

The battle of Portland

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On the 28th of May, 2020, three days after Minneapolis Police choked to death an unarmed black man called George Floyd, about a hundred or so protestors gathered outside the Multnomah County Justice Centre in downtown Portland, Oregon. Their target, contained in this high-rise complex of courtrooms and detention centres, was the Portland Police Bureau headquarters. Similar gatherings were happening throughout the United States and beyond as people, sickened at yet another black life extinguished by the protectors of law and order, held vigils and protests.

As the hours passed into days, their anger did not abate. Emboldened by what was rapidly becoming a global movement, hundreds became thousands. Songs and chants rang out. Despite the best efforts of police, the front facing windows of the complex were smashed, and emblazoned across the walls ran the slogan: Defund the Police!¹

Despite the constraints of life under the pandemic, organisations like Black Lives Matter, the NAACP, the Democratic Socialists of America, as well as a host of local groups like Rose City Justice and Care Not Cops, helped bring thousands on to Portland's streets. Over the coming months, amid Covid-19 and a spate of terrifying wildfires, Portland has played host to an intense and sustained struggle involving anti-racist protestors, local and federal police forces, and various gangs of far-right thugs. Events have unfolded at multiple locations in the city, often resulting in cat and mouse games between protestors and police. Following dispersal (often quite brutal) by police, protestors would regroup and hold firm at a new location. By the 31st of May, the centre of gravity had shifted to the Federal Courthouse in Portland's Pioneer Square, effectively Portland's 'living room'. Throughout the summer, and under constant and vicious assault from both local and later federal police, a community of anti-racist protestors maintained a presence here, their

numbers regularly swelling into the thousands.

George Floyd's killing was the catalyst. However, there were plenty of local reasons to come out. Portland is a city of many contrasts. On the one hand, it boasts a long tradition of resistance against oppression, of political and cultural radicalism, and it was the home of the revolutionary American journalist John Reed, whose *Ten Days that Shook the World* is the definitive eye-witness account of the Russian Revolution.² Over the years, Portland's lively left has organised numerous significant demonstrations against war, racism, and poverty. It is also regarded as a something of a haven for movements like Antifa and the Anarchist Black Bloc. Despite (or possibly because of) its reputation as a bastion of progressivism, however, Portland is no stranger to police violence and in particular violence against people of colour. In 1985, a black Vietnam veteran, Lloyd Stevenson, was killed in a police 'sleeper' chokehold outside a Portland 7-Eleven store.³ In a story which is horrifyingly familiar, Stevenson died while witnesses yelled out to police that they had the 'wrong guy' and that Stevenson had in fact tried to de-escalate the minor scuffle that had led to the police call. Protests followed, and despite a rare public inquest recommending a charge of negligent homicide, the officers involved were never prosecuted.

In the intervening years, many black Portlanders have died at the hands of the police: Kendra James, a mother of two, was shot during a traffic stop in 2003⁴; Aaron Campbell was shot by police during a so-called welfare check in 2010; seventeen year old Quance Hayes was shot while on his knees during an arrest in 2017 after an alleged robbery at a local motel.⁵ Particularly shocking was the case of Andre Gladen. Gladen, legally blind, homeless, and with schizophrenia, was killed by Portland police last year following an emergency call after Gladen was seen lying in a stranger's porch.⁶

The Portland Police Bureau (PPB) have frequently

been under investigation and supervision by the U.S. Department of Justice over its use of excessive force, especially against those with mental illness.⁷ Exacerbating the problem further is the lack of access to affordable housing (as well as healthcare). Portland has some of the highest rates of people living without proper shelter in the U.S.⁸ As a result, many live in sporadic 'Hooverville'-style encampments, leading to significant tensions with local businesses and frequent and brutal raids by city police.⁹

Oregon is predominantly white. This stems in large part from its history as a 'white-separatist' state that, although joining the Union on the eve of the U.S. Civil War, prohibited slavery by simply banning people of colour from settling there. Although this provision in the Oregon constitution was later removed, Oregon had a substantial Ku Klux Klan presence right up through the 1920s and '30s, maintaining the 'whiteness' of the state by racist terror.¹⁰ During the Second World War, which saw a small influx of black labourers into the state, Portland experienced some mild diversification. However, even today, Portland's population is 75 percent white, with an African American population of about 6 percent, the smallest of any major American city. The black community in Portland faces considerably higher rates of poverty (and all of its ensuing evils) than any other part of the population.¹¹ Facing displacement from the inner city amid increasing gentrification, black Portlanders have experienced continued harassment and violence from a police force whose officers are usually drawn from the surrounding (overwhelmingly white and more conservative) suburbs.

The protests in Portland that began last May arose out of the deep-seated anger towards the racism, brutality, and unaccountability of the city's police. This anger was vindicated daily by the sight of the Portland police viciously attacking protestors with rubber bullets, tear gas, and flash bangs, often at point-blank range. Recipients of this treatment often included journalists and photographers as well as protestors, who in many cases were clearly trying to comply with police orders.¹² Following a case brought by the group Don't Shoot (PDX), Judge Marco Hernández of the 9th Federal District Court cited 'evidence that officers have violated the constitutional rights of peaceful protesters'. This led to a temporary restraint on the use of tear gas and 'less

than lethal' ammunitions.¹³

Portland mayor Ted Wheeler, who at the time of writing is also the commissioner of police, is a liberal democrat who ran on a platform of police reform when elected in 2016. Despite campaigning as a culturally sensitive progressive who laments 'privilege as a white man', between 2016 and 2019 Wheeler actually increased the police budget while cutting funding for parks and recreation.¹⁴ As the protests continued throughout June, pressure was growing on Wheeler and the Portland City Council. In mid-June, the city council (consisting of five members including Wheeler) voted 3-1 in favour of reducing the police budget by \$15m dollars (about a 6 percent reduction). The dissenting vote, by Commissioner Chloe Eudaly (a tenant's rights activist elected in 2016), was motivated by disgust at the paltry reduction.¹⁵

