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USA

United States: A new stage in Black Lives Matter's battle against Trump's state violence

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President Donald Trump has loudly targeted the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement as "left wing anarchists" and "terrorists". He speaks of "carnage in the street" and "law and order". But it is clear that the agents provocateurs are in the White House and its federal agencies

Trump has unleashed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to bring military-style agencies onto the streets of Portland, Oregon and other cities to attack BLM in the name of protecting federal property. Trump's agents initiate the violence then blame demonstrators defending themselves for the confrontations. The right-wing media then broadcasts the images as "proof" that protesters are allegedly burning down cities.

Mayors and governors have denounced these illiberal actions as a violation of state rights and free speech. The movement in Portland and other cities has grown in response.

Trump's game plan

Trump is sending his agents to cities with Democratic mayors and governors. The broad reaction to these "secret police" led by Trump, Attorney General William Barr and others is resistance.

Trump's aim is to distract and deflect from his failures of leadership. He is preparing to declare the November presidential election as impossible to hold. Finalising the results of the election, if held, could take "months, even years", he says. It is a sign that what has happened in other countries can occur here.

The Portland upsurge against local police and now federal agents was initiated by leaders in the Black community (which makes up less than 3% of Portland's population), but there was an almost immediate outpouring of participation from whites. The broad resistance shows that the American people are not ready for a Putin-style dictatorship.

Portland stood firm for more than 60 days facing off against vicious local police and then Trump's federal agents. The White House was forced to pull back their agents, which occupied the city for most of July, even though it denies doing so.

Eyewitness report from Portland

According to Portland-based socialist activist and author Johanna Brenner, "Thousands of people showing up night after night, for two weeks straight, to protest the presence of Trump's police was key to the "deal" the Governor [Kate Brown] struck to get the feds to go."

In accordance with the deal, Oregon state troopers would take over from the federal agents.

"The fury about the federals' over-policing extended to state and local policing, so the Governor promised that the

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state troopers would not be provoked by small acts like having bottles thrown over the fence or fire-crackers set off.

"[Brown] promised not to use tear gas, except in extreme circumstances, none of which, she said, had been present over the last weeks. The Mayor [Ted Wheeler] promised the same.

"Of course, we shall see - but still a significant concession," said Brenner. "Trump embarrassed them immensely by doing what local police had been allowed to do."

"On Thursday night [July 30], the first night that the Oregon state troopers took over "protection" of the federal court house, the crowd was substantial, although not as large as previous demonstrations. There were many instances where the people in the protest disciplined others - for example, when some people lit two small fires, others doused them with water, when a protestor took a piece of wood and banged on the fence, others told her to quit and forced her to stop, and many people speaking called on everyone to keep their attention on the movement for Black lives, not the fence or the building.

"On Friday [July 31], the fencing came down, although the windows of the building remain boarded up. The downtown was pretty quiet.

"The statue in the park across from the federal courthouse that had been cleaned of graffiti Thursday was once again painted on Friday, but come on, kids need to have fun.

"Whether further protests will be called remains to be seen," said Brenner. "I think there will be, because organising continues around police accountability and de-funding at the local and at the state levels.

"Still, I will not stand by any prediction I make - this is an amazingly unpredictable political time."

Eyewitness Bette Lee told Counterpunch on July 31: "I was heartened to see so many recent newcomers like the 'Wall of Moms', the dads, veterans, teachers, union workers, nurses, doctors and healthcare workers at the protest, as well as the die-hards who had been at the frontlines for 58 nights.

"Their presence makes it much harder for Trump, his supporters and critics of the BLM protesters to separate us into 'good' vs 'bad' protesters, or to demonise us all as 'violent anarchists'.

"The government, police and law enforcement agencies have a long history of suppressing many political movements for social change in the past by using this strategy of criminalising our right to dissent and by deploying police and law enforcement violence to crush the resistance."

Trump's support is declining as he mishandles the coronavirus pandemic and anti-cop protests. Further, the economy is crashing. GDP had its worst quarterly decline since modern records began after World War II at 9.5%. Some economists say it is the worst decline since 1875.

Trump continues his attempt to undermine fair elections. He assigned former fundraiser Louis De Joy as Postmaster General to slow down the processing of mail. This could lead to postal ballots not being processed in time during the November election.

Agent provocateur in Minneapolis

Trump's smear against BLM leaders was recently exposed as fraudulent in Minneapolis, where the anti-cop, pro-Black lives movement began after George Floyd's death in May.

