

What is BORTAC and why is it patrolling the streets of Portland?

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Workers and youth in the US and around the world have watched with horror in recent days as gangs of heavily armed men, wearing generic camouflage without unit insignias or name tags, brutalized and illegally detained protesters on the streets of Portland, Oregon.

The federal agents have used CS tear gas, rubber bullets, pepper bombs, flash bang grenades and sonic weapons that can do permanent physical damage against peaceful protesters. In the most chilling scenes, captured on video by demonstrators, the unidentified paramilitaries have seized protesters and thrown them into unmarked vans and cars for “questioning.”

These squads of federal agents are drawn from a variety of agencies under the umbrella of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). They were deployed at the direction of the agency’s top officials in Washington.

The squads include agents from Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the US Marshal’s Service, the Coast Guard, the Federal Protective Service and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). The DHS has reportedly placed a total of 2,000 officers on standby for deployment around the country.

Spearheading the attack are agents of a little-known special unit within CBP called BORTAC, short for Border Patrol Tactical Unit.

Since February of this year, the Trump administration has been mobilizing BORTAC to carry out immigration round-ups in 10 cities where local governments have ordered police not to fully collaborate with federal immigration agents in detaining and deporting immigrants and carrying out immigration raids. A spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) explained in February that BORTAC was being mobilized to increase arrests of immigrants by 35 percent in the 10 cities. To date, BORTAC agents have carried out operations in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York, San Francisco and Newark.

The deployment of BORTAC to Portland came in response to the wave of mass protests over the May 25 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Portland was chosen to serve as a test case and example of the type of methods President Trump has pledged to carry out to “dominate” and suppress the protests against police violence, which he has labeled “anarchist riots.”

On June 1, he announced that he would invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 and order thousands of active-duty troops into Washington DC and other cities across the country to put down the protests, effectively overthrowing the Constitution and establishing a presidential dictatorship. He was blocked in this effort by current and retired military officers, who felt the coup d’état had not been properly prepared and could spark an uncontrollable public backlash.

Far from abandoning this agenda, he is seeking to implement it piecemeal, using, in the first instance, paramilitary thugs bloodied in the Gestapo-style border pogrom against immigrants before calling in the military directly.

This police state operation is aimed at the entire working class. Under conditions of the greatest public health, economic and political crisis in modern history, and amid growing working class resistance to the government’s homicidal back-to-work policy, the American ruling class is preparing its forces of repression for an explosive growth of social opposition to capitalism.

What is BORTAC?

BORTAC is the tactical unit of the US Border Patrol, a branch of CBP. Often described as the CBP’s equivalent of a police SWAT team, it is more accurately defined as the CPB’s version of a military Special Forces unit, like the Army Green Berets or the Navy SEALs.

The unit was founded in 1984 to put down protests by immigrants at Immigration and Naturalization Service detention facilities. It rapidly expanded its scope and “mission capabilities” in the following years, most dramatically after the 9/11 terror attack.

In 2007, BORTAC was placed under the command of the newly formed Special Operations Group (SOG), together with its sister group, the Border Patrol Search, Trauma and Rescue Unit (BORSTAR). The agency is currently headquartered at Biggs Army Airfield in El Paso, Texas.

The US Border Patrol maintains several BORTAC units located at various locations throughout the US. These units operate under the direct control of Headquarters, Special Response Teams, located in Washington, DC.

The agency in its current form is characterized as “a rapid response unit” capable of “executing both foreign and national level domestic operations.” BORTAC agents have operated in 28 countries around the world.

When participating in what are deemed “high-risk missions” domestically or abroad, BORTAC agents are authorized to use a wide range of deadly weapons and equipment, including certain types of grenade launchers, 37 mm gas guns, M4 Carbines (high-powered assault rifles) and the Steyr SSG rifle (a type of sniper rifle). BORTAC agents are authorized to carry firearms on and off duty. When conducting operations, BORTAC personnel are also equipped with a Kevlar ballistic helmet and an armored assault vest. When deployed domestically, these agents wear numbers instead of name tags for “the protection of the officers,” according to CPB.

