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USA

# State of Georgia Indicts 61 Activists as Part of an Anarchist Criminal Conspiracy

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**The State of Georgia has indicted 61 activists of Defend the Atlanta Forest—accusing 42 of them for being domestic terrorists—as part of an anarchist criminal conspiracy that engaged in “vandalizing private property, arson, destruction of government property, attacks on utility workers, attacks on law enforcement, attacks on private citizens, and gun violence.” The related Atlanta Solidarity Fund is also accused of money laundering and charity fraud.**

The Georgia Racketeer Influence Corrupt Organization Act (or RICO) is a particularly powerful legal instrument modeled on the federal RICO Act originally designed to go after organizations such as the Mafia. While Georgia frequently uses RICO to go after criminal organizations, including the state's recent RICO indictment of former president Donald Trump for attempting to steal the election in 2000, its use against a social movement is unprecedented and constitutes a threat to all activists in Georgia and elsewhere.

Defend the Atlanta Forest also known as the Stop Cop City, is a uniquely diverse movement that brings together opponents of the construction of an Atlanta Public Safety Training Center to train police and fire fighters. Involved are environmentalists and animal rights activists who want to save the 82-acre South River Forest, indigenous activists, opponents of prisons and police, and anti-racist activists. While the organization does not define itself as anarchist, many in the group are anarchists and socialists who support engaging in non-violent direct action to stop construction. Still property has been destroyed and there have been violent confrontations with the police. But some of those indicted as part of the conspiracy are not accused of any specific crime, and under RICO need not be.

The roots of the Stop Cop City movement are in the national Black Lives Matter protests against the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 26, 2020. Then on June 12, 2020 the Atlanta Police fatally shot a black man named Rayshard Brooks. He had been asleep in his car in a Wendy's restaurant parking lot when police arrived, attempted to administer a breathalyzer test, he struggle with police and then when he attempted to flee was shot and killed him. Local activists demanded divestment from the police and funding for social services, but the city instead decided to build the 90 million dollar training center in the forest that served as a recreation area for the adjacent black community. As the Defend the Atlanta Forest movement developed and began to engage in civil disobedience, the Atlanta police cracked down, in the course of which they fatally shot forest defender Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, a Venezuelan immigrant known as “Tortuguita,” who was sitting down with his hands in the air. He is the first environmental activist to have been shot and killed by police in the United States.

The 109-page indictment contains long discussions of anarchism and mutual aid and condemns direct action. It also confuses acts by Blood street gang, who engaged in shootings that lead to the death of an 8-year-old child, with the activities of Stop Cop City.

Civil rights organizations have argued that the Atlanta Police Department's severe repression has violated the free speech rights of movement activist and has been intended to chill the social protests. “We are extremely concerned by this breathtakingly broad and unprecedented use of state terrorism, anti-racketeering and money laundering laws against protesters,” said Aamra Ahmad, senior staff attorney with American Civil Liberties Union's National Security Project.

The Stop Cop City movement has been undeterred. Since the indictment some of its activists have chained themselves to bulldozers to stop the construction. Some Atlanta residents have also circulated a petition calling for a referendum on the construction of the training center. The struggle goes on in the streets, in the forest, and now in the courts.

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