

Occupy ICE Portland: Lessons from the Barricades

Another Perspective

CrimethInc.

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We are publishing one more analysis from participants in the blockade of the Portland facilities of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). After our previous reports, “The ICE Age Is Over: Reflections from the ICE Blockades” and “Occupy ICE Portland: Policing Revolution?” we reached out to other participants for an additional perspective on the situation. As we emphasized before, our collective has no official position on issues internal to the occupation; we are simply passing on the reports of anarchists who are involved. We urge you to support those arrested in the ICE blockades and participate in the struggle for a world without borders or white supremacy.

A nebulous line exists between reality and dreams. This line, like any other border, is itself unreal. We know that our dreams can and do become reality. Thoughts become deeds. Lies, told often enough, are considered true. Those in power absorb radical messages (even #AbolishICE) and twist them into new horrors. How do we intervene when our words and actions will be used against us?

With this analysis, we hope to add to conversations that are occurring all around the world. We encourage strategic thinking and storytelling, mourning, celebration, hostility, and rest. We will explore three key issues within the Portland occupation and other Occupy movements. We hope that you can find ways these relate to your local movement or occupation and perhaps to other situations moving forward.

Anarchism is an ideology of both subtle distinctions and hard lines. Sometimes, an uncompromising action can shift the Overton Window in dramatic and inspiring ways. Introducing anarchistic ideals into popular discussion is a way to move toward freedom and liberation and away from repression and authoritarianism. Already, thanks to the daily efforts of various affinity organizations around the US, we see the discourse on immigration reform shifting to include conversations about abolition: abolishing the agencies that are the militarized arms of enforcement, abolishing the criminalization of migration, abolishing national borders altogether. Many of these conversations were previously unthinkable within the prevailing narrative.

We hope to address the conflict between working within or replicating the structures and methods of the state, on the one hand, and creating a space for autonomous organizing that can maintain integrity while accomplishing a set goal, on the other. We argue that the analysis that gives rise to reformist tendencies is incomplete, which makes it dangerous—especially when it comes to planning direct action campaigns with participants who are targeted by state violence.

We also intend to address the emergence of individualistic dynamics within ostensibly collective projects, the ways that hierarchies can emerge within horizontal groups, and the complicity of the government of Portland with federal actors. We continue to examine and learn from our mistakes and successes, and hope others can learn from them, too.

Reform and Abolition: The Defanging of #AbolishICE

One of the lessons that our time at the camp drove home is that reform will never accomplish our goals. The state is a machine that aims to destroy us. Even if, in times of emergency, we may have to work with representatives of the state to ensure the safety of our neighbors, we must always be aware of the state’s motives—which revolve around profit and control, never around liberation.

We saw this play out on many levels. A few days after the establishment of the camp, the first round of reformists arrived. These were local groups and individuals, self-appointed or charismatic leaders, who saw an opportunity, smelled notoriety. They brought local influence, connections to sympathetic politicians, and a kind of celebrity that brought in numbers and offered a degree of legitimacy with business owners and middle-class society. These low-level influencers began the process of softening the militancy that had originally established the camp. There were discussions about the barriers that should be put in place for the community. General Assemblies were made less general, with more qualifications imposed on who was a part of the “community,” depending on amount of time spent in camp and personal preferences. Discourse began to form about “good” and “bad” protestors. Decisions were made unilaterally. A group was told to leave the camp for graffiti and others for personal misunderstandings. As liberalism crept in, respect for autonomy evaporated. The original discussions about self-determination were discarded in favor of “security teams” with arbitrary training standards that were imposed upon the camp rather than agreed on by participants. Another danger of reformist thinking is the constant replication of statist structures and a seeming inability to see beyond those false parameters.

The stage was set for activists who aim to get elected. Liberals hold that the abuses of ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection will be resolved by bureaucratic restructuring and that it is possible to negotiate with the heavily armored Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and FBI Hostage Rescue Team (HRT). The most explicit example of this was when activists assisted federal police in dismantling the camp’s defensive barricades, but there are many other examples.

Most perniciously, self-appointed “leaders” approached DHS and brokered a deal. Within 48 hours, Homeland Security and ICE had moved back into the building. These “leaders” negotiated this agreement on behalf of the commune without disclosure or consent. They did so without proper legal representation or good information about the relevant laws. This secret decision, made perhaps out of fear, brought fear to the entire camp. Always remember: the state does not have to tell you the truth. The purposes of law enforcement are well served when you are scared and unsure, cut off from your comrades and the real support that is provided by community, not government.

