

After multiple shootings and two deaths

Seattle police forcibly end Capitol Hill Occupied Protest

By Kayla Costa
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Early on Wednesday morning, heavily militarized police officers swept the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP), a tent encampment in downtown Seattle that began as the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) over three weeks ago on June 8, in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd. The principal demand of the demonstrators had been the defunding of the police.

At least one hundred officers from the Seattle Police Department and nearby Bellevue Police Department, as well as FBI agents, arrived at the protest with heavy riot gear and even tactical military-style vehicles to clear out dozens of protesters from their tents.

The operation was launched by Mayor Jenny Durkan's executive order, which was published late Tuesday night and went into effect at 2:00 a.m. Wednesday. Officers arrived at 5:00 a.m., giving sleeping protesters eight minutes to get out with all of their belongings or else be arrested. The most recent count is that thirty-two protesters were arrested during the sweep.

Up until recently, local Democratic Party officials have sought to portray themselves as tolerant if not supportive of the CHOP demonstration. They postured as reformers listening to the demands of the movement, which centered on "defunding" the police by cutting the budget at least 50 percent and diverting that funding to social programs and housing.

On June 14, Seattle Police Chief Carmen Best claimed that she had an "epiphany" while attending a large protest organized by Black Lives Matter. "I was looking at the 60,000 people that were there... This is a pivotal moment in history. We are going to move in a different direction and policing will never be the same as it was before."

Speaking with the press on June 11, Mayor Durkan described the protest as "four blocks in Seattle that is more like a block party atmosphere," then later, "CHAZ is not a lawless wasteland of anarchist insurrection—it is a peaceful expression of our community's collective grief and their desire to build a better world."

Durkan's appraisal was fairly accurate in the early weeks of the protest, as CHAZ/CHOP was more of a pop-up social community space for making art, dancing, playing games, watching documentaries, listening to speakers, and pitching in with the operations to collect trash, donate food and medical supplies, and manage the events.

However, the two-party political establishment had been searching for a means to dismantle the protest, with the Democrats preferring to direct opposition to police violence into the harmless channels of local "reform" politics, and the Republican right-wing, represented by President Trump, threatening to deploy the military and police to brutally end it.

Several recent shootings, which killed two individuals and injured four, were utilized as the pretext to initiate the final end to CHOP using a combination of both heavy force and empty promises of committing to "change" and "justice."

The latest shooting occurred on Sunday night near one of the concrete barricades that lines the small area of the protest. Several unidentified individuals shot bullets into a white SUV around 3:00 a.m. Monday. The gunshots critically wounded the 16-year-old and 14-year-old boys who were living in the vehicle at the time, and the 16-year-old died at the hospital just hours after being transported.

On June 20, 19-year-old Lorenzo Anderson died from gunshot wounds in similarly murky circumstances.

While the precise circumstances regarding each of the shootings are still unclear, most of the shootings appear to have been sparked by random arguments arising from the concentration of the homeless and poor working-class youth who have congregated in the CHOP area, within a highly tense and trapped situation.

With CHOP offering little serious political direction in the fight against police violence, in the midst of a campaign to crack down on the demonstration led by the fascist Trump administration, tensions have had no healthy way to find release. Instead, the demonstration has dwindled from thousands of day-time attendees to a few dozen committed protest leaders and poor or homeless campers.

"The bloodshed you're talking about has nothing to do with the movement," Antwan Bolar, a protester sleeping at CHOP, told the *Seattle Times*. "That's people who would have been doing it in North Seattle or South Seattle anyways—it's just concentrated here."

CHOP has also attracted far-right violence. On the morning of June 20, four white nationalists approached Dejuan Young as he was exiting the protest parameters and shot him after one said, "Hold this N-word." Young was critically wounded and taken to the hospital by protesters.

Several hours after the latest shooting on June 29, Fox News reporter Dan Springer allegedly pushed an African American woman after being surrounded by angry protesters. Fox News, which has covered CHOP in an extremely negative and dishonest light to back the claims of Trump that it is led by “domestic terrorists,” has denied the claims.

