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Occupy ICE Portland: Policing Revolution?

Some Critical Reflections

CrimethInc.

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house, and always hold yourself and your comrades accountable.
ICE is starting to melt, but we're just warming up.

with love,

Your local mindless anarchists hell-bent on nothing but destruction

belonging ourselves a tent city. If nothing changes, our commune will collapse before the police even attempt to raid it.

The occupation has been remarkable in garnering support and sparking grand aspirations. The amount of effort and organization put into sustaining the commune is commendable. But right now, we are doing nothing to hinder deportations or support detainee organizing. Occupiers are living comfortably while ICE continues its reign of terror next door. With all its flaws, the commune has taught us and transformed us. Still, it's time to abandon our notions of space and romanticized community and consider what it would mean to build a movement based on unconditional hospitality, real care, and actual militancy.

If it stays as it is, the commune will continue to drain resources and police insurrectionary potential while amounting to nothing more than a mild inconvenience to ICE employees. With the widespread popularity of increasingly radical abolitionist politics, we have the opportunity to bring people into our analysis and agitate against state control and hierarchy in general. We must back up our utopian visions by showing the revolutionary possibility of a world free of borders and authority. This is not a call to abandon the occupation altogether or to allow ICE to resume as normal. This is a reminder of the need for constant critique and a space to have these conversations. We ask our comrades to consider our goals and examine our tactics. Opportunities for meaningful action exist within the commune but only if we overhaul our current commitment to passivity and let go of our desire to be palatable to the state.

Furthermore, we call for a decentralized approach. ICE isn't just a building, so don't let your actions be limited to it. Seek out all of the appendages that keep the machine running and strike while we have the power. The information is out there. Find your comrades, form an affinity group, and get to work. Redecorate your local GEO Group building, throw a block party in front of an ICE agent's

We've received the following report from participants in the occupation around the Portland facilities of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). While our collective has no official position on issues internal to the occupation, we consider it important to promote constructive conversations about power dynamics within our movements and the ways that they can impose limits on what we can accomplish together. For more material on this subject, consult our earlier report, "The ICE Age Is Over: Reflections from the ICE Blockades." Shortly, for the sake of amplifying multiple perspectives, we will add one more text from Portland.

"Criticize the comrade, take a criticism from the comrade." -Bambu

"We do NOT touch the police tape. We do NOT block the street," a "leader" of the Portland occupation screamed through a megaphone at a crowd of newly arrived demonstrators near the reopened ICE facility. Organic anger from a group of mostly liberals led to a brief confrontation with Federal Protective Services (FPS/DHS), which was quickly quashed by an internal security team. People were ushered onto the sidewalk and scolded for not following supposedly "collective" agreements. The building remained untouched as protesters who were eager to agitate were made to feel guilty and illegitimate.

In the last three weeks of Portland's occupation at the ICE building, we've found ourselves caught between a desire to build with folks and a need to critique the ways that violence is sustained by our work. We've failed to address interpersonal violence and have left people isolated from the movement. We've prioritized the security of our "leaders" because of their contributions and their assumed necessity to our commune rather than making space for

conversation about sexual violence and the strategies we must implement to make sure folks are held accountable rather than simply “vouched for.” And we’ve lost sight of the initial goal of abolishing ICE.

Our occupation is said to be leading the movement against deportations across the country. We’re currently cohabitating with the ICE facility; as their work continues, we continue to sit back with our La Croix in hand and practice “self-care.” In many ways, this commune has been helpless since its inception, demonstrating the need to build conversation and criticism into our work.

When it comes down to it, the vast majority of us here have no idea how to coexist in a commune; we are improvising. We offer up this criticism knowing that it’s much easier to critique than to build. We write this in hopes of making space for continual analysis, collective reflection, and commitment to future organizing.

More than anything, we must practice humility and be conscious of our role in this organizing work. Shutting down an ICE building for over two weeks is a huge feat, and we do not want to diminish this accomplishment. But we cannot forget the people who our commune is said to be built on behalf of: undocumented folks, and specifically undocumented children, who are suffering in detention centers around the country. We remind ourselves first and foremost that these people do not need our saving. Amazing organizing efforts have been led by undocumented folks in and out of detention centers, often largely by undocumented women. They’ll be doing that whether or not we sleep out here tonight. Still, solidarity efforts are crucial to dismantling these walls and to abolishing ICE.