This prepared the ground for the next level NGO-type “mass mobilization” groups who wanted to use the fame of the camp to promote their own organizations’ specific policy goals. Other groups distanced themselves from the action to preserve their connections with governmental and private financing.

At this point, the desire of reformists to move the battle into some sort of policy framework came out into the open. Abolitionists confined themselves to demanding that the requested reforms be material rather than merely symbolic: not just catchphrase policies, but those that would support the long-term demands and goals of affected communities.

The purpose of anarchism is not to establish an anarchist state. It is to disrupt and delegitimize all the functions of the state itself and to agitate continually for increased autonomy. Liberalism and reform politics aim for compromise in a way that necessarily undermines true revolutionary work.

It is important to keep messaging clear from the start. We must establish up front that we do not want to replace ICE with an updated version of Immigration and Naturalization Services, which would still imprison people for traveling. We want to abolish ICE and everything it does completely. We do not want to secure the border. We do not want immigration reform, but to stop all

deportations immediately, abolish immigration imprisonment, abolish borders in so-called North America, decriminalize movement, and undermine the logic of “citizen versus migrant.” This is not about simply the abolition of ICE, but the decolonization of North America. The toughest opposition to this messaging will always be the liberals and the people concerned about “optics” above all.

If you have the energy for it, you can talk with these people about how borders, imprisonment, and police perpetuate centuries of violence including slavery, the colonization of North America, and Western imperialism.

The intersections between “No Border” work and prison abolition have never been more salient. These are rich traditions that offer us long histories to build on. The fight against borders is not our struggle alone. We will not be the primary authors of this resistance. Just as new relationships have been forged in the uprisings against police brutality, the time is ripe for us to build new connections in the fight against the internalization of the border. This will require more nuances and a contemplative approach. It is time to resist specific strategies of enforcement and establish alliances based on shared goals—not necessarily on shared ideology.

Hierarchy and How It Weakens Our Movements

Leadership and influence are not bad things in and of themselves. Hierarchy is not defined by the presence of influential leaders alone. It is a form of manipulative leadership that makes secret decisions and frames dissent as unacceptable, often employing fear or guilt as tools to compel compliance (for example, “If you make the action too radical, you are responsible for what the police do to vulnerable communities”). It involves hoarding power and information—and hoarding information during confrontations with the state is very dangerous. People may do so out of a desire to feel important, rather than because they actually wish to collaborate with police, but regardless, it renders the larger group more vulnerable to the state.

For example, a local paper published an article mentioning that a

“document obtained by WW... suggests occupiers may be risking far more serious charges... Oregon’s chief deputy federal defender, Steve Sady... handed out copies of the document at a meeting with a small group of key protest organizers Saturday.”

This is a perfect example of how the state co-opts existing dynamics and plays on personal fear. This was collaboration with the state, plain and simple, without the knowledge or consent of anyone outside this “key” group. They made a secret deal with the state, placing the value of their own judgment above the judgment of the entirety of the rest of the camp.

Lack of information makes it impossible to make transparent, consensus-based decisions. It makes it harder to build a strong, cohesive movement, and spreads feelings of distrust and fear. People make poor decisions when they act out of fear. The state is counting on us being afraid so they can squash our movements before we even get started. This evolved into a tangible fear throughout the camp by the first weekend.

To reiterate, hierarchy is not merely the presence of power; power moves dynamically at all times, in all interactions. Hierarchy is the abuse of power and an attitude of egotistical entitlement to leadership, and often involves leaders whose leadership role the group has not consented to. This is how situations played out at camp, time and time again. There were no roundtable

discussions, group consensus, or even transparency of information or intentions. Individuals appointed themselves “leaders” and the camp followed their instructions, allowing these “leaders” to take away their autonomy. This is how these “leaders” turned into “key protest organizers” and effectively sold the camp out to federal agents within the first five days of the occupation. Hierarchy and patriarchy work well together, and this empowered the “leaders” to do the state’s job for them.

To be clear, these hierarchical dynamics can occur within our own anarchist affinity groups. We need to remember how much work there is to be done. It is foolish to decide independently that your group of five will be the only people on site who are empowered to do security, or that only one single person should work on media messaging. We certainly don’t all share the same skills—and we don’t need to. Liberation movements need to empower everyone to contribute the skills they have, or else hierarchies will emerge and weaken the movement, stopping some people from contributing or developing their own strengths and stopping others from even being curious about what strengths other people might have.

