

Welcome to the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ)

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What is CHAZ?

The Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) will most likely be a short lived communal project of local socialists and anarchists in Seattle. But it's fascinating lesson in how to build communal societies and what benefits they can provide to a large group of people. After a week of tough protesting against the Seattle PD, local anarchists began to create roadblocks in and around the Capitol Hill area of Seattle once the department retreated from their East Precinct. CHAZ was established only after the Seattle PD abandoned that precinct. Capitol Hill is a posh, LGBTQ community where a lot of younger urban professionals already lived. On June 8th, they officially declared a six block radius under their complete control and gave it a new name, The Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ), aka "Free Capitol Hill." Anarchists used the moniker "Free Capitol Hill" in homage to the "Free Derry" sign erected in the Bogside neighborhood of the Northern Ireland city of Derry, which became an embattled city during the Troubles. These developments are amazing when you consider that in just two weeks, three different police precincts were either abandoned or burned down (2 in Minneapolis, 1 in Seattle). We've never seen this before in America and it does signal what can be possible through numbers and sheer determination. Now, obviously the goal is not to take over police stations, but to defund departments and attempt to rebuild policing from the ground up. Some may toe the line of "reform" but anarchists and socialists in this country know that much more than that is needed. CHAZ is a local experiment, but one worth taking lessons from and it's a breath of fresh air during a time of inhumanity.

The Establishment of CHAZ

On June 7, the mayor of Seattle, Jenny Durkan announced that no more tear gas can be used and only de-escalation techniques going forward. That night and the night of June 8th, her department decided to use tear gas anyway because like most mayors in the country, they have no control of their brutish and unaccountable police departments. Video surfaced late on the night of June 8th of tear gas filling an entire street in the Capitol Hill district. This video went viral, but what didn't go viral was the Seattle PD's tactical retreat that happened later in the night and the subsequent complete control that was gained in the district by local anarchists and socialists. By the morning of June 9th, that six block radius was in their complete control. Roadblocks were erected, signs were put up and artists came in to put their stamp on the community. As far as internal governance goes, there is none of course. It's an experiment in de-centralized governance operating as a *de facto* anarchist region. It's probably most similar to Freetown Christiania which is an intentional commune in the borough of Christianshavn in the city of Copenhagen, Denmark.

Daily Life in CHAZ

Tents have been pitched next to the abandoned police station and local medics, artists, civil servants and restaurateurs have flooded the zone in order to provide their services. It's estimated that about 200 residents are currently occupying CHAZ and have come from all over the city of Seattle. On June 9th, they established the "No Cop Co-op", which hands out free water, hand sanitizer, snacks, masks and kebabs. An intersection was cordoned off to provide "teach-ins" which are basically soapbox lectures on how to run a co-op and how to build effective communes.

Other speakers educate people on police brutality and protesting tactics moving forward. A large screen outdoor cinema was set up with a large projector and portable toilets were donated from the Seattle Transportation Department. Additionally, homemade riot shields are being made and distributed to everyone in the commune. Going forward, local zoners also hope to build a cohesive labor movement that can spread across the Northwest. National organizations like CODEPINK support the commune stating “police are the real instigators.” Local activists in CHAZ have decided to use a pink umbrella as their symbol to show solidarity with those in Hong Kong whose techniques have been copied by protestors all over the world. As mentioned earlier, street medics have flooded the zone and play a major role. Many of them are college educated and have experience being in the field during protests. They also have created medic tents in order to deal with the future conflicts that they will surely have with the police.

The Demands and What Lies Ahead

On June 9th, CHAZ representatives released a list of demands that were authored by many of the collective voices in the zone. Most of them are extremely realistic and can be accomplished if Seattle actually had a representative government instead of one that works for Amazon. The list of demands falls under four categories: economics, education, the justice system and health and human services. The authors stated further that the zone was on land taken from the local Native American Duwamish people over a century ago. The Pacific Northwest has a long history with native tribes and the collective voices of the zone realize that. Additionally, they have requested no violence be used in attempts to remove the zoners and that they be allowed to operate in a communal structure in order to “show the country what is possible through collective voices.” CHAZ has been praised by the IWW’s *Industrial Worker* publication as an effective way to distribute badly needed social services. The irony behind the creation of CHAZ is that austerity measures have been put in many American cities since the CARES bailout back in March. This is expected during crises and it’s not acceptable to those not just in CHAZ but protesting within the BLM movement. Austerity has been a prime focus during these protests because while police departments across the country see their budgets increase every year, every other line item of public services continue to be cut. Anarchists in the zone realize they need to do more planning going forward. They have already begun deputizing scouts and are working on expanding their perimeter even more. Smoking areas have been designated and local marijuana growers have flooded the zone to provide free marijuana. The anti-capitalist views of the inhabitants will create an atmosphere of brainstorming that will only serve the commune for the better going forward. As an example of this, many have begun talking about black-owned banks, divesting from local corporations and prison reform. Local activists even gave a soapbox speech criticizing the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), and how their representatives in conservative state legislatures write laws without “any clue” as to who they represent. The opportunity is there to create a flourishing commune in a short term project that will ultimately likely be destroyed at some point. The main goal is to provide a glimpse for Americans what can be possible through communal action when you operate outside of the system of government that many Americans take for granted. This is not a country that is used to communal action and most citizens probably don’t even know the definition of a co-op. Kshama Sawant is a Seattle City Council member and member of the Trotskyist Socialist Alternative Party (SA). She visited the zone on June 9th

and asked the residents to turn it into a community center for restorative justice. She agreed that there needs to be long term goals and that the method of going beyond policing (police abolition) needs to be analyzed and discoursed in the mainstream. Sawant did suggest caution though on pushing the city too far. She, along with the residents want to avoid future violence if the police do eventually move in to tear down the commune. The development of CHAZ is a real time education in community organizing and anarchist alternatives. Amazon and Boeing weren't going to provide the people of Seattle with basic life necessities. Those in CHAZ hope they can demonstrate that social services can be provided in a vacuum. They have stated they will continue to build the commune and will continue until they are forced out. Long live the commune!

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