The stated mission of BORTAC is “to provide the Immigration and Naturalization Service with a specially trained and equipped tactical unit to address unusual situations within the service by use of special techniques.” A CBP fact sheet on the agency indicates that “it’s in the desert where BORTAC teams are really in their element.” The document continues: “Agents hide in the desert brush and wait for illegal immigrants or drug smugglers to sneak down centuries-old secret trails.”

In other words, BORTAC agents are trained killers who specialize in hunting immigrants.

A former DHS official speaking to the *Washington Post* under

conditions of anonymity said BORTAC agents were viewed within the US military-intelligence community as “highly trained, valuable, scarce resources.” The official told the *Post* that the agents would “typically be used for domestic law enforcement in extraordinary circumstances” adding, “[T]hese units don’t normally sit around idle.”

Both BORTAC and its sister group BORSTAR are relatively small units compared to US military Special Operations forces. The most recent data available, from 2016, shows that the two agencies employ 271 BORTAC and 282 BORSTAR “active” and “ready reserve” agents. There are 180 additional trained agents marked as “inactive.”

The units have operated with or received training from the US Coast Guard’s former Drug Interdiction Assist Team, US military Special Operations forces such as the Navy SEALs and Army Special Forces, and elite police and military units of several foreign nations. They are trained in intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance; foreign law enforcement; Border Patrol capacity building; airmobile operations; maritime operations and precision marksmanship. Every agent is sniper certified.

US imperialism comes home

Over the last two decades, BORTAC has operated extensively overseas, assisting in US imperialist crimes all over the world. Its rap sheet includes involvement in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, both part of the illegal and unprovoked invasion of Iraq in 2003 that resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and the destruction of the country’s social infrastructure.

To date, BORTAC agents have conducted missions in Colombia, Panama, Estonia, Haiti, Peru, Belize, Mexico, Costa Rica, Kenya, Ukraine, Kosovo, Argentina, Honduras, Ecuador, Bolivia, Moldova, Ethiopia, Armenia, Tajikistan and Guatemala. During the “war on terror,” BORTAC agents were deployed to Jordan, Iraq and Afghanistan. They have also been involved in countless “counter-narcotics” operations in South America, most notably in El Salvador and Bolivia.

While conducting what the agency refers to as “foreign internal defense missions,” BORTAC agents provide training to “host government personnel.” BORTAC has provided tactical team and counter-narcotics training to dozens to foreign police officers and paramilitary units.

From 2005 to 2007, agents were heavily involved in training Iraqi border police. BORTAC agents also “advised” and operated alongside Iraqi border police officers in the field from 2008 to 2011, serving as members of “Department of Defense Security Transition Teams.” The US unit trained the Iraqi border police tactical teams as well as Iraqi border police officers and managers.

Within the US, BORTAC operates along the US southern and northern borders. The agency also continues in its original task of “providing assistance” to the US Bureau of Prisons by brutalizing inmates during large scale “inmate disturbances.”

BORTAC teams are often deployed to assist local law enforcement in “high-profile” events. Instances of publicly known deployments of BORTAC units include the 1992 Los Angeles protests against police violence, where they operated among 1,000 riot-trained federal special agents. The protests erupted in minority working class areas of Los Angeles against the travesty of the Simi Valley criminal trial of police who brutally beat Rodney King, which ended in acquittals.

In April 2000, the unit was utilized in the high profile case of six-year-old Cuban refugee Elian Gonzalez. BORTAC was used to raid the family’s home in Miami, Florida, in order to seize the child for his return to Cuba.

More recently, the agency was used in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. According to CPB documents, agents were called into New Orleans and deputized as marshals to “restore order” and “deal with the looting” that followed the devastation and flooding from the hurricane. In reality, BORTAC was deployed primarily to suppress expressions of

popular outrage over the callous, incompetent and inhumane government response to the hurricane.

The deployment of BORTAC in Portland is for the same purpose: to intimidate and repress youth and workers protesting police brutality. It marks a major escalation of the assault on democratic rights and the turn toward dictatorship in the US. The police state scaffolding built up over two decades, ostensibly for use against terrorists, has been turned first against immigrants and now against the working class more broadly.

Who is responsible for the creation and deployment of BORTAC?