Hierarchy is power calcified into tropes. In our society, the common tropes of power are white-skinned, bullying, and misogynist. We have to be careful not to fall into those tropes ourselves, no matter how radical our ideologies are. White supremacy and misogyny are so widespread that they offer opportunities for the state to undermine and disrupt radical movements. Even if the destructive dynamics are not coming from state infiltrators, the disruption and damage to the movement is the same.

To illustrate the toxic intersection between patriarchy and state violence, we can recall Brandon Darby, an FBI informant who infiltrated the Common Ground Collective in New Orleans, which formed to take direct action in response to Hurricane Katrina, and then an activist community planning actions at the 2008 Republican National Convention. Participants had described Brandon’s behavior as patriarchal and predatory long before it turned out that he was working with federal agents to entrap unwary young activists.

In Portland, some of the leaders were not white nor male, but their actions perpetuated recurring issues of hierarchy, patriarchy, and capitulation to the state. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter if it’s a cop, an informant, a troll, or simply a liberal being a liberal. Pay attention to how people’s behavior impacts your collective ability to achieve your goals.

Our goal is not to spread paranoia or gossip among radicals regarding who might be a snitch, but to provide information on what has hurt us in the past and how to avoid replicating these dynamics in the future.

Collusion between State and Federal Actors: Greasing the Cogs of the Fascist Machine

City and state actors have collaborated with federal institutions like Homeland Security and ICE. This advances the aims of authoritarianism. We need to develop a widespread hostility to policing efforts, both those of state agents and the moral, political, and tactical policing of individuals who think they know how to govern the struggle.

Portland is a “sanctuary city.” A sanctuary city (or county, or state) is a governmental entity that limits its cooperation with ICE agents in order to protect low-priority immigrants from deportation—while still turning over those immigrants who have committed additional crimes.

In February 2017, Portland City Council voted to fund immigration assistance for migrants, and shortly after, voted to declare Portland a “sanctuary city,” expressing their disinclination to assist ICE in finding and deporting undocumented immigrants. Many people in Portland who believe in the workings of city government thought that this meant that the city council and the mayor would actively protect at least low-priority immigrants from deportation. “The City of Portland will remain a welcoming, safe place for all people,” Mayor Ted Wheeler said in a statement. However, a local newspaper published an article debunking this:

“...review of more than 1000 internal communications between federal immigration and Oregon law enforcement agencies shows many local officials are already testing the limits of so-called sanctuary laws. At least 11 agencies—including the Oregon State Police, the Portland Police Bureau and the Oregon Department of Corrections—may have shared more information than was required in 2017.”

Regarding the mayor’s promise that Portland police “will not work with ICE to enforce federal immigration law,” the same article states that

“Portland police shared several unredacted police reports with the federal agency in 2017. But that was before a policy change on February 1. Unlike the DA’s office, Portland police decided that providing public records is barred by the state’s sanctuary law, a spokesman says. The bureau now charges federal immigration officials for the reports and redaction.”

So, the only thing that changed is that the Portland Police Bureau now makes money from the requests for information it still fulfills. This doesn’t protect people. It just makes money for the police.

Portland police are at OccupyICEPDX, even though the mayor stated definitively they would not be used to enforce federal law. Portland police have been onsite at Occupy since the second day, establishing their presence on the perimeters of the camp, directing traffic off the main road, and surveilling those staying at and supporting the emerging Temporary Autonomous Zone. Blogger and occupier Andrew Sorg had a strange interaction with a masked DHS officer, in which Sorg asked if he was a Portland police officer. The officer refused to answer and excused himself from the line shortly thereafter.

Portland’s complicity with the FBI and the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) significantly affects the landscape of political action in Portland. Treating protest as a threat to national security means that all protestors are considered potential terrorists who can therefore be handled at the federal level. An attorney for the ACLU of Oregon, one of the groups active against the JTTF, states that “lack of transparency also makes it very difficult to know how and when rights violations involve Portland police officers who are deputized as JTTF officers and who operate under the authority of the FBI.”

On a state level, Oregon has had a sanctuary state law since 1987, a law that was prompted by the landmark civil rights case *Trevino v. Dahlin*. Oregon’s sanctuary law states:

“No law enforcement agency of the State of Oregon or of any political subdivision of the state shall use agency moneys, equipment or personnel for the purpose of detecting or apprehending persons whose only violation of law is that they are persons of

foreign citizenship present in the United States in violation of federal immigration laws.”

