

# Evictions and Domestic Terrorism Charges in Atlanta Forest Defense

The Final Straw Radio  
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For this week's main podcast, we spoke with an activist of the Atlanta Anti-Repression Committee about the recent police raids and arrests in the Welaunee Forest, aka Atlanta Forest, which have brought charges of domestic terrorism on 5 people for allegedly building treehouses and throwing stones at cops. These arrests come after police entered the forest and used less lethal weapons on people in the forest, ostensibly participating in the #DefendTheAtlantaForest and #StopCopCity [links to sites available online] movement to defend the forest from the building of what might be the world's largest movie studio sound stage and a police training center. Again, be sure to check the show notes for more info sources and ways to support those being repressed. Check out our past coverage of the movement to defend Welaunee Forest in Atlanta by listening or reading our July 3rd, 2022 episode.

Search for this interview title at **<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/>** to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

**The Final Straw Radio: Would you please introduce yourself for the listening audience with any name, affiliations, preferred pronouns, location or other information that makes sense for this interview?**

**Sarah:** Hey, everyone, I'm Sarah. I am a resident of South Atlanta. I'm involved in the movement to Defend the Forest and to stop the construction of Cop City for about a year now. And I'm involved with the Atlanta Anti Repression Committee organizing in support of people facing political charges.

**TFSR: So we're talking about the recent police violence that occurred in the Weelaunee forest, aka Atlanta, in the state of Georgia. First step, can you briefly remind listeners about the movement that's been coalescing there for over the last year or more?**

**S:** Yeah, absolutely. So since May of 2021, there has been activity organizing in a section of the South River Forest in South Atlanta, or southwest DeKalb County, that is threatened by two projects: Cop City, which is the construction of a massive new training center for the Atlanta police being built by the Atlanta Police Foundation; as well as an expansion of Blackhall Studios, which they've renamed to Shadowbox Studios. It's involved a dubious, possibly illegal, land swap between the county and private owner of Blackhall Studios, Ryan Millsap. And these projects are on adjacent plots of land and they're threatening a huge, much beloved section of urban forests, including the public DeKalb county park, Intrenchment Creek Park.

For the last year, since October or November of 2021 there's been an ongoing series of encampments in the woods in order to prevent the construction of these facilities -- and for people who care about the the forest and have a desire to stop these projects -- to coalesce in the space, to gather there. Many people have come to live in those woods in an ongoing series of protest camps.

Those encampments have included tree sits, which have been a contentious ongoing aspect of the protests for almost a full year, actually, since January of this year 2022. But the physical encampment and obstruction in the woods is just one element of a much broader movement that has involved a wide range of people. There's lots of different organizing efforts. There's really seen to be something that has mobilized and galvanize people from all across the city, and especially from the area. People who live in the area around this forest and who have been involved for many years in the fight for Intrenchment Creek and the South River, which are both heavily polluted.

**TFSR: So news sources are saying that six people were arrested and are being charged with Domestic Terrorism. To your understanding, can you talk about what happened?**

**S:** Yes. So on Tuesday, December 13, there was a large multi agency police oper-

ation in the area surrounding the occupied section of forest. And so this is commonly called the Weelaunee forest, or also the South River Forest. Weelaunee is the Muskogee name for the South River, it means brown, green, yellow waters. And so this past Tuesday, and then again, on Wednesday, there was a large scale police operation. This involved the Atlanta police, the DeKalb county police, the Department of Homeland Security, who are actually building a department within the Atlanta police. They're horizontally integrated with APD. It also involved Atlanta SWAT teams, and the Georgia Bureau of Investigations. And those are just some of the agencies that we know are involved in this operation.

And so this is one in a series of raids. This is the most recent in what has been a long arc of police efforts to control the forest and to capture and charge activists. The difference in this raid is that the police came prepared to extract people from tree sits. Like I said, there have been tree sits ongoing for many months now, since January, in several different parts of the forest. And the people who were occupying those trees were surrounded on the ground by Atlanta police officers, and then essentially threatened. This is not the first time that this happened. Actually, I can go into more detail about that later about the history of violent threats of the Atlanta police against people who are occupying tree sets.