From the start of the mass protests, white supremacists inspired by Trump have infiltrated the movement. The big lie told by Trump has been that Blacks and others are the instigators of violent actions at federal landmarks and Confederate monuments. In his mind, these symbols represent "true (white) America".

However, facts have emerged confirming that the agent provocateur in Minneapolis was a right-wing vigilante.

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, a progressive Black politician, said in May he was not convinced that the left was behind the violence. He said it was likely an agent provocateur on the right. Ellison said at the time: "Far-right extremists are hoping to turn the George Floyd protests into a new civil war."

An "Umbrella Man" was filmed smashing the windows of a car parts dealership on May 27, two days after the police killed Floyd. Investigators reported in July that the man is a white supremacist, who sought to provoke violence against protesters.

A Minneapolis arson investigator wrote in an affidavit: "This was the first fire that set off a string of fires and looting throughout the precinct and the rest of the city."

In the 1960s, the FBI ran a program called COINTELPRO, targeting civil rights and Black leaders as well as those on the left. The language Trump uses today was used back then and the attacks were bipartisan. Organisations such as the Black Panther Party and militant Black workers, such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit's car plants, were targeted for attacks.

Leaders of the Panthers were assassinated. Pan Africanists who supported the colonial revolutions faced scrutiny. It was not surprising that both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr were assassinated in their prime.

The mass incarceration of African Americans and Latinos occurred in the 1970s and '80s to demonise and criminalise African Americans and people of colour. The Democratic and Republican parties supported this policy of mass jailing of Black and Brown people.

Some concern on focus

This is the historical context for why there is some concern in the broader BLM movement that the struggle is focusing too much on the federal thugs and not on the issue of Black lives. This includes some moderate leaders in Portland, Seattle, Minneapolis and other cities. Many Black elected officials say efforts should focus on voting rights and the November elections.

This is not new. Historically, Black protesters were labelled by the police and government as "violent rioters", "communists" and "terrorists" to convince whites to stay away from demonstrations.

Today, a majority of the public and youth back the movement for Black lives. It includes mainly whites in rural areas.

Before the changes won in housing since the 1960s - many of which still stand - Blacks could not live in the suburbs. Today about 13% of Blacks do; while only 8% live in urban areas due to gentrification. San Francisco's Black population, for example, is less than 5%, down from double digits in the 1970s.

It is not surprising that some Black activists are concerned about the focus of some allies being the government's defence of federal property.

Journalist Anne Branigin raised the issue of Portland's "Wall of Moms" in an article on popular Black website The Root. [1] She wrote: "The mostly white group of mothers has been accused of 'anti-Blackness' by another local group led by Black organisers, who say the Wall of Moms overlooked the safety of Black protesters during the demonstrations and were not truly invested in the cause.

"Don't Shoot Portland, a social justice and mutual aid group first formed in 2014, made the allegations public on Wednesday [July 29] via its Instagram. In it, the org[anisation] disclosed behind-the-scenes tensions between Black organisers and the Wall of Moms, who had recently agreed to cede leadership roles to Black leaders.

"This concern about co-option is at the heart of Don't Shoot Portland's callout.

"'We were used to further an agenda unrelated to BLM,' said the group. 'We need everyone to show up against racism, but it's even more crucial to prioritise transparency and accountability.'"

How valid is the concern? Since African Americans are the leaders of the movement, it is not likely. The focus remains Black lives, even with Trump's use of federal thugs something Blacks face all the time. It is new for many white demonstrators.

The success of the Portland mass protests against the federal agents and for Black lives does not take away from Black activists' concerns. Allies in the past have moved on as African Americans continued to resist, since simply being Black can lead to police violence and the loss of one's life.

Mind the final words of John Lewis

On July 30, an Op-Ed written by John Lewis before his death was printed in The New York Times. It is a noteworthy reminder of the importance of protests. One of Lewis' final actions was to stand on "Black Lives Plaza" in front of the White House in solidarity with the mass upsurge.

Lewis wrote: "Emmett Till was my George Floyd. He was my Rayshard Brooks, Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor. He was 14 when he was killed, and I was only 15 years old at the time. I will never ever forget the moment when it became so clear that he could easily have been me.

"Like so many young people today, I was searching for a way out, or some might say a way in, and then I heard the voice of Dr Martin Luther King Jr on an old radio. He was talking about the philosophy and discipline of nonviolence. He said we are all complicit when we tolerate injustice. He said it is not enough to say it will get better by and by. He said each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up and speak out. When you see something that is not

right, you must say something. You must do something."

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[1] <https://www.theroot.com/portland-s-wall-of-moms-called-out-for-not-protecting-b-1844574048>.