

Who Needs Fascists When We Have Police?

Reflections on the Anti-Fascist Mobilization in Portland of August 4

CrimethInc.

August 6, 2018

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On August 4, thousands of people came together in Portland, Oregon to protest a rally organized by the fascist groups “Patriot Prayer” and the “Proud Boys.” At a similar march in Portland on June 30, police opened their ranks in order to allow fascists to attack protesters, then protected the assailants and attacked the same protesters that the fascists had just attacked. August 4 followed a similar script. Once again, police worked closely with the fascists, but this time the police were the ones who escalated the conflict, deploying near lethal force against those who had come to demonstrate against fascism. Examining the events of August 4, we can see that the fascists themselves are not the greatest threat we face. Police are already acting as the stormtroopers of fascism in the United States.

Below is our analysis of the events of August 4, followed by an eyewitness account.

Throughout 2017 as anarchists and other opponents of fascism scrambled to respond to a newly ascendant fascist movement, police, too, were refining their strategies. In Charlottesville when fascists attacked outnumbered counter-demonstrators, the police stood back and let the clashes take place, only interceding afterwards. However, the violence that resulted from this strategy catalyzed a nationwide backlash. Two weeks later, when Joey Gibson and his “Patriot Prayer” group attempted to hold rallies in San Francisco and Berkeley, 10,000 anti-fascists chased out the police and their fascist friends.

The *forces of order* set out to craft a new approach. In April 2018, participants in a small anti-fascist rally in Newnan, Georgia reported that the police had changed strategies, indiscriminately targeting them with overwhelming force and lethal weaponry from the very beginning of the demonstration. “The next round will not pit us against rag-tag Nazis, but against the full force of the state itself,” they warned others around the country. “Street-level fascists are dangerous, but the escalation of state control and police violence fulfills their program on a much larger scale.”

It has since come to light that several of the participants in the police mobilization in Newnan are themselves open adherents of fascism.

Collusion between police and fascists is nothing new. The Ku Klux Klan openly coordinated with police in many parts of the United States throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, when the relationship between police and openly fascist groups is not recognized, this enables the authorities to present themselves as a supposedly neutral solution to the problem of “extremism,” justifying an intensification of surveillance and control that are then used to implement increasingly totalitarian measures.

Conventional wisdom has it that the role of fascists is to do the dirty work of the state, carrying out attacks that the police cannot, like last month’s Nazi assault on the Occupy ICE encampment in San Antonio. Yet on August 4 in Portland, it was the *police* who did the dirty work for the fascists. They were the ones who perpetrated the violence that the fascists had been promising to enact. They allowed participants in the fascist rally to gather outside the area for which they had obtained a permit, rather than within it, so as to avoid being searched. They allowed the fascists to retain the majority of their weapons, then accompanied them around downtown like a bodyguard, facing outward away from the fascists to protect them from the entire city of Portland. Finally, the police attacked the crowd, initiating hostilities by shooting concussion grenades at people’s heads.

The following day, a similar scenario played out in Berkeley at another demonstration called by the same network of fascists. Few fascists showed up, yet intense conflicts unfolded between anti-fascists and police.

How do we respond to escalating totalitarianism when every attempt to stand up to those recruiting for racist murders brings us immediately into conflict with the full force of the police state?

First, we have to connect the struggle against fascism with the struggles against police that have taken place over the past several years. We have to join forces with everyone on the receiving end of police violence—communities of color, poor people, undocumented people, and everyone else who already recognizes the struggle against police violence as a matter of life and death.

Second, we have to use the increasingly overt collaboration between fascists and police to delegitimize the police in the eyes of those who still regard them as the preservers of safety and justice. As we have explored elsewhere, fascist overreach can cause more people to recognize the oppressive function of the “enforcers of order.”

Finally, we have to be clear about the connections between grassroots fascists and the systematic violence of the state. If the fascist agenda comes to fruition, it will be carried out through the institutions of the state. Those who wish to oppose slavery and genocide should make sure that the state has neither the legitimacy to get away with them nor the resources to carry them out. This is one of the many ways in which an anarchist opposition to state power itself is essential to the struggle against fascism. We need to help other people make these connections, and quick.

Note: Throughout this text, we refer to “Patriot Prayer” and the “Proud Boys” as fascists on account of their numerous well-documented affiliations with explicitly fascist groups and their explicit advocacy of patriarchal authoritarianism and bigotry. Some of them disingenuously seek to cloud the issue, but it is enough for us that they advocate for the mass murders Pinochet carried out and regularly give Nazi salutes at these demonstrations.

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People trickled into Chapman square. The Pop Mob demonstration packed the sidewalk and the courthouse steps, joined by the more liberal contingent of counterprotestors. People carried signs, speakers with bullhorns addressed the crowd, and clowns danced on an adjacent sidewalk while people in black bloc milled about. After some scouting, the best route down to the waterfront was determined and the bloc crowded in behind a banner reading “GTFÖ ya Jabrönis” to lead the march. Pop Mob fell in behind us. We arrived at the intersection of Salmon and Naito Parkway just after 11:30.