This law was supported by conservative lawmakers, law enforcement and civil rights organizations alike—by conservatives and law enforcement for keeping state funds from enforcing federal law, and by civil rights organizations for preserving civil liberties. Current efforts like Initiative Petition 22, proposed by the anti-immigrant hate group, Oregonians for Immigration Reform, seek to repeal these protections and encourage the use of state funds to pay for federal investigations and enforcement, at the same time that California and Texas are trying to pass state sanctuary laws that mimic the 1987 Oregon legislation.

DHS has jurisdiction on federal property, like the Portland federal courthouse and the plaza across the street, where fascist groups like Patriot Prayer and associated groups (including Traditionalist Worker’s Party, Identity Europa, Hellshaking Street Preachers, American Freedom Keepers, and the Oath Keepers) have organized eight different rallies in the last year in Portland alone. Time and again, DHS and the Portland police collaborate to referee rallies, protests, and counter-protests. They have collected information on protesters and bystanders alike during past actions.

The information that Portland police collect is now available either for free or at a small price to the FBI. This includes the personal information of those kettled in crowd control activity, which the police promised they would delete and did not. Increasing collusion between the federal and local government means more surveillance, tighter information networks, and increasingly punitive actions against protesters.

Conclusion

Finally, we have to address how white supremacy in left-leaning and radical circles impacted the camp and the blockade.

To be clear, white people should never speak on behalf of affected communities. We should prevent white people from centering themselves in this struggle financially, physically, and politically. It makes sense to exclude white people from certain spaces. All incoming support should be directed to people and organizations that have been fighting against US ethnic cleansing. White people should be humble about their place in the fight.

With all that said, white people must not uncritically follow the leadership of people of color regardless of the political content of that leadership. Hostile forces have used this tendency as a tool to undermine the movement. We have seen the supposed differences between white and non-white activists manipulated and exacerbated. People’s motivations for using this rhetoric may have been narcissism, a desire to hold power, or a belief that they were carrying out orders. Ultimately, it does not matter. At the end of the day, these dynamics left the camp fraught with power struggles and vulnerable to manipulation. Between these problems and “leaders” negotiating behind closed doors, the camp’s on-the-ground effectiveness was reduced to nothing before the first week was over.

People of color are not a monolith. One person of color should not be given the authority to speak for all people of color or to frame any particular tactic or strategy as “what all people of color want.” Important decisions that affect the group as a whole must be made by group consen-

sus, not by self-appointed leaders or figureheads. This goes double for decisions that specifically impact those who are most targeted by ICE and police forces.

We hope that you are able to apply these observations fruitfully in your own context, whatever that might be. Here are some proposals we consider useful:

- Research how the immigration system works. Who is involved? Who benefits? What are the bottlenecks, contradictions, and vulnerabilities?
- Make real connections with and follow the lead of grassroots groups that have been involved in migration and deportation defense.
- Don't fixate on a single camp or occupation. The imprisonment and deportation system depends on legal, administrative, material, and information logistics. This means both that the system has many vulnerabilities and that the system is often versatile enough to work through disruptions. We should always be changing and innovating new tactics.
- Research these groups: GEO Group, CoreCivic (formerly CCA), Global Tel Link (GTL), and Corizon. Find them by their formal names or hidden behind their shell LLCs. Let everyone know who they are, what they do, how much money they're making, and what people can do to stop them or cost them money. They are probably doing business in your area, so let the community know about their actions.
- Find out which local companies and contractors are supporting these operations. For example, we found out the name of the company that is leasing the fence to DHS. Put them on blast.
- Put pressure on local politicians, but expect them to betray you. Call your "representatives" if you want, but create a plan to hold them publicly accountable. Keep their feet to the fire of public scrutiny.
- Every deportation is potentially life-threatening. The increasing threat of deportation itself silences communities and endangers people. Remind everyone of this regularly and loudly. For some people, there is no "next time."
- Download Canva and make memes. Share them. Do what you need to do to get your message trending in the digital age.
- Billboards and bus stop ads are usually not guarded at night. Get creative. Remember that keeping it simple and bold is the most effective method.
- We are in a war of attrition. We have to exhaust their resources and their capacity to operate, while undercutting the perceived legitimacy that protects them from the effects of public outrage.
- Take the initiative. You have complete autonomy. Find ways to take action while supporting yourself and the people around you.

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