The commune is exciting because it’s an opportunity to experiment with different organizing strategies and visions for another world. We have an amazing kitchen staff, an incredible kids area, and overall an impressive space. But we also have a pseudo-policing unit, extremely flawed approaches to navigating accusations of sexual violence, and potential security threats. At

ations to a sort of Burning Man commune peacefully coexisting with DHS. With an assortment of sparkling water, open yoga sessions, and nightly concerts contrasted by armored snipers on the roof and makeshift barricades covered in circle-As, the camp has the look of a leftist music festival—Anarchoachella, if you will. Camaraderie is important and nothing is inherently wrong with creating a comfortable space. But our focus has been abandoned and our inclination towards action has dissipated.

When attempting to initiate an urgently-needed discussion on possible actions the night before ICE resumed work in the building, organizers were met with hostility for interrupting a music show and berated by a crowd of mostly newcomers about the necessity of “self-care” and “taking a break.” After a night of dancing and consuming kale salads, they put up no resistance as ICE agents poured into the building the next morning. While this is unintentional, we are capitalizing on the suffering of children and wasting resources to live out our collective ideological fantasies. If holding space is prioritized over disrupting deportations and separations, the commune is nothing more than a bourgeois liberal playground.

Stop Embarrassing the Movement

In our struggle to smash the borders and end the deadly policing of them, we have replicated the same institutions we oppose. Our camp is encircled in barriers separating ourselves from the capitalist hellworld and the flow of people is strictly controlled. Our own security cameras monitor the movements of occupiers and the entrances and exits are restricted to a few gates. We have created categories of those who belong and those who don’t. A list has been compiled of commune exiles that includes critics, utopians, and anti-authoritarians. ACAB adorns the wall but the “Care Team” is a border patrol of its own. Rampant anti-houseless rhetoric prompts exclusion of those perceived as houseless while simultaneously la-

be further targeted by police, face harsher sentences, and gain less sympathy from white civil society. However, the weaponizing of identity in order to police certain actions not only means speaking on behalf of a population “in need of protection,” it also attempts to make any discussion about risk, tactics, and actions impossible and to shut down political conversation.

If we believe that we can remove risk and danger from this work, then we ultimately must commit to reproducing the existing social order. There will be risk in disrupting ICE and danger in threatening white civil society. People should analyze the risks, the dangers they face personally, and determine whether or not they want to take an action or be in a specific space. We need to build in support so we do not reserve specific actions for more privileged people—but winning with “passive resistance” is a fantasy.

To assume that we must resist passively in order to accommodate more vulnerable commune members falsely ties militance to whiteness. We think of Jackie Wang’s essay, “Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety,” in which she takes on this question of risk. Wang writes,

“When an analysis of privilege is turned into a political program that asserts that the most vulnerable should not take risks, the only politically correct politics becomes a politics of reformism and retreat, a politics that necessarily capitulates to the status quo while erasing the legacy of Black Power groups like the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army.”

We think about people who have been resisting in deportation centers since before ICE’s inception, about militant direct action taken by undocumented students across the country and the need for further militancy to dismantle patriarchy, white supremacy, and the settler-colonial state.

A feeling of complacency has spread throughout the camp as it has transitioned from a militant attempt to shut down ICE oper-

this point, preserving the commune has become a more central project than actually disrupting ICE. We’ve failed to build a space to assess and change our strategies as they inevitably fail or are co-opted. Consequently, our commune has done little to interrogate the ways it reproduces and legitimizes policing, surveillance, and heteropatriarchal violence.

Ultimately, much of our work has been whitewashed, neutralized, and made non-threatening to the state—that’s how we’ve been able to be legitimized as an action that will not be touched by the Portland Police Bureau (PPB). We supposedly decided that the commune will now only engage in “passive resistance,” a concept as oxymoronic as “good policing” or “public property.” The commune’s internal police force, known as the “Care Team,” has worked to ensure that protesters “keep in line.” Our commitment to the commune’s continued existence has become a commitment to establishing a framework in which insurgent and revolutionary politics become unimaginable.

“All Cops” Means the Pretend Ones Too

Seizing the lack of structure as an opportunity for a power grab, a group of people created a self-appointed security team within the first few days. Sporting pink bandannas as an emblem of this new committee, the group established a visible manifestation of their higher status.

From the beginning, the team consisted primarily of individuals with a pattern of taking control and policing others at past demonstrations. Masquerading as anarchists and radicals, these people implement authoritarian practices and recreate the state structures we have set out to abolish. The ideology of many of those on the security team is indecipherable; sometimes it appears that their primary motive is power.

