

An Anarchist is Shot in Seattle

How will it be resolved? By the State or with Restorative Justice?

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An unarmed protester is shot by a right-winger and the wounded anarchist does not want to rely on the punitive power of the state. What are the alternatives?

On the night of Donald Trump's inauguration, January 20, Hex, an IWW organizer, street medic and anarchist, was shot and severely wounded at a protest against Milo Yiannopoulos's speaking engagement at the University of Washington (UW) in Seattle.



A still from a YouTube video at the moment an IWW member was shot by a supporter of alt-right provocateur, Milo Yiannopoulos.

The alt-right provocateur and serial harasser was invited by the campus College Republicans, although the university administration had been warned for months by students, workers, and professors there would inevitably be violence if the event took place.

A few hours after the shooting, Marc Hokoana and his wife Elizabeth turned themselves in to the police, claimed self-defense, and were released later that same night without charges.

The shooting comes within the context of increased right-wing violence and threats on the UW campus. Hex declined to press charges and instead says he wishes to pursue restorative justice, focusing on the rehabilitation of the perpetrator through reconciliation with the victim and the community at large.

In an interview on Seattle radio station KEXP, Hex explained his stance as inspired by an understanding of personal responsibility and a commitment to prison abolition, tied into the responsibility his shooter disregarded by shooting him. [See links 1 and 2 below.]

He wants to consider his assailants as human beings who need to learn to understand that what they have done disrupts social solidarity, mutual aid and loving relationships. Hex deems the assault to be a mistake, and he sympathizes with the perpetrator because he has made mistakes in his life too. He doesn't want their mistake to permanently deform their life by stigmatizing them with the experience of prison and the exclusions from various opportunities afterwards.

As anarchists, we share with Hex a commitment to the abolition of prisons, and honor his extraordinary courage in his insistence on seeing his shooter as a human being. In view of the local wave of fascist threats and violence, however, we propose that taking account of the relationships not just between Hex and his shooter, but of all the relationships affected by this fascist upswing around the college, might suggest a different approach.

Here's the background of the events:

Several hours before the January 20 event, Yiannopoulos supporters gathered on Red Square, outside the campus venue. The crowd grew to several hundred, ranging from curious students to veteran neo-nazi organizers. Many local anarchists and other radicals were a few miles away from the widely publicized event at a march downtown, leaving fewer than a hundred anti-fascist protesters on the Square, of which perhaps thirty were masked.

About one hundred right-wing supporters got into the hall where Yiannopoulos was scheduled to speak. Then, protesters blocked the entrances, leaving them face to face with some 700 enraged Milo supporters. Scattered fist fights broke out between the two groups and objects flew in both directions. Not long after the event started in a largely empty hall, and an hour late, a large contingent from the downtown march arrived. A cheer went up from the anti-fascist protesters, while the Milo supporters looked about in concern as the balance shifted.

In the midst of the confusion, a muffled pop was heard. Hex, who had been de-escalating confrontations in the crowd, was shot in the stomach by one of the Hokoanas, likely Marc, and lay curled in a gathering pool of his own blood.

The police surrounding the square did not leave their positions despite acknowledging the shooting. Only after several minutes was a small golf cart sent to take the victim to an ambulance.

Within days, videos surfaced showing the shooting had been clearly premeditated, with Elizabeth's hand on a holster under her coat, and Marc telling her, "Don't shoot anybody yet!...They have to start it!"

At the time of this writing, criminal charges have still not been filed against the shooter. The University administration has not issued a condemnation of the shooting, only saying that the president is "heartbroken" that it occurred, with the repeated implication that protesters were at least as much to blame as the shooter himself.

The morning after the shooting, the emboldened campus Republicans released a statement, threatening more of the same: "Antifa, Anarchists, violent political agitators...it's time your flame is put out."

The same day, alt-right online forums released identifying information about the organizers of a teach-in that preceded the protest, who soon received messages containing homophobic and transphobic slurs as well as sexual and death threats.

One graduate student instructor advised the administration that a self-identified white supremacist student threatened to shoot her and her class. Campus staff, after a conversation with her, dismissed her concerns.

