

Protest and serve

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Organizers working to end police violence refuse

to be intimidated by growing efforts to criminalize free speech.

Since Sept. 5, 2023, 61 people in Atlanta have been charged with racketeering for protesting in connection with the Stop Cop City movement. Attorney General Chris Carr of Georgia is using the state's Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) to develop a model for prosecutor offices around the country to repress organizing against police violence. Georgia has expanded its domestic terrorism law to increase the number of offenses that people can be held for while at the same time eliminating public bail funds that bail poor people and activists out of jail. The aim is to criminalize movements and chill dissent, particularly uprisings centered around stopping police violence.

The RICO indictment itself states that the “criminal activity” didn’t begin when we started organizing against Cop City in the spring of 2021, but instead a full year before, on May 25, 2020, when a Minneapolis police officer murdered George Floyd. For the State, a “criminal enterprise” was born when people poured into the streets demanding justice, abolition, defunding, and alternatives to police interactions with the public. While masses of people were inspired—during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—to protest the ongoing police murders of Black people, the state of Georgia instead determined this collective exercise of free speech a criminal act.

The State’s level of attack on the Stop Cop City movement establishes a deliberate and frightening trend. In Atlanta, we have witnessed, in addition to the racketeering charges, the killing of [Manuel Terán, aka Tortuguita](#), with no one held accountable; [42 people charged with domestic terrorism](#); and the arrest of the leaders of [the Atlanta Solidarity Fund](#). These actions are designed not only to criminalize the movement but to redirect its efforts toward defending arrested comrades while destroying the infrastructure that supports movement work.

Across the country, increasingly draconian laws have been passed to create extensive civil and criminal penalties for protest. Oklahoma and Iowa have enacted laws [giving drivers immunity](#) for hitting protesters. Indiana and Minnesota now bar people convicted of [unlawful assembly from having a state job](#) or receiving unemployment insurance, housing support, or student loans. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a new law in April 2021 that he bragged was “the strongest anti-looting, anti-rioting, pro-law-enforcement piece of legislation in the country.” In other words: anti-protest, anti-First Amendment, and pro-criminalization.

[Water protectors in Minnesota](#), who have organized against the construction of a new pipeline, have also had their organizing criminalized. Between December 2020 and September 2021, more than [1,000 demonstrators were charged](#) with protest-related crimes. Many of those charges were later dismissed, but the State isn’t always after a conviction—draining movement energy and resources through lawsuits suffices.

Land defenders in the Black Hills have been [charged with felonies](#) for standing against the continued occupation and disfigurement of their land. Protesters against the Israeli genocide have now become [a particular target of law enforcement](#), as well as a wider media and government narrative that projects them as antisemitic as opposed to anti-genocide. In Atlanta’s Cop City fight, open records requests exposed a [public-private task force](#)—one that included all levels of municipal, county, and state police; Homeland Security; and the Atlanta Police Foundation—strategizing on how to bring domestic terrorism charges against Cop City organizers.

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The protest landscape today is reminiscent of that in the 1960s and '70s when

police, prosecutors, and courts acted in alignment to crack down on radical activists and civil rights protesters. These same forces are uniting today against direct action led by leftist organizers, similar to when federal and state authorities teamed up to conduct surveillance and targeted operations on protest movements in years past. This targeting by State actors led not only to the attempted criminalization of organizers but also to the killing of activists like Chicago Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton in 1969. If you are challenging the State on how resources are spent or how communities are policed, the State is going to respond with all the tools it has to defeat you.

We must not give up the fight. We must create structures and support systems to expose and overcome the abuse of power. A mass defense structure is crucial—this includes legal observers, bail funds, and movement lawyers to support organizers who are targeted by the State.

Additionally, we need media teams that support the movement narrative on important battles. Creating spaces for organizations and individual activists to meet, plan strategies and objectives, and build collective support is likewise key. In Atlanta, some of these tools are being attacked because they're so effective in supporting organizers to get back into the streets and continue the fight. Power needs to be in the hands of the people—and for that to happen, the people must be organized to combat state repression.

Source: [Yes!](#)