The security phenomenon is a recurring issue in Portland. At almost every rally or march, one finds the same dozen people role-playing as cops, following around “suspicious” people. They hold themselves above the participants, who they are there to “protect.” The people who assume this role never appear on the front lines fighting riot police; they can’t be found when there is a real security threat. They pounce on the lone agitator, getting enough action to bolster their ego and flex their power. The anarchist symbols covering the camp are purely aesthetic, since we continue to let security govern us.

The security team created a monopoly on information, keeping important reports about threats to themselves. Using this lack of transparency to their advantage, security members were able to justify their existence through distorted threats and the instilling of fear—a tactic habitually used by the state. Calling a “code red” one night, security commanded people to retreat into tents while refusing to offer information as to what the situation was. Terrified newcomers and children scrambled back with no grasp on how severe the threat actually was.

Their authority allows them to determine the political legitimacy of people’s thoughts and actions, as well as deciding which actions are “too risky” for the commune to engage in. We’ve seen women enter the space with questions about the work, only to be told, “Do you really want to know or are you just being facetious?” We’ve seen folks heckling Homeland Security Officers told that they’re “kids” and therefore should get back in line and listen to the commune authority. We’ve seen comrades lambasted and told to leave for attempting civil disobedience.

All of this is done under the guise of “protecting” people of color and trans folks. We are open to discussing tactics, but we will not stand for a security team that grounds its work in the patriarchal protection of black, brown, and trans people and that insists on policing all forms of political action, analysis, and engagement.

its meaning and value, and it seems that the leaders don’t care about resisting, just about passivity.

The assumption at the camp seems to be that by engaging in their version of passive resistance, we will swing the media coverage and stall a police attack. It sounds great in theory, but it appears to ignore history altogether. Those who embrace this framework are operating under the illusion that if we are peaceful and compliant with police orders, we can exist in harmony with the state. This ignores every peaceful protest that has been ambushed by riot police, every “passive” mobilization that has been squashed by the state, every instance of police brutality. It buys into the notion that our behavior dictates how the police will treat us, the same idea recited by Fox News pundits after police murders. In reality, the state cares little about how we behave. The authorities make their own excuses with the assistance of the media and attack on their own initiative. The goal of abolishing ICE and the practice of physically shutting it down puts us in conflict with the state. Since the camp is diametrically opposed to the state and its wishes, a police attack is inevitable. Peacefulness and compliance will not seduce the state into inaction, it will just take away our power. In conceding our power, we let our safety lie in the hands of the police.

On June 28, while most of the camp slept, federal police cleared the entrances and arrested multiple people. Our barricades were ripped down, and the veteran camp in the driveway was torn to pieces—despite their peacefulness. The police proved that they didn’t need an excuse to move on the camp. Yet leaders are still calling for “passive resistance” and employing vulnerability politics to suppress militancy.

The Care Team frequently falls back on the claim that any escalation would “put __ group at risk,” using the most convenient marginalized identity at hand to make this argument. The “risk” that they claim to be defending people from is the potential for arrests or police brutality directed towards people of color and trans people. This analysis is not incorrect; less privileged people will

The work of transformative justice is tricky and we've seen few attempts at it done well. But that should not cause us to conclude it is not necessary in our work. If we learned anything from zines like *Why Misogynists Make Great Informants*, essays like *Betrayal: A Critical Analysis of Rape Culture in Anarchist Subcultures*, and the book *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities*, it is that this sort of misogyny in our circles is nothing new. We know that these forms of violence and harm take place within our communities. We build with our shared commitment to holding ourselves and each other accountable.

What's the Point: Passive Resistance and Smashing the State

If you've spent any time at the camp, you are probably familiar with the obsession with "passive resistance." It's hard to miss. The phrase is posted on the entrance to the camp, mindlessly thrown around by "leaders," and praised by the liberals who come and go. As much as it is used, nobody seems to know what it means or how we came to embrace it. This section will not be focused on the failures of nonviolence. That story has been written countless times and we've all sat through arguments over it. Instead, we focus on how self-appointed leaders twist the idea to shut down virtually any resistance to ICE.