Even after her car windows were smashed days later, the administration dismissed any suggestion that the incident could be related to the threats. She subsequently quit the graduate program, explaining that, "a PhD isn't worth getting shot for."

Less than a week after the shooting, a group calling itself the UW Wall Builders called for supporters to bring bricks to the school's main square to "build [our] own wall on campus." The group previously issued a poll asking: "Illegal aliens must be a) physically removed, so to speak, b) sent to the concentration camps, c) sent to daddy Richard's study for 'further discipline,' d) sent over Trump's big beautiful wall."

At the pro-wall event, police surrounded the student organizer to protect him from protesters as he gave an interview to local news media. Days later, the same person walked into the campus (Queer) Center displaying an illegal six-inch knife, but faced no reprimand from the University.

On February 15, during a performance of a Shakespeare play in which the leading actors were people of color, a campus theater was glued over with posters proclaiming, "Drive out the sodomites and degenerates of Seattle: Yellow, Black and Brown. Look out! The Nazis have come to town!"

Campus police commander Steve Rittreiser responded with glowing approval, and advised those who didn't like it to take responsibility for their own safety: "Putting up handbills is certainly legal. We want people to be able to promote freedom of expression and freedom of thought," he continued.

Away from the campus, a disturbing wave of racist attacks occurred. A number of both Jewish and Islamic places of worship have been threatened and attacked. One mosque was burned to the ground. In a neighboring town, authorities are investigating what looks to be a recent lynching.

Although there have been threats which reasonable people would recognize as actual danger, given the context, and therefore not protected by the First Amendment, the University administration still refers to the ongoing declarations of intended harm as protected student expression.

We do not want to contest Hex's principled stand; however, we want to propose that anarchists in this situation might beneficially approach engagement with current institutions in another way, by making a distinction between abolitionism and abstentionism.

Anarchists often default to total disengagement from institutions we want to abolish, usually to avoid legitimizing them by our participation. The present situation at the University of Washington poses a difficult question: Are there times when engaging and using institutions, even those we essentially disagree with, is a more effective way to demonstrate their illegitimacy, while minimizing harm to populations they claim to serve?

Is it possible to call them out on their inconsistency and hypocrisy, to drag them to their limits and force them to reveal deeply-seated contradictions behind their claims of neutrality?

Might it be worth demanding that the University of Washington apply its disciplinary process with fascist students for their threats of rape, violence, and murder, since it has routinely canceled and interfered with talks and events on animal rights, or against the occupation of Palestine, or against borders, prisons and police?

Doing so might not legitimize First Amendment pretenses; it might show up their limits. It may also be necessary, in the current absence of better protections, in order to possibly offer some safety to marginalized students. We may have to engage these institutions to fight for the parts of them we want, against the parts we don't, and to show up the difference by how they act judged against their own supposed standards, and ultimately against our far more radical visions and values.

We also need to ask if restorative justice can be effective with people who commit transgressions but don't share the community's values. Restorative justice is about returning a community to a state of harmony that has been broken by an offense that violates agreed upon values and in cases where the perpetrator as well as the victim realize an injustice was done.

A fascist itching to shoot someone falls outside of that equation. In such a case, there doesn't seem to be much hope for restorative justice as a solution.

External links

1. Audio: Interview with IWW/GDC Survivor of UW Shooting

<https://twincitiesgdc.org/2017/03/04/interview-with-iwwgdc-survivor-of-uw-shooting/>

2. Edited transcript: Wounded anti-Milo protester speaks. Radical unionist gets married in hospital, still supports the right to bear arms and wants restorative justice, not prison, for his shooter by George Howland Jr., March 30, 2017

<https://outsidecityhall.wordpress.com/2017/03/30/wounded-anti-milo-protester-speaks/>

Related

See "Seattle Far-Right Shooter's Trial Ends in Hung Jury: How can we get justice in an unjust system?," FE #405, Winter, 2020.

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/398-summer-2017/an-anarchist-is-shot-in-seattle>

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