorist Jack Posobiec, effectively ejecting him from the march. In the following weeks, when a small group of MAGA-hatted Nazis interrupted Alexander Reid Ross's discussion of his book *Against the Fascist Creep* at a local bookstore, anti-fascists sounded the alarm once again

and more allies quickly arrived to chase the Nazis out of the venue. Anti-fascists in DC also played roles in anti-ICE, Black Lives Matter, No Justice No Pride, and Kurdish solidarity actions.

## **A Hard Summer**

In July 2017, DC anti-fascists joined in protesting a KKK march in Charlottesville, Virginia. Soon after, on August 11 and 12, a large DC contingent joined in the dynamic protest at the Unite the Right rally. As anti-fascists and anti-racists marched to celebrate the cancellation of the gathering, neo-Nazi James Fields Jr. drove his car through the crowd, killing Heather Heyer and injuring many others. A large medic team from DC was on the scene to respond after the attack and helped to organize mental health services afterwards.

The tragedy in Charlottesville had far-reaching effects. The next day, as thousands around the world mobilized in solidarity with Charlottesville, DC anarchists, anti-fascists, members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and the IWW marched on Richard Spencer's home.

When the NPI began organizing their next annual conference for November 2017, a long-term impact of the events in Charlottesville became clear. While Richard Spencer had been courting the media the previous year as the face of the growing "alt-right," by fall 2017 he had scaled back to work with only a trusted handful of fascists. After many years of hosting the conference, the Reagan Building finally denied him space, citing security concerns. Although a small group still loyal to Spencer met in a Maryland barn usually rented out for weddings, they were expelled as soon as the owners figured out that they were fascists.

Since then, Spencer has not been seen in his home office in Virginia. He seems to be nearly inactive here.

The violence at the Unite the Right rally also helped to undermine Trump. When he commented that there were "some very fine people on both sides," expressing sympathy for fascists, the statement inspired widespread disgust, even among some on the right. The subsequent departures of Stephen Bannon and Sebastian Gorka from the Trump administration were surely catalyzed by the events in Charlottesville.

## **Abolish ICE**

In 2018, when liberals began adopting the radical demand to abolish ICE, national nonprofits and community leaders organized several marches bringing out thousands of people. During this time, DSA and IWW members repeatedly confronted members of the Trump team at local restaurants. On two different occasions, people protested outside of the home of Stephen Miller, the man responsible for Trump's immigration policy.

## **Unite the Right 2**

Today, DC is bracing for "Unite the Right 2." Neo-Nazis are planning to come to our city to celebrate the anniversary of the tragedy in Charlottesville. Don't let DC stand alone against fascism.

We are calling on all opponents of fascism and people of good conscience to participate in international days of action and a mass mobilization in Washington, DC on August 10–12, 2018.



This is for Heather Heyer, for the abolition of ICE, for the dismantling of borders and the prison-industrial complex, for the end of the settler colonial system. We will confront fascism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, white supremacy, and state violence August 10–12.

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