After about an hour of standing in direct sunlight, packed in behind the banner, dripping sweat and occasionally forming a tight circle so someone could change or pee, we got word that Joey Gibson and his goons were marching north on the waterfront. The police had been threatening us since we got there, telling us to get out of the street or we would be subject to arrest and less-lethal impact weapons.

We turned north and began marching up the opposite sidewalk across the street from the fascists. Armored vehicles with pigs in full riot gear drove up and down Naito Parkway between the two groups. Pigs on foot were also forced to walk up and down the street in the hot sun in

full riot gear; their visible discomfort made the heat that we were suffering more bearable. At some point, my smaller affinity group got separated from the rest of our bloc. We stayed moving with the larger group, approximately one third of which was also clad in some kind of bloc gear, as it moved up and down the sidewalk, still unable to enter the street. Bystanders handed us cold water bottles and Food Not Bombs gave out falafel wraps. A vast and diverse group of people had turned out.

In addition to the bloc, labor was there in force along with the Democratic Socialists of America and the various other groups that composed Pop Mob, including some folks dressed up as giant sunflowers. At one point, someone rolled up a shopping cart with a guillotine in it, to the tune of The Coup's "The Guillotine."

The march slowed to a stop. Our crew was reveling in having found some shade to stop and drink water in; we were dancing to the music playing from a source none of us could see. The reprieve was brief. Suddenly to the south there was a flurry of movement and a call for assistance. We moved in and saw that Joey Gibson and two members of his goon squad had been allowed to cross the street into the counterprotest. We locked arms and everyone present, bloc and not, formed a tight circle around them and pushed them back into the street. I didn't see what transpired before that moment but as they crossed back over to their side, they exchanged high fives. Just then, I heard someone yell, "I got Joey's hat! Anyone wanna take a selfie in it?"

There was another brief scuffle with a guy trying to take pictures in the wrong place at the wrong time, and then the tension seemed to dissipate a bit. After what felt like ages but probably wasn't more than 20 minutes, the fascists started walking south again from Salmon Street. The counterprotest followed from across the street, then turned right down Main Street and descended deeper into southwest. There was a scattering then a regrouping of people as folks scrambled to reassemble behind banners—I think this was at Columbia and Naito Parkway. Riot cops now faced off with the counterprotestors, with the fascists cowering across the street behind them, cheering on the taxpayer-funded stormtroopers. A U-Haul truck was driving around full of counterprotesters with a PA system in the back and a banner reading "racists can't dance," playing music for people to dance to.

We were far enough back that we didn't have our eyes on the pigs when they opened fire so the first few concussive rounds were a terrifying, confusing surprise. Everyone was suddenly moving backwards. I tried to keep my eyes or hands on my friends and walk slowly backwards, as did most of the people around me, in spite of the number of people who, understandably, turned and ran. The pigs continued to fire concussive rounds, pepper balls, marker rounds, and possibly rubber bullets. I also saw several people covered in mace getting their eyes flushed by medics or other comrades. I saw a few people bleeding from what I assumed were rubber bullet wounds or from gravel sprayed by concussive rounds hitting the asphalt and exploding.

The pigs continued deploying less-lethal rounds, pushing the counterprotest first west, then north. After a long game of cat and mouse, the counterprotest was so scattered that our crew decided it was time to go. Our numbers were diminishing, we were vulnerable to being kettled, and I was nervous that we would get trapped between fascists and pigs if we continued going in the direction that the police were trying to force us.

Later, I learned that there were still fascists hanging around at the waterfront despite their shuttles having left. From accounts I heard, there were about 30 people on either side of Naito Parkway, riot cops between them, yelling at each other for an hour or so before getting bored and leaving.

The next day, I'm not the only one demoralized. A few fascists jumped the barricades and left bloody, but in the end the pigs protected them and did so effectively. We never had an opportunity to get close to them; they had their march.

On the other hand, the turnout was tremendous. The amalgam of different groups and individual actors created a mass of people that outnumbered the fascists at least 3 to 1. I have no doubt that Saturday's events will inform tactical decisions in the future. As we collectively gain experience fighting fascism in our contemporary context, we will continue to adjust accordingly. Also, the disproportionate police response infuriated a lot of people.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't talk about riot cops' use of concussive rounds. Afterwards, there were several accounts of police aiming at people's heads with flash-bang grenades. One individual was struck in the back of the head at close range. The round penetrated their helmet and inflicted a gaping head wound. If they had not been wearing a helmet, the attack would have been fatal.

The implications of this are serious. We know cops are violent, murderous thugs, and the environment of a demonstration gives them an excuse to indulge in hurting people under the pretense of "crowd control" with even less accountability than normal. Perhaps motorcycle helmets should be considered essential from now on.

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Retrieved on 17th June 2021 from crimethinc.com

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