The Trump administration is in a deep and unprecedented political crisis. The political establishment, Democratic and Republican alike, has responded to the coronavirus pandemic by funneling trillions of dollars to corporate America and Wall Street in order to keep the stock market afloat.

The failure to fund or organize any serious response to the public health crisis triggered by the pandemic, compounded by the criminal back-to-work drive, has resulted in a full-scale catastrophe. Infections and deaths are spiraling out of control. The entire economic and political system of capitalism is being irreparably discredited.

Now, amidst Depression levels of unemployment, the White House and Congress are cutting off the expanded jobless benefits that enabled millions of families to avoid homelessness and hunger.

With his poll numbers falling, Trump is flailing about and turning to the most brutal and repressive measures. The corporate media is openly speculating on whether the November elections will be held, and, if they are, whether Trump will accept a result that goes against him.

It would be a fatal mistake, however, for workers to believe that a victory for the Democrats and Joe Biden in November would halt the attack on democratic rights—as they are being told by much of the media, the trade unions and the various pseudo-left organizations that promote so-called “progressive” Democrats such as Bernie Sanders. Not a single prominent Democrat, including Biden, Barack Obama and Nancy Pelosi, has denounced Trump’s measures for what they are—an assertion of dictatorial powers. The Democrats have made no appeal for popular protest against the threat of a police state. They fear a mass movement of the working class far more than they fear Trump’s dictatorial agenda.

They have sought from the outset to channel mass opposition to Trump behind their war-mongering anti-Russia campaign and opposed any real fight against Trump’s attacks on immigrants and on the working class as a whole. In recent weeks they have stepped up their promotion of the dangerous illusion that the military will defend democratic rights in opposition to Trump—the same military that has carried out war crimes around the world. They promote their own authoritarian agenda, including internet censorship, in alliance with the CIA, the FBI and sections of the military.

The Democratic Party’s complicity in Trump’s attacks runs much deeper than silent complicity.

Trump did not erect BORTAC or any of the other bodies of armed men he is now mobilizing to crush popular opposition. The police state scaffolding in the US has been built up over decades by Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

The Obama administration, in particular, played a major role in building up the capabilities of ICE. After coming to power, Obama vastly expanded a program begun under Bush called Secure Communities. The program brought federal, state and local law enforcement agencies together with ICE in an effort to deport immigrants who were already living in communities, as opposed to those attempting to cross the border.

Prior to the Obama administration, there was very little interior enforcement. By the end of 2011, however, the number of immigrants arrested in the country’s interior equaled the number arrested along the border. Obama earned the nickname “deporter-in-chief” by deporting

approximately 3 million immigrants during his eight-year term. That was roughly double the rate under Republican President George Bush and more than the number deported by any previous president in US history.

The administration's "reform" measures focused not only on immigrants already residing in the country, but also on strengthening "Fortress America" at the border. In 2010, Obama signed into law a bill that allocated \$600 million to further militarize the US-Mexico border by hiring thousands of additional border agents and using Predator drones to patrol from the sky.

The Obama administration's illegal drone assassination program abroad resulted in the deaths of thousands of people in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere. In September 2011, Obama authorized the assassination of a US citizen, fundamentalist cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki, in Yemen. This murder, a flagrant violation of US and international law, set a precedent whereby the US president can sign death warrants for US citizens on his own say-so, without charges or trial.

After spending trillions of dollars to further build up the military-intelligence apparatus, Obama handed Trump the reins and told the American people to respect his presidency. In his final press conference in the White House, he vouched for the political legitimacy of the incoming administration and declared that having won, "it is appropriate for [Trump] to go forward with his visions and his values."

The Democratic Party represents a faction of the same ruling class to which Trump himself belongs. Not a single step forward can be taken with the framework of the two-party system.

The fight against the Trump administration, militarism and dictatorship and the defense of democratic rights is a fight against capitalism and American imperialism, which must be conducted independently of and in opposition to the Democratic Party.

Furthermore, the fight against the Trump administration must be connected to the fight against social inequality, the destruction of social programs and infrastructure, the attack on jobs and wages, the persecution of immigrant workers, and the consequences of unending war, which threatens all of humanity.

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