



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

From a high school activist: Getting radical during George Floyd protests

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SLL photo

My name is Ripley, and I'm a tenth grade student from Brooklyn. For the past few months, I've been reflecting a lot on my political and activist identity, something I neglected for years. As a younger kid, I went to dozens of protests with my dad. I wasn't unaware in doing so — I knew that I was supporting people similar and different to me, those of varied race, religion, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity and so on. I understood that police were bad, and were constantly hurting Black people. I held up signs and banners, posed for many photos and did my best to chant along with the crowd. Although I didn't completely know what certain terms I saw meant, like "communism," "socialism" and "anti-imperialism," the importance of

my participation in things like worker's rights protests was not lost on me.

I began to stop attending these events when I was a pre-teen. At first, it just felt good to exercise some choice in the matter. I was old enough to watch myself for a few hours while my dad was at a demonstration, and it was a Saturday. Why go? This repeated again and again, and eventually I was more passionate about my right to refuse to participate in protests than any sort of activist work. It wasn't that I didn't care about social issues, rather I felt disconnected from them. I think, weirdly enough, it felt like "rebellion" to not fight injustice and oppression, having been raised by a parent who always encouraged me to do so. Thankfully, my thinking has changed a lot since middle school.

In the past year or so, I've started reading revolutionary works on my own and questioning the systems that public education teaches us to accept. I went to the highly publicized climate march in September 2019, along with many other high school students. It wasn't a great experience for me. The entire ordeal felt performative, and staged. I kept wondering, as wealthy white students were photographed and interviewed around me, where were these activists during events protesting U.S. invasions of other nations? Or inhumane treatment of refugees? The image of an attractive white teen holding a sign that says "Save our earth" is palatable to most media, I suppose.

I have since developed a strong passion for the movement to liberate oppressed people, especially Black people. Like most teens, my identity has been a source of confusion, contention and pride, all at the same time. In understanding myself as a biracial Black lesbian, I have to fight for my voice to be heard, while considering the privileges I have. I need to defend myself in homophobic spaces and contexts, and in white or anti-Black ones. Yet, in fighting oppression it's imperative that I step down and listen to Black people who are impacted by colorism. I am mixed, with lighter skin, and that makes my abuse in this oppressive system much less violent than

dark-skinned Black people who are not of mixed descent. I also need to listen to Black trans people and be aware of my privilege as a cis person. Admitting this isn't enough: what do these actions entail for me? How do I constantly ensure I am centering the people in my community who are the least privileged? These questions have fueled my devotion to fight the racism that permeates the entire institution of the United States.

Of course, COVID-19 had smothered any opportunity to attend physical protests. I spent a good chunk of time in "quarantine" thinking about all the demonstrations I'd attend once it was all over. Or so I thought. Then, the video of George Floyd's murder exploded onto the internet.

An innocent Black man was killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis. The ordeal, lacking the slightest bit of humanity, was inescapable to even the least "political" figures online. It was there, in recorded, shareable proof.

I'm very angry that the death of a Black person at the hands of a racist cop is only this moving, or worth speaking about, when a graphic video is available. The internet was aware of Breonna Taylor's murder in Louisville, Ky., two months prior, yet seemed to move on quickly. I'm also frustrated that everyone's initial reaction was to retweet, post, direct message and generally spread this video. It is quite frankly traumatic for Black people to watch Black people die, over and over, for being Black. I don't think that should require further explanation. I wholeheartedly believe that Black people in the U.S. are collectively being traumatized and re-traumatized by the racism we are forced to endure in all walks of life: at schools, in the workplace, in public spaces, online, and by our government and law enforcement officials. The video evidence of George Floyd's killing is just a particularly striking example.

On the other hand, I am glad that the murder was filmed: without the video, people in privileged positions would not have cared enough to contribute to the movement

that is taking place. It is shameful that so many non-Black people needed to watch a cop kneel on George Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes in order to do so, but action is needed. Large scale protests began to occur, and while the rebellions in Minnesota polarized the topic (and became a frequent subject of demonization by the media), there seems to be overwhelming support for the movement. I've witnessed apolitical students start to express hatred towards police, and calls for defunding and abolition over reform are growing louder and louder.

I felt strongly that I should participate in my city's protests. On Saturday, May 30, I went to two: first, a rally in Harlem. The initial gathering, which happened on 125th Street, was kind of off-putting to me. Speakers made repeated references to "Black on Black crime" and the importance of keeping all protests peaceful. At one point, a speaker said, "It is one thing to march, but it is another thing to vote." The constant emphasis on voting as a primary means of progress made me uncomfortable — it seemed to diminish the work of protesters within an event full of them.

It called to mind tone-deaf celebrity posts that have been circulating lately. Taylor Swift recently tweeted, "After stoking the fires of white supremacy and racism your entire presidency, you have the nerve to feign moral superiority before threatening violence? 'When the looting starts the shooting starts'??? We will vote you out in November @realdonaldtrump." Her statement was applauded among many for its apparent support of protesters. A number of news outlets even reported about this tweet — now her most liked. I found it a bit infuriating: why do white liberals focus on Trump as if he is the root cause of U.S. racism? Why are they celebrated for denouncing only this easy target?