But these tree sits are makeshift shelters that are constructed within the trees and people live in them in order to prevent ongoing construction. The cops surrounded them on the ground, threatened them, asking them to come out voluntarily and then pretty immediately began shooting pepper balls and tear gas canisters at the treehouse occupation. So, people are in small confined spaces, that are having tear gas shot into those confined spaces, and then also. My understanding is that there were just hours of pepper balls, these crowd control weapons being used on the people in these tree houses, who were eventually extracted after several hours of this and were arrested. So we know that there were arborists that were working with the Atlanta Police Foundation. This is historically how tree sits are disrupted and people are extracted from them. The result of this is that there have been five people who were tree sitters who have been charged with, well a litany of charges, but the most notable being domestic terrorism. We're seeing that the big accomplishment for the police is to bring forward this charge of domestic terrorism.

**TF SR: Yeah. Could you talk about the charges of domestic terrorism? Journalist Will Potter, author of *Green Is the New Red*, pointed out on Twitter that they're being accused of throwing stones at police and building makeshift treehouses, like I mentioned. It seems a bit of an escalation to charge them with terrorism for these activities. What do you think is going on here? And could you reiterate what agencies do you think are involved in the policing of the space?**

**It feels like a new generation of anti infrastructure occupations on Turtle Island since No DAPL, and I'm thinking particularly also about Camp Grayling, that this is an effort to cause a chilling effect.**

**S:** Yeah, so we understand that six people have been charged with domestic terrorism, all of whom were arrested in the site of the proposed construction site for Cop City, as well as for the Shadowbox Studios expansion. And so they're charged under a specific bill, which was passed in 2017 in Georgia, and that is House Resolution 452. And there's some good articles that are coming out exploring this. It's really notable because this is the first time that protesters have ever been charged using this law. It's a new use of a pretty new law and yeah, you accurately indicate that they have been accused of things that are sort of like minor crimes, many of them. Our understanding is they were arrested after being extracted from tree houses, like sitting in the tree houses, which is a historic tactic of the nonviolent direct action, strain of the environmental movement.

They were arrested, extracted outside of these tree houses and now are being charged with domestic terrorism along with a slate of other other charges. These are mostly blanket charges, it seems like they were all hit with pretty much the same thing. There's a few differences between them. But it does really seem like this is an effort at a scare tactic to implement a chilling effect across the movement to say, "if you are an activist attempting to block or stop construction of a facility to fight for a more livable world, that you're at risk of being characterized as an "enemy of America", of the United States".

What else is notable is that this law was actually voted on by the Georgia legislature in response to Dylan Roof's, murderous shooting spree at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. So, following this hate crime where a number of Black people were killed by a white supremacist who took violent, deadly action, there is the use of this law now instead to target anti-racist protesters who are fighting against an expansion of carceral and police facilities. That's something notable about this law. It does seem -- and I think that there's like a lot of the initial legal opinions, there's an article in the Atlanta Journal Constitution quoting the ACLU -- to indicate that this is a really broad and over-reaching use of the law. Not only is the law possibly unconstitutional, this use of it as well, seems really blatantly illegal, according to the other laws locally.

But this isn't the first time that terrorism has come up in environmental struggles, in political struggles. There's all of these instances coming out of the Green Scare, and also recent ecological struggles of the use of anti-terrorism laws, the designation of domestic terrorists and the use of the terrorism enhancement. And so we have the RNC 8, and the NATO 3, both of whom were charged and the terrorism enhancement was applied to their cases, but ultimately didn't stick. There's people like Daniel McGowan in the early 2000's and then more recently Jessica Reznicek, the valve turner, who took action against the Dakota Access Pipeline, who was recently convicted with a terrorism enhancement for interfering with critical infrastructure.

But this comes also in the context of a wave of struggles, as well as a push from the center, the federal government, against what they see as domestic terrorism in the January 6 attempted insurrection at the US Capitol.

What else is notable here is that it doesn't appear -- we know that there are ongoing investigations happening around the forest struggle, as I said earlier, this is a really broad struggle, there's so many different parts of it, that have been involved in different groups that have been organizing and taking action to pressure people to stop this project, as well as organizing and camping out in the forest itself... But it's not like there was an investigation and then some people were targeted and then had charges brought against them that would make sense for something as high level and as serious as domestic terrorism. Instead, it really seems like there's a political motivation, or a narrative motivation, and the authorities are acting with some desperation to cut off what is a really robust and successful protest movement. As of this month it's been one year since they first evicted the initial occupation in this forest. And people have been resilient to a number of raids, to police intimidation tactics, to investigations, arrests, etc because there's a lot of determination in this fight.

