

The ICE Age Is Over

Reflections from the ICE Blockades

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Starting in mid-June, occupations sprang up around the United States in protest against ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement). These occupations were a response to ICE policies which include separating families as they cross the border, incarcerating and drugging undocumented children, and deporting millions of undocumented people of all ages, often to places where they will be put in grave danger. In the following accounts from the ICE occupations in Portland, Tacoma, and Atlanta, participants reflect on some of the internal challenges facing movements against the border regime.

Portland: Cracking the ICE

After itching to do something, anything, about the violence being enacted by ICE, I was pleased to hear that some folks participating in the march held on June 17 and ending at the ICE facility at 4310 SW Macadam Avenue in Portland had decided that they weren't leaving. My first visit to the space that would become the commune was on June 19 in the early afternoon. If memory serves, there were only a handful of tents, one or two canopies with kitchen and first aid supplies, and perhaps one portajohn. After observing for an hour or two, I approached folks to ask if there was anything I could bring and was asked to supply the encampment with ice and another cooler if possible.

In the hour it took me to run that errand, the small scattering of three or four tents became nine or ten, and then 40 or so people became, by my approximation, over 100.

While ICE agents were still trapped in the building, a pizza delivery person showed up (from Bellagios, I think) to deliver food to the ICE agents. After walking around the building multiple times and not finding a way in, he gave up and left the huge stack of pizzas with the protesters.

When I showed up after work the next day, the camp was bigger still. That day, there was some alarm when DHS (Department of Homeland Security) showed up. People rallied and ran to the front entrance on the Macadam side of the building and were quickly forced aside by DHS. While I chose to stay behind in the driveway, in the event that that was the next target, by all accounts DHS escorted ICE agents who had been trapped inside the building into their vehicles, with many of the ICE agents covering their faces.

Over the next few days, the camp expanded to include between 80 and 100 tents on either side of the bike path, in front of the main driveway, and spilling over into a field adjacent to the facility—as well as a large kitchen, a childcare area, a communications team, an engineering team, a medical tent, a front entrance check-in area, and more. The engineering team, with the help of fellow occupiers and community members who delivered loads of pallets and furniture, fortified the encampment with barricades. We also worked on creating a boardwalk of sorts down the trolley tracks to provide a wheelchair-accessible way to reach all the tents providing services and in hopes of potentially creating more space for tents.

On Thursday, June 28, at 5:30 am, DHS tore down the barricade from the door on the Macadam side of the building to the far side of the driveway in order to enable officers and transport vehicles to come and go again. After many days of being shuttered, the building was open again.

I wasn't able to make it until that afternoon, but the difference was striking. There was still an air of lightheartedness, but the seriousness of the situation was unmistakable. We had known

it was coming and here it was. I opted to park far away and walk into the camp. DHS vehicles were absolutely infesting the surrounding area. I walked into the camp and immediately spotted snipers on the roof. Small children were yelling at them: “Quit your job!” and “You should feel bad!” There was a line of DHS officers in full riot gear lining the edge of the driveway, facing off with protestors. The engineering team was furiously assembling more barricades. The press was assembled outside near the entrance; I almost walked face-first into a camera as I was trying to access the sidewalk. Security was tighter. I overheard security ask multiple people who were standing around what they were doing.

Overall, for me personally, it was a tremendously heartening experience. I worked with teams of people who were organized and dedicated. The atmosphere was refreshingly lively and upbeat, with children running around and people of all stripes showing up to support the occupation with their labor, their bodies, and their time, or just to get a hot meal. I saw anarchists working alongside DSA, and lots of awesome solidarity. I witnessed vital, important work being done toward the goal of dismantling ICE.

That said, the occupation was not without its problems. I heard that comrades were thrown out for tagging the Tesla building and I wanted to find out what had gone down. When I first approached someone from the security team, they seemed as outraged as I was; they took me to folks who might know more.

I found myself speaking to two people. One seemed concerned bordering on exhausted; the other seemed annoyed bordering on hostile and eventually walked away from me. I didn’t have a lot of information at that moment, so I accepted that the person I was talking to didn’t either and left it at that. The day of the crackdown (June 28), I approached the person who had walked away from me, introduced myself, and stated that I hadn’t been there to cause problems, that I was genuinely concerned, and that I had more information if they wanted to talk about it. From my end, this was an earnest attempt to make peace with this person. They proceeded to berate me for defending the people who had done the tagging, telling me that it was inappropriate and put marginalized people at risk, that the account I heard from one of the people who was expelled was false. The person I was speaking with kept referring to some sort of nebulous “leadership,” and insinuated that the only reason I was there was to get the expelled person’s stuff back. When I tried to express that actually I was making an attempt to offer an olive branch, despite our difference of opinion, they told me they were done with me and walked away.