Trump himself has been an instigator of far-right hostility to the CHOP demonstration. “Seattle Looters, Agitators, Anarchists and ‘Protestors’,” Trump tweeted on Monday, “are now refusing to leave the ‘CHOP’ Zone. They have ZERO respect for Government, or the Mayor of Seattle or Governor of Washington State! Not good!”

The shootings did not signify widespread chaos from a takeover of the city, as Trump suggests, but rather the inevitable demise of CHOP’s disorienting project, which fostered illusions in protest stunts rather than a serious revolutionary perspective. Further, while the recent shootings are a tragedy, they pale in comparison to the death toll of police killing as well as the daily gun violence, addiction, and now COVID-19 that disproportionately impact the poorest layers of American society due to extreme social inequality. Yet the shootings and violence provided government officials with the pretext they needed to shut the CHOP tent camp down. “Too much crime, too much violence,” Chief Best told a reporter from Convergent Media on Instagram Live. “We had to do something. It was time to act. It has gone on far too long.”

Seattle police are expected to flood the Capitol Hill area for up to 10 days to prevent protesters from returning. Best continued, “We have two young African American men—not even the age of 20, both teenagers—dead, and many others are injured. Rape, robbery, assault. It was time for us to get in and do what we needed to do to clear out the area and start restoring public safety in the area.”

In a press conference on Wednesday afternoon, Mayor Durkan echoed those claims. “Despite our continued efforts to de-escalate,” she argued, “the deteriorated conditions and repeated gun violence required us to immediately address public safety concerns.”

While Durkan stated that she fully supports “SPD’s operations this morning” and praised the fact that SPD “had to design and practice the operation” for days, she focused her remarks on posing as a fighter for reform on the side of the protests against police violence, deploying the common Democratic Party tool of identity politics.

“I will continue to refocus our energy on the hard but critical work to answer the voices demonstrating and demanding change, to reimagine with Chief Best what policing looks like in our city, and to invest in the true health and safety of our communities,” Durkan announced. “No city, including Seattle, will dismantle centuries of systemic racism overnight. But we must act now. We must answer to history.”

In addition to promises of police reform, greater funding in social services, and ways to maintain “community spaces” in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, Durkan expressed the need to invest in “black prosperity, health, and brilliance.”

The posturing of the Democratic Party is a fraud. This party represents the interests of American capitalism and the ruling elite,

which depend on the build-up of the police apparatus in order to defend extreme social inequality and suppress working-class opposition.

The most that the political establishment is willing and able to do is make minor changes to policing, which will have no impact on the reign of police terror against the poor and political protests. This includes the banning of chokeholds and other deadly practices, promoted by establishment Democrats and “socialists” like Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant alike, except when police officers claim they are in “life-threatening” situations.

Tellingly, both Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders argue that these police “reforms” require even more funding of the police, not less.

Those genuinely committed to the fight against police violence and inequality must oppose both the forceful shutdown of the protest by the state, as well as the attempts by local officials and CHOP leaders to channel the opposition behind the dead end of winning local “reforms” through the Democratic Party. While there was no central political leadership, many protest leaders have been negotiating with Democratic city officials, over these demands and to allow CHOP to remain intact.

The police cannot be reformed in any meaningful way, let alone abolished, on a local level or within the framework of capitalism. This basic truth flows from an understanding of the function of the police as an arm of the capitalist state, serving the objective role of defending the profit interests of the corporate-financial elite and class inequality.

Reminiscent of the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011, the parochial, anarchistic, and fundamentally unserious conceptions that dominated CHOP isolated the local protest from the broad opposition in the working class against police brutality, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ruling class as a whole.

Workers and youth can take the popular opposition expressed in the Seattle protests in a different direction, by turning toward the working class in a fight for an independent political movement against the capitalist system.

This struggle requires the political connection between the struggle against the deadly consequences of the “back-to-work” campaign, including the phased reopening plan of Washington Governor Jay Inslee, with the struggle against police violence, unemployment, eviction and homelessness, budget cuts, poverty, and the plight of immigrants into a unified mobilization of workers all over the world.

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