And so, what they've done is just come into the woods, conduct a raid with a massive use of resources, really just disrupt life in South Atlanta here and then just arrest whoever that they captured with blanket charges and the people who they captured were tree sitters. We're seeing them use a lot of old tactics from the repressive playbook. There's the statement of really high serious political charges in the bonds hearing, that initial denial of bond, an attempt to redirect resources and attention away from the movement, away from the enemy and towards the focus of simply anti-repression efforts, getting people free. And obviously that is the priority and desire of the broad movement at the time.

Luckily, this is a national movement. There's been actions and information nights and awareness spreading all over the country. The activism on this issue has really been something that people have participated in from all across the country, because it is evident to people who live everywhere what the stakes are of the expansion of police resources, police authority, following mass movements, to confine the role and the murders capabilities of the police. What we've seen is just increased investment in the police and this is something that is obviously widely widely unpopular. Though we believe that prosecutors and the police agencies, including the Georgia Bureau of Investigations, Atlanta Police Foundation, the Atlanta police department, are attempting to spread fear, just aggregate the movement, to punish people who have taken part in this.

Which is something that we've seen repeatedly, is just arrest and imprisonment on charges that will have no basis sticking in court. It's been something that the cops have been attempting with this movement over and over again. And this seems to be more of the same, but just on a much higher level. And so it seems like a real overreach to apply domestic terrorism to a local defense of a public park really.

**TFSR: Meanwhile, how are you seeing the media and social media engaging with what's happening in the Weelaunee forest in Atlanta, and the rising state repression?**

**S:** We've seen a pretty interesting media response so far. There has been an increasing local news narrative that's been building, kind of supporting a lot of the paranoid ideas of the police, about the movement, and that certainly is now being taken to a really high level. There's these really nasty stories coming out on the Daily Mail and the other sensationalized media. Media has been a big point of conflict in this campaign, the local outlet in Atlanta, our major newspaper the Atlanta Journal Constitution, is Owned by Cox Media, which are one of the major funders of the Atlanta Police Foundation and of the [Cop City] project. And so, actually the CEO or the head of Cox Media sits on the board of the Atlanta Police Foundation.

So it's a really serious, tight interest, and only through many months of pressure from Atlanta residents has the Atlanta Journal Constitution finally been open and stating their affiliation with the Atlanta Police Foundation and the contradictory interests in the project. And the Atlanta Journal Constitution has been calling for more serious legal action against the protesters for months, and helping to generate this media consensus among local news that really over represents certain aspects of the struggle and attempts to divide people in a way that the movement has refused to allow it. Characterizing the movement as violent, as extremists, as all outside agitators, all of these tired narratives are things that the AJC has been part of helping produce.

This is because they're interested in also pushing the massive narrative we're seeing nationally around "the crime wave" and fear mongering around police resources. They call it, you know, "first responder resources" and "a crackdown on crime". This is part of the local media ecology, but in response to this repression, as I mentioned earlier, the AJC just put out an article questioning the legitimacy of the application of domestic terrorism in this instance. Also, we're just seeing this type of coverage coming out from a lot of new sources. There's been a really massive influx of interests, Al Jazeera, or AJ+, [who] just put out a really good video where they explore some of the local political dynamics. On social media there's been a huge outpouring of support for the struggle. It's been really beautiful to see a lot of outrage on behalf of the arrestees, and people really being galvanized by this level of undue repression. The tree sitters, who have been a really massive symbol, and really an inspiration to so much of the movement and to its supporters, being attacked by the police is really outraging people. It seems like that's translating into a lot of support.

But on the other hand, we've also seen on Twitter which is really having this whole moment with Elon Musk, dictatorial banning of people who are talking shit about him on Twitter, and his collusion with the right wing, with Andy Ngo, namely. We saw Andy Ngo -- who's occasionally tried to drum up some animosity towards this movement on Twitter, directing information about it to Elon Musk. And actually this happened on Wednesday or Thursday of this past week and then, just a few hours later, It's Going Down -- which has been one of the platforms that's shared a lot of information about the movement, and published articles that people have written and perspectives on the struggle for many months now -- It's



Going Down was banned from Twitter and their account was taken down. And then this is the same period of time that Twitter is banning all of these different journalists that report on technology, that report on financial interests and how decisions get made. It's definitely of concern to us as well, about what type of attention this might bring towards political activists and platforms for media, similar to It's Going Down.