This inability to have a conversation is a big problem. And that conversation is not just about property destruction—we have that one all the damn time. But I had legitimate questions: Was “no property destruction” a ground rule that had been decided upon at a General Assembly? How were new people invited into the space? Were they made aware of the ground rules? Who has the right to determine the proper form of resistance to an institution as hateful as ICE? Was there a protocol established regarding how to handle violations? Was there any accountability for people on the security team or in any other position abusing power? I think these are major recurring problems in spaces like this that need to be addressed before we can start organizing across tendencies in any meaningful way.

Portland and Tacoma: You Can't Build a Movement Based on Shame

I spent time at both the blockade in Portland, Oregon and the Northwest Detention Center Occupation in Tacoma, Washington. I think it is so inspiring and exciting that these occupations and blockades are happening all over the country. I wish they were happening in every city, at every ICE facility.

At both of these occupations, there were many anarchists with whom I felt affinity; but there were also aspects of these occupations that reminded me of the worst parts of the 2011 Occupy movement—including an intense form of privilege politics that I had hoped we had learned from and moved on from in the past seven years.

One of the most exciting aspects of resistance during times of intense repression and authoritarianism such as the time we are experiencing now is the number of people who are radicalized and join anarchist struggles. It is a huge opportunity for us—a time to spread anarchist ideas. Newly radicalized people are looking for direction. Often, however, they will follow the loudest voices—and the loudest voices are often the liberals or self-appointed “leadership” of a movement. I have seen both new people and seasoned revolutionaries controlled by authoritarian privilege politics, accepting them out of fear of being seen as racist—even though most privilege politics are themselves racist, involving self-appointed white leaders claiming to speak for all people of color and claiming that people of color are always peaceful.

This is not to say that racism is not a problem in anarchist scenes. But adhering to reactionary privilege politics can be as bad as not addressing it at all.

At the occupation at the Northwest Detention Center, there were moments when the General Assembly was filled with anarchists; at these times, the assembly made consensus decisions to never talk to the police and to not have a police liaison or any sort of security force, and agreed that snitching and sexual assault were the only acceptable reasons to kick someone out of camp without discussion. There were other times when the General Assembly was full of liberals, self-appointed all-white leadership, and even a person who threatened to snitch if someone did anything illegal. These were the moments the camp felt most stifling. We were told by that all-white “leadership” that the only acceptable action was to build the camp, for example, by cooking and organizing supplies. They maintained that any other actions would harm the people inside the detention center—all of whom, apparently, did not want tactics to escalate beyond cooking and taking out the trash.

To be clear: the NWDC is one of the biggest immigration prisons in the country. How they asked all 1500 people trapped inside it what tactics they do and don't support was never explained to us (and of course they could not and did not consult with all of these people).

At the Portland occupation, I saw some people aggressively shamed for tagging the Tesla showroom. They were screamed at and kicked out of the occupation at 3 am. I also saw those same people later being described as white, although half of them were people of color, because it didn't fit into the leadership's privilege politics narrative to admit that many people of color are invested in confrontational politics and escalation. As they were verbally assaulted and kicked out of camp, they were told that because they had tagged the Tesla showroom, it would be their fault if the police came to the blockade and took children away from their parents.

At the Tacoma blockade, one afternoon, a nonviolent direct action training took place. It began with two white people and one person of color aggressively shaming everyone in the space for the actions of the police. According to them, it was our fault that the ICE agents were torturing and raping people inside because demonstrators had been standing in the street the night before. It was our fault the ICE agents were torturing and raping people inside because a couple demonstrators had been drinking beer.

We must remember that the violence of the police is never our fault. The violence inflicted upon the migrants detained within the Northwest Detention Center, despite being escalated during the protest outside, is still entirely the fault of the police inflicting it.

Many of the people in the nonviolent direct action training were white folks who had never been to a protest before and were heavily influenced by being shamed and told how racist they were. This type of privilege politics, built on shaming people into inaction, is not how you build a movement. It doesn't build momentum, it shuts it down. It doesn't inspire people, it shuts them down. Shame is a feeling that does nothing but disempower people, which is the exact opposite of our goal—building power, together.

