

Washington, DC: Report from the Anti-Fascist Mobilization of July 6

With Reflections on the Past and Future of Anti-Fascist Tactics

CrimethInc.

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On July 6, fascists attempted to hold a “Demand Free Speech”¹ rally in Washington, DC. Anarchists and DC Black Lives Matter mobilized in response. Although the massive police presence hampered what anti-fascists could do, the fascist rally was not a success, confirming that anti-fascists have largely succeeded in thwarting the street-level fascist movement that many feared would emerge in the Trump era. The question, now, is how we can employ the tactics we have popularized in the anti-fascist movement—black blocs, de-platforming, and investigative research—in other movements and contexts.

Here, we offer a short report from DC on how previous mobilizations in DC have informed the strategies they employ today and an account of the day’s events.

A group of neo-fascists promised to bring out 1000 people to a rally in Washington, DC on July 6, including 100 or more battle-ready Proud Boys. The rally had big names associated with it and local, institutional, and regional support; the organizers included Enrique Tarrío, chairman of the Proud Boys. Because it was sandwiched between Donald Trump’s 4th of July rally and “Christians United For Israel,” a major gathering of the Christian right, DC anti-fascists feared that this event could draw a much larger turnout than recent far-right events had in the area. If a new right-wing coalition emerged that could put numbers back into the streets, that would mean another round of draining confrontations between fascists and anti-fascists.

In the end, the “Demand Free Speech Rally” was disorganized and undermined by infighting. Their event was a bust: it brought out dozens, not a thousand. The Proud Boys, which seemed like the last group standing among the fascist organizations of two years ago, couldn’t muster the 100 attendees they promised. Identity Evropa also made a last-minute push and failed to bring out the numbers they anticipated.

While repugnant characters like Adrienna DiCioccio and Jack Posebiac have huge Twitter followings, that doesn’t translate into an on-the-ground street movement. They are social media grifters who consider a trending hashtag more important than the kind of organizing that can mobilize people. They can use their platforms to create misinformation campaigns that cause police to crack down on anti-fascists, but they lack the relationships, skills, and political savvy to produce mass turnout for their own events.

Of course, that doesn’t mean they can’t learn those skills. We were not born with those skills either. We have to remain vigilant, mobilizing resistance whenever there is a chance that fascists will succeed in their publicity stunts, so they are never positively reinforced for their efforts to recruit.

Over the past two and a half years, organizers in DC have learned harsh lessons about the risks of collective action. DC anarchists were shocked when DC police chose to mass-arrest and then mass-prosecute over 200 people for the courageous actions of January 20, 2017. The preceding 10 years of comparatively restrained police tactics had made DC anarchists complacent. We had

¹ Rather than the kind of state-enforced “freedom of speech” in which armored riot police bludgeon the general population while fascists call for even more violence, anarchists seek real freedom, in which communities can self-organize to defend against the violence of police and fascists alike.

conceded ground to liberals when we should have been developing strategies that could prepare us for the moment when that scenario changed.

The now infamous Anti-Capitalist and Anti-fascist Bloc that responded to the inauguration of Donald Trump was isolated from the majority of people on the street in DC that day, leaving it vulnerable to repression. In setting out to deepen our relations with other social movements, local anarchists aim to ensure that we cannot be isolated from our communities.

One role the black bloc can play is to defend those who are vulnerable to police attacks. On July 6, the bloc mobilized when we heard a large number of fascists were close to the park; our goal was to preserve space for people from targeted communities.

Just a year ago, anarchists were asked to stay out of the sites of permitted demonstrations for fear of mass arrests and police violence. Our recent efforts to connect with others have enabled us to make space for anarchist actions in a way that was not possible between 2016 and 2018. Building and deepening relationships takes time, patience, and understanding. We hope that these efforts will equip us to be better prepared for demonstrations in DC in the future, the next time anarchists and anti-fascists mobilize.

When we act, ideally we should be swimming in a sea of people, not alone against the stream of police repression. Different tactics make us stronger and sharing space makes those tactical experiments safer. It's harder to make a bugaboo out of the black bloc when other people in the streets know who we are and what we are there to do.

Don't Mute DC

Earlier this year, white gentrifiers demanded that Shaw's Metro PCS store shut off the music it has been playing for over 20 years. In the 1990s, Metro PCS was rocking Go-Go outside and selling beepers, back when the U Street corridor was known as "Black Broadway." Formerly known as Chocolate City, DC has been seeing Go-Go events pushed out of the city into Maryland.

Go-Go is a historically Black music that developed in Washington, DC—a homegrown variant of funk, old-school hip-hop, and R&B music, founded by DC legend Chuck Brown. The disappearance of Go-Go from nearly every neighborhood illustrates the displacement of Black people from DC.

A massive community-led response to the pressure on Metro PCS brought thousands out to U Street in the face of policing and gentrification. Later in spring 2019, Metro PCS returned Go-Go music to Chuck Brown Way. While police have been shutting down these shows, communities have been using Go-Go dance parties as a form of resistance to gentrification in DC.

