

Life in an Autonomous Zone

Seattle's Capitol Hill Organized Protest

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2020

The lynching of a black man, George Floyd, by a white Minneapolis policeman on May 25, sparked widespread and sustained protests, some escalating to uprisings, across the country and the world. They began as a cry against police killings of Black and Brown people, and many grew to include broader demands such as the abolition of the police and prisons and the widespread surveillance and control of daily life. Many also identified with demands for eliminating racial oppression, de-colonization and reparations for past wrongs.

One of these manifestations was Seattle's 3-week-long Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP).



For two weeks following George Floyd's murder, large crowds of protesters confronted Seattle police in many parts of the city including near the East Precinct on Capitol Hill. They were met with brutal violence and military-style weapons. Then, on June 8, the Seattle Police Department (SPD) withdrew from its East Precinct building and temporarily left the area surrounding it to the protesters. It was this area that was initially called the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ), and later renamed the Capitol Hill Organized Protest because of the concerns of many involved to keep the focus on the city-wide and country-wide protest movement.

To understand how the CHOP developed it is relevant to know that Seattle has long had a wide variety of anarchist and leftist groups, including solidarity networks, anti-racist and antifascist affinity groups, prison abolition organizations, anti-gentrification campaigns, and queer activists.

The Capitol Hill neighborhood has a history of grassroots political activity, including cafes and other venues that have welcomed anarchist and leftist discussions, presentations, plays, music and other performances, as well as periodic militant demonstrations. It also has traditionally had a strong LGBTQ presence.

However, for several years the neighborhood has been under attack from gentrifiers who want to clear out what they view as the bad elements to make it comfortable for businesses and residents who can pay the exorbitant rents they are able to charge.

So, it was not surprising that when the police temporarily pulled back from the precinct, several blocks adjacent to it became the symbolic center of the protests against police brutality, and for abolition of the police and prisons.

This was facilitated by the mutual aid projects that were already developed by anarchists and other radicals over the years, intensified in the Covid-19 pandemic, and became part of the protests.

Many houseless people found shelter in this temporary relatively police-free area. In addition, previously uninvolved neighborhood residents, college and high-school students, and working-class people from all over the region came to experience and participate in the CHOP. There were people from Black, Latinx, Asian and white neighborhoods.

It developed into a strongly multiracial environment. Almost everyone found it a comfortable and safe place to be most of the time despite police and Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan's lies about dangers and hostility to visitors.

Those involved self organized janitorial duties, coordinating trash, recycling, and mail delivery, the entry and exit of business, food and sanitation vehicles.

Mutual aid groups that participated in the CHOP included legal aid support, those focusing on harm reduction, a community health clinic, and distribution of free food, personal hygiene products and clothing.

Local artists painted a Black Lives Matter mural on the street and involved whoever wanted to participate. There was also other street art and graffiti. A vigil to those murdered by police was organized. There was also other street art and graffiti, including murals specifically dedicated to black trans women killed by police.

A free library was established with donated material. Book stands were set up on the street, some offering free copies by Black and Indigenous authors. Teach-ins were held on topics related to racial inequality and the history of anti-racist activism. Relevant films were shown.

A conversation cafe was set up where people were encouraged to engage in individual and small group discussions about racial injustice and other important issues. A community garden was planted and people came to recite poetry, play music and dance.

However, the CHOP was not without problems. Many were frustrated by what they saw as a disturbing lack of decision-making process that made it difficult to gain collective consent on coordinating the various undertakings. Others were not disturbed by this. In addition, there were significant political differences between groups seeking reform and those demanding more radical change that proved difficult to overcome.

Right-wing thugs such as the Proud Boys were also attracted to the area. One of their well-known members, Tusitala "Tiny" Toese, who wears a t-shirt stating, "Pinochet Did Nothing Wrong," was caught with others on video pushing and punching people in the zone.

Early on, lies about what was going on in the zone were propagated. Fox News showed photos and video of fires in Minneapolis while reporting on CHOP without indicating this wasn't happening on Capitol Hill. Seattle Police Chief Carmen Best claimed to have "solid information" that "anti-government protesters" planned to burn down the East precinct.

There was absolutely no evidence of this being the case. SPD Assistant Chief Deanna Nollette falsely charged the police had intelligence that security guards at CHOP entry points were checking IDs of anyone wanting to come in and businesses inside were being extorted in order to stay open. The community safety volunteers at the entry points denied this and stated both would go against everything the protest stood for.

Anyone who bothered to check with local businesses found that no such thing was happening, and the Capitol Hill Chamber of Commerce business development manager said she hadn't heard of businesses being charged fees. But these allegations were widely reported by news outlets before the police chief retracted them. Nearly all news sources reported multiple shootings in the CHOP; while one may have occurred inside, most happened outside its borders.

This central focal point of protest was dispersed by the police early in the morning on July 1 following the mayor's executive order to clear the area.

While the CHOP faced significant challenges related to the social inequalities, injustices and hierarchy of modern society, there was also a lot of energy and determination to confront them through self-organization and mutual aid. These goals continue to inspire many people who experienced the Capitol Hill Organized Protest.

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/407-fall-2020/life-in-an-autonomous-zone>
Fifth Estate #407, Fall, 2020

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