Passive resistance is not about passivity, it is about resistance. It is peaceful, but it is not compliance. At the camp, the term is being pulled further and further from its definition. When a few daring comrades tried to lock arms on the side entrance, blocking in the federal agents, they were attacked for not practicing proper resistance. Other people tried linking themselves together in the driveway, but were criticized by leaders for poking the bear. Even yelling at police is a bit too provocative. Passive resistance has lost

The members of the security team are able to absolve themselves of responsibility for their policing efforts by leaning on "consensus-based decisions." In confronting someone who is "out of line," they argue that they're simply carrying out orders. Whose orders these are is entirely unclear. Consensus by itself can be employed as a tactic for repressing autonomous action. But the commune takes it one step further by neglecting to actually engage in true consensus decision-making. The general assemblies here occur sporadically and happen at inaccessible times. The result is that an invisible, unknown, exclusive committee of people reach a decision which is then stamped as group consensus and forced on everyone else. There is a hidden rigid hierarchy disguised in careful leftist language to isolate critics. Blatantly false statements are thrown around, such as "EVERYONE living at camp agrees that..." or "the overwhelming CONSENSUS is..." This destroys any space for critique and gives those new to the camp the impression that everyone is in unanimous agreement.

We understand the need to disrupt the "ally industrial complex" in which white people, those new to the movement, and other "privileged" folks sit on the side and cheer on our POC comrades. At this point, more and more people want to get involved, and that's crucial. People who show up must be understood as potential comrades and legitimate political actors. The liberal who decides to scream at the cops is engaging in an activity that might further radicalize them—and yet we choose to police that work, tell them it's out of line, and demand that the ways we disrupt ICE be narrow and pre-approved. How do we expect to expand this movement if we teach our potential comrades that their political analysis is irrelevant? Why should they return to this work if they are told that their ideas, opinions, and forms of action are incorrect? If our goal is to build a new world, we have to start by not replicating the old. Ultimately, we're isolating potential comrades and disciplining our collective political imagination.

Security Team 2.0: Your Misogyny is Showing

After initial criticism of the internal police force, the security team rebranded themselves as “the Care Team.” This attempt to rebrand leans on understandings of the importance of care—the feminized labor that sustains the social and emotional well-being of the commune. When we think of care, we think of our kitchen staff, the folks who hold down the childcare tent, and those partaking in other forms of feminized work. Excluding those folks from “the” Care Team is not only a tactic the internal police uses to avoid accountability, but is also a disrespectful manipulation of feminist understandings of care.

We hear more and more in leftist circles about the need to build a new world based on a politics of care. We understand care as feminized work of listening, working to understand people’s emotional needs, and validating and supporting all who enter our spaces. It’s a call to collectivize our traumas and strategies for healing, which should not be conflated with neoliberal notions of “self-care.” We see much of the work of care tied to Black Feminist analysis, the work of the Movement for Black Lives, and in prison abolitionist circles. We want to expand that work in order to build a movement for each other.

Contrary to many beliefs, “care” is not about a practice of patriarchal protection, nor a politics based on policing potential threats. The current campaign of Critical Resistance, “Care Not Cops,” does the necessary work of disrupting notions of “good policing,” making it clear that policing and care are incompatible. Care is an acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others and a recognition of the need to collaborate for our collective survival.

Men Ruin Movements: Addressing Gendered Violence within Our Communities

Within minutes of entering the commune we learn that one of the core organizers is a person with serious accusations against them. Of course, it’s not our job to snoop around and try to determine whether or not this specific person is “guilty,” nor necessarily to call for their immediate removal. But we do want to know whether there is a process by which accusations are heard, people’s experiences are validated, and action is taken to hold people accountable and to ensure that those making these accusations feel welcomed in. We want to see a commitment to addressing and disrupting gendered violence and other forms of harm. And we want to know that these conversations are at the forefront of the community we seek to build.

When men are in charge, apparently, this becomes too much to ask for. When we ask why someone is still on the core “Care Team,” we are told that despite accusations, this person has been “vouched for.” His leadership position and the amount he’s contributed become grounds for delegitimizing and failing to address accusations. We hear excuses about organizational capacity used to put accusations of sexual violence on the back burner until we can give them the attention they need.

Our shared critiques of criminal justice procedures and commitments to abolishing the prison industrial complex are being used to justify not addressing the sexual violence accusations against people. The counterargument that people of color are more likely to face incarceration is not wrong; however, to use this as a justification not to hold people accountable is disappointing. To manipulate these realities in order to avoid even having conversations about feminist praxis only further embeds our work in the same patriarchal structures that we claim to oppose.