Making a vow to not re-elect the current president means nothing. The only reason Donald Trump angers Democrats is because he relies on shock value. He is virulently, loudly anti-Black, and it makes liberals feel that same "moral superiority" for keeping their prejudice mostly hidden. It is worth mentioning that President

Barack Obama, who Taylor Swift supported in 2008, deployed the National Guard into Ferguson, Mo., to brutalize protesters after the murder of Michael Brown by a cop. He also supported the grand jury's decision to not charge Brown's killer. Still, public figures hearken back to his time in office, claiming that things would be better if only Trump was not in the White House.

As I stood in the crowd with my sign, I and other younger attendees awkwardly shuffled when questionable statements echoed across the sidewalk. The rally started to wrap up after about an hour and a half after my arrival, and because I was unsure as to where nearby groups were marching, I left. I decided to go straight to the protest on Parkside and Ocean avenues in Flatbush, Brooklyn.

I walked out of the train station and into a huge crowd of protestors. The group spilled across multiple streets and into Prospect Park. There were a good number of people attending from their fire escapes across the street, too. I should also mention that every person I saw was wearing a mask to cover their mouth and nose, except for police. Ahead of me, comrades took turns standing on a makeshift podium and addressed the thousands of protestors. The speakers were all wonderful and came from a variety of backgrounds, but one impacted me especially. I wish I remembered her name — a young woman who introduced herself as a Brooklyn high schooler. She went on to explain the countless ways she and other students of color had been racially profiled. Her voice faltered with emotion as she denounced killer cops, and demanded justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and others. The frustration and anger she spoke with resonated with me deeply.

Sometimes, there is such a disconnect I feel when listening to the words of older white male activists. It often feels like those people, often the most outspoken and respected of radical leftists, are concerned most with concepts and combating oppression solely because it threatens their political theories. I think organized action is crucial, and I admit that I have a lot of reading to do, as I have limited

knowledge in this realm. Even so, there will never be anything more powerful to me than the words of young Black and Brown women. The thoughts of oppressed people are strong, they are honest, they are based upon experience and pain. And yet, so often these voices aren't valued to the same extent as white scholars of socioeconomics.

The young woman declared in no uncertain terms that the only way to achieve universal justice is to liberate the oppressed and unite for the struggles of the working class. I was biting my lip a little bit when she announced that a communist society was necessary, because many white protesters in attendance appeared to be of a certain liberal-hipster-gentrifying type. I was afraid that this person, who I identified with and admired so strongly, would be met with angry shouts. Instead, there was immense support amongst the protesters. I felt, in that moment, so much hope for the broader movement towards liberation. Others had great speeches too: one highlighted the need to center and protect Black women and LGBTQ+ identifying Black people. A group of three young Black women led the crowd in chanting a quote from Assata Shakur. "It is our duty to fight for our freedom! It is our duty to win! We must love each other and support each other! We have nothing to lose but our chains!" and so on. We repeated this again and again, louder and stronger each time.

While standing on that street corner, I could see a group of police officers standing on top of a building opposite me. This was no shock. However, someone near me motioned to the crowd to look up — the cops were flying a drone just above our heads. It shouldn't have been so startling considering the amount of surveillance the NYPD conducts on a day-to-day basis in New York, when protests aren't even occurring. I still felt deeply unsettled knowing I was being watched so closely.

As we started to march down Parkside Avenue, thousands chanted "No justice, no peace! Fuck these racist-ass police!" Many protesters offered food and water, as

well as personal protective equipment (PPE) to those who needed it. As we moved along, local residents of Flatbush showed support from their cars and the sidewalks. A bus driver in a stalled B41 bus, who was a Black woman, honked the horn in time with our chants and raised her fist. The group erupted in cheers and applause at this and other acts of solidarity.

The protesting experience was one unlike any I can remember. Tips I had read online in activist resources really came into play — staying tight at corners, moving quickly and confidently, and avoiding police interaction at all costs. The cops were running alongside us in groups of five or six, rushing to barricade every cross street they could. A lot of younger protesters seemed to get very nervous watching them act so ferociously, but the organizers did a good job keeping everyone moving. At intersections, white demonstrators formed human chains to create a barrier between officers in riot gear and the main body of protesters, who were mostly Black and Brown youth.

I marched a little over an hour. In that time we dominated many major streets in addition to Parkside Avenue: Flatbush, Church and Bedford avenues are just a few. I didn't witness any major conflict between police and protesters until I was leaving. By that time, they had managed to separate the march into three or four different groups, and it seemed as though each was starting to be cornered.

I was a bit anxious heading home alone. I kept finding myself on blocks lined with police cars and helicopters seemed to be approaching from all directions. I passed by a bloodied protester being treated by street medics, and later stumbled upon a blockaded group on a residential block. I had to stop and watch for a moment — dozens and dozens of police cars sped onto this street and stopped in a frighteningly militant formation. Officers wielding batons and shields were sprinting out of their vehicles and towards the demonstrators, who were standing and chanting the names of police brutality victims. A helicopter lowered itself until it was practically

touching the people protesting, causing dangerous whirlwinds and flying dirt. The group held strong, though. I would have joined in resistance if my parents weren't urging me to go home.

This was all before 6:30 p.m. I found out later that evening that violent arrests started very soon after my departure. This march was also the one in which two NYPD SUVs ran straight into a crowd of protesters. Video footage of that awful moment has been seen across the world at this point. Clearly, the NYPD and all of the other police departments in the United States do not exist to "protect and serve" the people. They are actively harming and killing oppressed communities.

I'm so glad that I attended these recent protests. I will no doubt go to many more in the future. Anything I can contribute to the dismantling of the police state, and of every single racist institution that makes up this country, is worth doing.