In addition to that there is a whole aspect of this movement which is positioning itself against the world offered to us by the tech giants and by the interests of the billionaires. There is also this part of it. The fight has been largely about cop city, but just also massively people mobilizing against the interests of Hollywood, in gentrifying and displacing people in Atlanta in the same way that giant tech companies have done in other major cities, especially in majority-Black cities across the country.

Beyond the displacement of people from their physical homes, from their neighborhoods, from patches of a forest and parkland, in cities across the country, we also have an aspect of the struggle which says, "We reject the life of the virtual reality of just, like, 'Netflix and zone out' that's what life is confined to". And this is all that is offered to many people in exchange for selling all of your life, your time, your data, your labor, and in an economy where this is enforced by a racist policing apparatus.

So, that's a kind of interesting convergence of different aspects of the struggle. I think, there are so many different things that have spoken to people and we're seeing this overreach by the police investigations, really, likely at the request of their funders and actors of the project, is backfiring or are really fired up about.

**TF SR: This movement has grown pretty wide and gotten a lot of coverage inspiring resistance in other places, like I mentioned. And I've heard that some of the investors have backed out of the project. You mentioned that the police are going hard now because it seems like they've been embarrassed by the movement's success. Can you talk a little bit about the success of the movement to defend the forest?**

**S:** Yeah, so I think that this movement has drawn out the lines that connect the issues that many are deeply familiar with. Between ecological struggles, anti racist struggles and abolitionist struggles, struggles against the police, and also against displacement and gentrification. One of the successes of the struggle to defend the forest has been articulating how all of those things fit in together, and also from drawing on a really broad understanding of what the movement can be, and all the different people that have a stake in this fight. To push back on the narrative that we see used for counterinsurgency purposes, time and time again, that says, "the only people who can fight in protest, in a struggle are this narrowing set of people". It promotes the false idea that there are the "right" actors to fight for issues of justice.

In fact, issues of justice and injustice are of consequence and importance

to everybody. It's a lie that there are some people who have more of a right to struggle than others. In fact, the construction of Cop City is something that concerns everybody and the movement has been really clear about inviting participation from anyone who feels moved to defend the forest and to fight the expansion of the Police Training Center and the Hollywood studios.

Some of the other successes have been really broad participation, sustained resistance that's been resilient in the face of heavy attempts by police to control the forest, to displace people from the protest encampment and to discourage participation in this movement. We've seen time and time again that when the police act to suppress this movement it strengthens and it grows. That is a testament to how seriously people take this issue, the willingness and bravery in the face of police intimidation and violent tactics like what we saw in the woods this week. There's a really strong sense of determination from participants in this movement to fight for what is right. And I think that that is a huge success. I hope it only grows from here.

**TFSR: So how can listeners be supporting those who caught charges in the wider movement against Cop City and the film studios and for the forest? I've seen on social media posts that there are ways to support the arrestees -- sending books, sending letters and such, and I'll definitely post some of that to show notes -- what are some good news sources to keep up with, in your estimation?**

**S:** You can support the movement by following what's happening, there are a few different platforms to follow. There's [wDefendAtlantaForest](#) on Instagram, Telegram, Twitter, it has a website. There's [StopCopCity](#) also on Instagram and Twitter. Community Movement Builders, a local organization in Atlanta that's heavily involved in the movement, they have their own information. The Stop Reeves Young campaign, or the SRY campaign, has information about those who are involved in the construction of Cop City and contracted by the Atlanta Police Foundation. So there's information on all of those.

The Atlanta Solidarity Fund is providing information about the arrests, and financial support for the arrestees can go to the Atlanta Solidarity Fund, which is a politically oriented bail fund and legal support fund here in Atlanta. They're amazing, they do really good work. You can also support by raising awareness about this issue, about the arrests and repression of environmental activists in Atlanta in your own context, having an info night, organizing a letter writing. There are prosecutors and district attorneys, the Georgia Attorney General who have purview over this case, and I'm sure would hear from people who take issue with the broad application of domestic terrorism go apply to these activists.



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