As I watched the people being kicked out of the Portland blockade that night, the “security team” evicting them repeatedly expressed the belief that if there was graffiti, the police would immediately come and shut down the camp. As if the police wouldn't come to an illegal blockade if the building hadn't been tagged! As if the police were allowing the camp to exist because of some morality that the police and the protestors shared, and the only reason the police would come would be if that morality were no longer shared. It was as if they believed that the protestors and the police had come to an agreement, in which as long as the police could trust the protestors to police each other, then the protestors could trust the police not to evict the camp.

But the police can never be trusted, and they will never share our ethics. We know, both from the logic of the state's position as well as from our experience in past actions, that the police will always come—just as soon as they have the force to do so. However, the amount of force they need to evict a camp or shut down a demonstration often depends on how confrontational the demonstration is. The more confrontational the occupation, the more force the police will need to evict it and the longer it will take for them to amass that force.

One recent example of this is the Olympia blockade, which barricaded an active railroad for 12 days. The entire neighborhood was covered in anti-police graffiti. Cement was poured on the tracks. Security cameras were taken down. Parking meters in the area were broken. At any given time, the greatest number of people you might find at the blockade would be ~50–100. At night, it was down to 5–20 people. By contrast, if we count from the first day of the overnight occupation in Portland to the day the ICE building was reopened, the Portland blockade lasted 10 days—and the number of people at that blockade was often 1000 or more.

The graffiti—and the smashed parking meters, broken security cameras, and so forth—at the Olympia blockade did not cause the police to come sooner. It actually took them longer to come, despite the blockade being only a fraction of the size of the Portland blockade. At the Portland blockade, people were busy policing each other. The actual cops didn't even need to come. The protestors themselves were protecting the property of the government and the showrooms of capitalism. (Never mind that both the Tesla showroom and the ICE facility are owned by a man who openly admitted to running his Mercedes into demonstrators.)

We are in a time of crisis, in which the overt white nationalist terror of the state is clearer than ever. In this moment, we should build autonomous spaces in which people can take action

outside of the control of politicians and peace police. We believe this because of our political ethics of autonomy, but it is strategic as well. Confrontational tactics are a threat to the state, whereas any protest tactics that do not actually threaten the power of white supremacy can only reinforce it. The stronger we make the barricades, the longer we can hold off the police. The less we police each other, the less power we give to them.

As anarchists, how do we counter the politics of leadership, inaction and shame? How do we build our power even as the liberals and peace police are actively trying to strip it from us?

Atlanta: The ICE Age Is Over

In Atlanta thousands of people gathered early Saturday morning for a “Keep Families Together” march organized by NGOs and members of the Democratic Party. Currently, several dozen participants in this march are still occupying a plaza outside the City Jail, which doubles as an ICE detention facility. While the group seems set to stay the night, the occupation still has a long way to go to connect with the thousands who took the street earlier in the day.

Strangely, the coalition that called for this march chose to start at the ICE facility, then marched away to go listen to speeches outside of a closed federal building. Surrounding the physical building where hundreds of immigrants are detained seemed like a good start, but the politicians in charge of the rally moved away from the site of real power to a symbolic site. Some participants who had their families in tow were overheard lamenting that the march was a little too tame for them, even with their kids in tow.

Autonomous groups and leftist groups that utilize non-electoral strategies had organized before the large demonstration to continue the march and return to the jail. After the rally was dismissed, a large banner reading “ICE BREAKERS: Chinga La Migra” was stretched across the street accompanied by chanting and drums. Several hundred joined, despite liberal protest marshals attempting to discourage them from doing so. Together, they marched back to the jail, holding the streets the whole way.

Peachtree Street was blocked outside the jail as hundreds chanted and waved to those locked up inside. Cops drove motorcycles through the crowd, but the crowd did not back down; soon, a couch appeared in the streets and people began to set up tents. The atmosphere was festive, with many dancing to music or playing soccer. As the day wore on, the cops slowly began to encroach on the occupation, forcing people to clear the street, confiscating the couch and tents, and violently arresting one person. Numbers fluctuated throughout the day but remained over 50.

As of this writing, the occupation is ongoing, having resisted the initial attempts to push it out. There still remains a lot to do. The terrain of the occupation is favorable to autonomous groups and anarchists because we were the ones to push for it and to make it logistically possible, but unfortunately these circles comprise the bulk of the camp. Democrats were the first to call for an action and they sucked up the spontaneous energy of thousands with their march in the morning, though it is likely that whoever had been the first to call for a march would have drawn a large number of demonstrators.

We were enraged by the concentration camps and sought to catalyze a real movement against them. This energy was enough to enable us to push for an occupation. Now we need to figure out how to bridge the distance between those who carry signs declaring #abolishice and those who want to shut down the ICE facilities themselves. How can the occupations grow, spread, and mutate?

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