In July, following an executive order by Trump, federal officers from a multiple agencies of the Department of Homeland Security arrived in Portland. These agencies included the U.S. Marshals Service, the Federal Protective Service, the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, and Homeland Security Investigations. Most of these agencies, like the Department of Homeland Security itself, came into existence following the attacks of the 11th of September, 2001, under the professed aim of fighting terrorism. Trump's stated purpose in sending these agents to Portland was to protect federal property (such as the Pioneer Square Courthouse). They were to 'restore law and order', something liberals like Wheeler were unable to do. The bigger strategy here was to make an example of a reputedly liberal stronghold. For Trump and the right of U.S. politics, crushing the protest movement in Portland would send a chilling message.

Unsurprisingly, Trump's heavily armed enforcers went about creating as much chaos as possible, showing little restraint as they set upon the protestors: Donovan La Bella was shot in the head by federal officers with a 'less-lethal' round, necessitating facial reconstruction surgery;¹⁶ Navy veteran Chris David, having peacefully approached the federal police line to remind them of their oaths, was beaten with a bat and pepper-sprayed in the face. Impressively, David stood still throughout the ordeal before walking calmly away (this despite a badly broken hand).¹⁷

A further sinister development was a series of abductions perpetrated by Trump's agents on protestors



who were heading to or from the demonstration. Mark Pettibone, a 29-year-old anti-racist activist described how he was kidnapped while walking home, tossed into an unmarked van, and held overnight in a cell before being released uncharged the next morning.¹⁸ These abductions and the general brutality of Trump's agents lead to widespread criticism by the Democratic establishment, including Oregon's elected representatives in the U.S. Senate and Congress. Moreover, it allowed Mayor Wheeler to take a principled media stand against Trump and this federal incursion. This however was to do little to redeem his reputation among those protesting.

The response by Portlanders to the behaviour of federal agents in their town was inspiring. Once again, the protest numbers swelled. On the 20th of July, the now famous 'Wall of Moms' (a group of Portland mothers) stood shoulder to shoulder to protect the protestors. Federal agents responded with tear gas.¹⁹ Undeterred, more protestors arrived, a 'Wall of Dads' equipped with leaf blowers to repel the chemical cloud, followed by a 'Wall of Vets' (military veterans).²⁰ On the 22nd of July, Mayor Wheeler ventured out to speak to the crowd. He was met with derision and calls to resign.²¹ Indeed, even when tear-gassed by federal agents later that night, Wheeler received little sympathy. After all, many of those present had received the same from Wheeler's police force only weeks before.

By the end of July and start of August, following

courageous and imaginative resistance by Portland's protestors, there was some reprieve. Federal agents had, at least temporarily, pulled back; many took refuge inside the federal courthouse itself. As August progressed, however, there were renewed clashes between protestors and local police throughout the city. By late August a new menace was emerging. Various fascist groups and far-right militias such as the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer, often from nearby towns such as Vancouver, Washington, were descending on Portland with the aim of violently disrupting the protests. On the 29th of August, a caravan of flag-emblazoned vehicles, the so-called Trump 2020 Cruise Rally, drove through Portland using paintball guns and pepper spray to attack protestors. During the rally, one participant, a member of the Patriot Prayer militia group called Aaron Danielson, was shot and killed. A few days later, Michael Reinohl, an anti-fascist activist suspected of Danielson's killing, was shot dead by police. Witnesses strongly contradict the police version of events, arguing that no attempt was made to arrest Reinohl. Trump later described Reinohl's killing as an act of 'retribution'.²²

Throughout September, with the Oregon air filled with smoke from deadly wildfires, protests continued, albeit with much-diminished numbers. Mayor Wheeler and Oregon State governor Kate Brown won praise for 'standing up to' Trump and for negotiating the withdrawal of federal agents.²³ However, the fundamental

problems with the Portland Police Bureau, as with police departments throughout the United States, remain. Portland's protest movement has won some victories. As well as a small defunding of the police department, various programs whereby Portland police patrolled high schools have been discontinued. Moreover, Portland State University has disarmed its campus police force (it is common for U.S. colleges to have their own armed police forces). It is worth noting that in 2018, an African American postal worker and U.S. Navy veteran, Jason Washington, was shot dead outside a bar by campus police. While the officers involved were never charged, Portland State University paid \$1m dollars in a settlement to Washington's family.

Importantly, the issues raised by these protests, in Portland and around the world, have gained wide support. In the United States, there is growing discontent at the excessively militarized police forces patrolling the country and the terror they inflict on working class people, especially people of colour. Familiar attempts at demonizing the protestors as violent thugs and looters have not managed to dissuade many people that—as their own eyes can plainly see—the really serious violence has stemmed from the forces of the state and their far-right supporters. The Black Lives Matter movement is now mainstream. What is more, once fringe positions like defunding (or even abolishing) the police are now up for discussion.

Along with the presidential and congressional elections, November also sees state and city elections across the United States. In Portland, polls suggest that Ted Wheeler is in serious danger of losing the mayoral election to left-wing challenger Sarah Iannarone. Iannarone, a strong supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement as well as an activist for housing and climate justice, has gained considerable support off the back of the protest movement. A victory for Iannarone would be a significant step forward and a vindication of the power of protest. But it would only be the start. As anyone resisting oppression or fighting for their rights learns, from Black Lives Matter protestors in Portland to picketing Debenhams workers in Dublin, the primary role of the police is to protect the interests of the powerful in society. Thus, the call should not merely be for the reform of the police force, but for its abolition.

Endnotes

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