

“Last Year They Came with Torches—This Year They Come with Badges”

A Report from Charlottesville, August 11, 2018

CrimethInc.

August 12, 2018

A year after fascists with torches marched through the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, anarchists and other anti-racists who traveled there to shut down their rally returned to support locals in observing the anniversary of those events. Defying a massive police mobilization aimed at suppressing all freedom to demonstrate, hundreds marched around downtown for hours. The following hasty report was submitted by some of the out-of-town participants.

When we arrived in Charlottesville, the atmosphere felt different than it had a year ago when we came here to oppose the Unite the Right demonstration. Then, the city felt tense, but it was also full of people who were heading into a fight they believed in. The mood wasn't festive, exactly, but our shared desire to protect and support each another and to stand up to fascists created a lively energy.

This year, as I walked onto the University of Virginia (UVA) campus where the rally was to be held, it seemed that the energy we had shared was nowhere to be found. The police and the state authorities had done everything in their power to dominate the environment and shape the entire weekend of events according to their own agenda.

On Wednesday, the governor and the city manager declared a state of emergency in Virginia as a whole and Charlottesville in particular. They brought over 1000 officers to the city and housed them in student dorms, drawing censure from several student groups. The police set up checkpoints around the city at which to search people for a long list of items they declared forbidden. They created a “security perimeter” blocking roads and access to parking. They erected metal detectors and banned *additional* items at the UVA student rally on Saturday night, against students' wishes. They did all this despite the fact that only anti-racist activists were expected to come to the city this weekend.

Fortunately, UVA students and other protesters were determined not to permit the police to control their event or dictate the proper way of remembering Heather Heyer, Nia Wilson, and all the other people who have been killed or harmed by fascist and racist violence.

We waited at the Rotunda, by the statue of Thomas Jefferson where fascists with torches had surrounded and attacked UVA students last year.

And then, finally, life broke out once more in Charlottesville.

Student organizers, many of whom were people of color, stood on the top steps, separated from the crowd by the metal detectors we were supposed to walk through in order to attend the rally. They fiercely decried the absurdity of the massive police presence and the institution of police itself, highlighting the connection between fascists and cops by means of a powerful call and response speech and a banner.

The students led the crowd to the left side of the exterior of the Rotunda, a place the police were not controlling, and used the steps as an impromptu stage. The first speaker had only been speaking for a couple of minutes when we started hearing people shouting that riot cops were on our left. Much of the crowd migrated towards the cops and began chanting at them. The chant I heard most was, “We don’t see no riot here, why are you in riot gear?”

After twenty minutes or so, student-aged individuals began weaving through the crowd and telling people to come back towards where the speakers had been. No one I talked to knew why we were being called back, although there were murmurs that the police were going to declare an unlawful assembly. Eventually, we made our way back. As we got closer, we saw that the speakers had stopped and a march was beginning so we joined in. The crowd was at least a few hundred strong. We quickly took the street.

It was clear from the beginning that the march had a radical character. We chanted against the state, capitalism, cops, white supremacy, fascists... all the different manifestations of hierarchy and oppression. It was a relief to be in this environment after the police had attempted to force an oppressive and controlled atmosphere on the rally.

Student organizers led the march to Lambeth Field, which state troopers had been using as a staging area. Students spoke while police officers lined up on the other side of the field.

The energy lagged a bit in the amphitheater. We felt powerful when we were marching in the streets, forcing cars to turn around and yelling together our refusal to stand for oppression. In the amphitheater, we were passive audience members once more. There is a time for speeches and listening, but what I wanted, and I think what many of us wanted, was to be in the streets together. We were also getting antsy about being in a location vulnerable to police control. At the sound of a siren, the crowd decided collectively and spontaneously to leave the stadium and start marching again.

This second phase of the march was more leaderless. There were advantages and disadvantages to this. It was not always clear what direction we were going; we had to stop a few times to confer about our path. Yet despite these logistical challenges, we marched through the streets of Charlottesville for two hours, passing through downtown and finally arriving at the park where the fascists had gathered during last year’s Unite the Right demonstration—the park where the statue of Robert E. Lee is located.

A considerable police presence was concentrated here to protect the statue—reportedly over 100 officers. Despite chants demanding to tear the statue down, several voices in the march announced that the march was over and that we should go home. I guessed that these were the voices of student organizers, as I don’t think anyone else felt such a degree of ownership over the event that they would have felt they could call for its conclusion.

During the time we were marching, we saw very few cops and experienced very little repression or attempts to control the march. As far as I know, no arrests were made, although there are

rumors that one person was de-arrested, and two videos show scuffles in which police apparently attack people in the march as the crowd arrives at Water Street and moves onto the Downtown Mall after 9 pm.

In retrospect, whether intentional or not, it was strategic to plan to hold the rally at the Rotunda and then instead to march to several other locations. This forced the police to keep mobilizing and deploying with the consequence that they had to draw many of their numbers out of downtown—making it possible for the march to arrive there after all, despite all their attempts to control the area.

Even though Virginia deployed over 1000 cops to Charlottesville this weekend, the police knew that attacking students and other anti-racist activists on the anniversary of the Unite the Right rally and Heather Heyer’s murder would be bad publicity. Because of this, they were forced to allow us to march mostly unimpeded. We were not searched or controlled as the authorities had promised we would be. Some people wore masks, which the authorities had declared would not be permitted. Once again, we learned that the state can only control us to the extent that we collectively accept the myth of its power.

When we band together against police and the state, even when our numbers are not as great as theirs, we can win—just as we succeeded in shutting down the fascist rally in Charlottesville last year, even though we were outnumbered. In contrast to last weekend’s demonstrations in Portland and Berkeley, this time there were no fascists in Charlottesville for the police to protect. The optics become worse for the police when they attack anti-fascist activists without the excuse that they are “defending other citizens.” Especially after the brutal police repression in Berkeley and Portland last week, it felt good that in Charlottesville, the police were afraid to touch us. This enabled us to be together to celebrate Heather and hold the state accountable on our own terms in a way that the authorities would never permit, were it up to them.

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