When anarchists, Black Lives Matter activists, and local anti-fascists became aware of the right-wing mobilization, we believed it would be important to hold space for Black, Brown, and Indigenous joy in the face of white supremacy. We set out to help bring together social movements in a way that would secure the safety of DC residents and give the protest a specifically DC atmosphere.

Before the Demonstration

While DC organizers believed that this could be a large mobilization, the material force the Proud Boys promised didn't show. It was a far cry from the "thousand give or take a few hundred" they predicted to the park service.

Leading up to the mobilization, we intentionally did not discuss their politics. We just branded their event for them, clarifying for everyone that it was part of the same fascist current as previous such demonstrations in DC. A week before the demonstration, public pressure compelled the Spy Museum to publicly denounce the alt-right and cancel their VIP event.

In a last-minute attempt to mobilize supporters and escalate the likelihood of right-wing violence, far-right media began circulating rumors about "antifa acid attacks." Numerous Proud Boys used this opportunity to announce that they planned to carry loaded guns. On the other hand, these rumors also provided cover for several of the speakers to cancel in the face of public pressure from DC antifascists. Jack Posebiac, Mike Cernovich, and Omar Navarrow all backed out before the rally.

Roger Stone was a no-show. Laura Loomer blamed antifa for the rally ending early. All in all, their rally was logistical failure, with numerous events ending early and lacking attendance.

Tactically Unimpressive, But Politically Successful?

10:30 am, at the beginning of the rally—Black Lives Matter organizers explicitly expressed support for the black bloc. "See the people with masks over their faces, and in all black? Those are our people. They are here to keep us safe because police don't. We keep each other safe." As the demonstration got underway, crowds gathered against the backdrop of DC's homegrown funk while anti-fascist speakers from different communities alternated with bands brought in by anti-fascists of color and Black Lives Matter DC.

Around 11:30 am, as the rally was getting started, groups of right-wing journalists repeatedly attempted to film the demonstration without the consent of organizers or the community at large. Organizers aimed to create an atmosphere characterized by consent and solidarity in which the attendees would actively prevent fascists from attacking community members. At one point, a group of drag queens chased out a group of fascists.

This began a skirmish between fascists and anti-fascists. As this unfolded, some of them continued heckling and attempting to film. Numerous Proud Boys and their supporters repeatedly came over and were chased away by community members, not just participants in the bloc.

For those not in the streets in DC on July 6, the black bloc was hardly the wrecking ball we were on J20. There are no smashed windows to write about, no video clips of Richard Spencer being punched in the face. The most exciting moments of the day were funny rather than inspiring—for example, playing tug of war with police over a newspaper box.

Around 1:30 pm, the bloc took the streets to confront Identity Evropa, who were a block away from their permitted rally.

Other participants in the movement are no longer seeking to police our actions, but the police are still eager to suppress even the most mundane acts of rebellion.

At 5:30 pm, anarchists, Black Lives Matter, and other rally attendees met up again in front of Trump hotel. Despite hundreds of police, several dozen people were able to hold their ground

in front of the VIP Bus, delaying its departure by over an hour and a half. The bus, which was supposed to leave by 6:30, left around 8 pm for an undisclosed location in Northern Virginia.

In short, while the day can hardly be said to be a tactical victory, we were able to diminish and contain the threat that the rally posed to our communities. It's for the best that we didn't have to physically fight a large group of fascists, in any case.

Towards the Future

Days after the #DemandFreeSpeech rally, the "Mother of All Rallies" organizers cancelled their annual pro-Trump demonstration. They cited censorship on social media, but it's significant that this occurred days after the flop of the "free speech" demonstration.

When we think about the future—about how to make sure we gain strength and our opposition lays dormant—we need to reflect on the limitations we have experienced in this era and how to make sure we don't repeat the mistakes of the past.

In many different mobilizations, we have repeatedly confronted the same issues. When there is a small minority of people who feel comfortable standing up to the police, how do we relate to others who are not prepared to? How do we address the questions of timing and the safety of participants both inside and outside the bloc? When should we push the envelope, and when should we play a supporting role?

If we want to increase our ability to act and build relationships with other revolutionary movements, these are important questions. But we can think bigger about what we do next. How do we push for militant resistance in the face of border militarization, concentration camps, police killing, and state violence? How do we take the focus from individual fascists towards state-sanctioned racial violence.

As we look forward to replicating the success of mass anti-fascism, we can look to use the skills we've built in other arenas. The Republican Party's vision, while not quite as overt as Richard Spencer's program, still includes systemic ethnic cleansing and concentration camps for children. How can we map the relationships that create these policies? How can we build campaigns that make it unpopular to support racialized policing and mass incarceration? How do we use research, counter-intelligence, social mapping, and street militancy against ICE and prisons? How do we use these skills in mutual aid projects as well?

On one hand, we have to build the ability to sustain and intensify our offensive organizing. On the other hand, we have to support each another through crisis capitalism.

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