

Stop Cop City!



The Final Straw Radio
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First up, the struggle to Defend the Atlanta Forest and Stop Cop City has been gaining momentum over the last year, in opposition to the building of what would be the largest police urban training center in the so-called USA in the wake of the 2020 George Floyd Uprising, alongside the construction of what would be the country's largest film sound stage for Blackhall Studios. Coming up, you'll hear Tony Lane of Defend Atlanta Forest talk about some of the issues involved, the ongoing organizing to stop the destruction of dozens of acres in this forest in the city in the forest, the ongoing info-tours around the country and upcoming week of action from July 23-30th, 2022.

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TFSR: Could you please introduce yourself with whatever name, pronoun, or other identifying info you'd like to share?

Tony Lane: Sure. My name is Tony Lane. I live in Atlanta. I've lived here for about 15 years and yeah, I love it.

TFSR: So we're here to talk about the effort to defend the Atlanta forest. Listeners may know Atlanta to be one of the largest urban centers in the southeast of Turtle Island in the so called US state of Georgia. Thoughts of a cityscape with honking horns and traffic, large buildings of commerce, busy pedestrian streets, may not fit into the idea of verdant and lush scenes of natural beauty. Can you talk a bit about the city, about the forest, and how they interact? And how does this shape the life of those who are living in Atlanta?

Tony: Sure, well, it's immediately noticeable if you're flying or driving into Atlanta that there's trees everywhere. I mean, Atlanta has the largest tree canopy compared to any other major city in America. I think about 48% of the city has tree coverage, which is pretty incredible. So in a certain way, it's a city like any other, but there's 1000's of acres of forest that you can explore here as well.

TFSR: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the history of the forest? Maybe the size of it, but also its former uses. I understand there was a jail there at one point. And also sort of what having such a canopy in a big city means for things like ambient temperature, water absorption, versus runoff and erosion, the air quality, and the general health of urban populations.

Tony: The parcel of land that is under threat is in the South River Forest, which is about 3500 acres of forest and that is beneficial ecologically to the city in a variety of ways. It mitigates flooding, it contributes to the quality of the air. Atlanta is shielded from the urban heat island effect much more than other cities, at least, because of this large tree canopy.

To speak on the history just a bit. It was Muskogee land, stewarded by the Muskogee until the early 1800's When they were forcibly displaced. I don't know how much history you want me to go into here, but it was sold in a lottery auction and run as farmland up until the early 1900s, when it was purchased by the city. It was run briefly as a municipal

dairy farm and then turned into a prison. It was run as a prison up until the 1990's. I think 1990 Actually. The conditions in the prison are totally horrid. There's a lot of good research on this done by a local amateur research collective called the Atlanta Community Press. I highly recommend looking into that.

TFSR: You can ramble if there's other pieces of history or other experiences, if you feel like sort of painting a picture of some of your favorite parts of the forest, having lived in Atlanta for a bit and being intimate with it.

Tony: It's funny because there's obviously a huge focus on the ecological aspect of the forest. It does help to filter the air and mitigate flooding, and so on and so forth. But it has a lot of use in the city outside of that too. The forest itself is like a huge place of importance for the 'Bike Life' community in the city. I would say probably up until the movement began at least, it was very common to see people riding dirt bikes and four wheelers through there, to see people riding mountain bikes are there. It's also just a place that teenagers get away to to smoke weed and make out or do whatever teenagers do, walk their dogs, so on and so forth.

TFSR: Can you talk about what the proposed plan is and why people are up in arms about it?

Tony: Of course. So, the project is kind of two pronged. The city, and specifically the Atlanta Police Foundation is planning to build a police training facility on a large swath of the forest. Specifically, they want to build a mock city to train in urban conflict. The other side of the project is movie studios called Black Hall. Actually, they just recently renamed themselves to Shadowbox. They make movies like Venom, Jumanji, Godzilla, stuff like that. They want to expand their operation to build one of the biggest soundstages in America.

TFSR: Can you talk a little bit more about the Police Foundation. Is that a collaboration between some of the counties around there and the city police? Or is that just the Atlanta Police as this huge entity that that would be holding this facility? Would it just be local police that are training in that facility? Or are there like bigger implications to that?

Tony: The Atlanta Police Foundation is a slush fund. It's run by private companies. Basically, it's a way for private companies in the city and state to have kind of influence and say over city operations. So, the project is actually being built by the Atlanta Police Foundation, which is actually companies like Bank of America, Home Depot, Waffle House, even. The project is estimated to be about \$90 million, and \$60 million of that project is coming from private donors.

TFSR: What makes it a profitable venture? If these companies are pouring in this amount of money, it's probably not just out of the fact that they love the cops. Where's the money making for that part of it?

Tony: Of course. Atlanta, is really structured around these kinds of back-door clientelist deals between private companies and the city. I think it's a pretty straightforward way that these companies can buy influence and buy protection in the city. Ultimately, I think the city really has no other plans to mitigate some of the problems that it faces other than investing in police activity. I can say more about that, too.

TFSR: Would you? What kind of problems you're talking about or alluding to?

Tony: Well, a big justification for this project is explicitly tied to the movement and 2020. So there's plans for this project as early as 2017. But throughout the movement here in 2020, if listeners don't know, the movement here was particularly strong.

TFSR: This is just to clarify, this is the uprising that came up after repeated police murders at the beginning of COVID. Like the COVID pandemic, right?

Tony: That's correct. In Atlanta, an unarmed black man named Rayshard Brooks was killed by the police later on into the movement after the kind of initial phase of rioting and looting all over the country. That led to more clashes in the city, and nightly demonstrations at the third precinct here in Atlanta. Throughout the movement, there was internal strife between the police, mass sick outs, roughly 200 Police quit their jobs during this time. So the 'Cop City' project is among other things, is meant to explicitly address this kind of loss in morale amongst the police here.

TF SR: That makes sense as a recent need for the city to feel like it needs to do some sort of like urban combat. Can you talk about how the police interact with the city, like the population of the city? Sort of like a brief history of recent events. Do the police do a lot of raiding of homeless encampments? Are they going in and doing ‘no knocks’ in neighborhoods? What does it look like, the policing of Atlanta?

Tony: I’m not exactly sure how to address this, but maybe it makes sense to talk about the recent development in Atlanta. Especially since 2008, the city’s been pretty rapidly gentrifying. So that’s led to an unprecedented amount of evictions. Basically, the police, play the same role here that they do everywhere else, which is to protect the interests of the wealthy, to protect the interests of the business owners here.

Atlanta kind of has a unique relationship to the police and to the business class here. There was an intense amount of activity concentrated in Atlanta during the Civil Rights and Black power movements of the 60’s. Out of this struggle grew a particular model of social management that’s colloquially referred to as ‘The Atlanta Way,’ which entails cooperation between white corporate power structures and the Black Business Class. After the 60’s, the majority of the police department became Black, city council is majority Black, so on and so forth.

Since 2008, Atlanta has seen unprecedented gentrification and development due to investment from the tech sector, from the film industry, specifically, and that’s resulted in unprecedented amounts of evictions and repression of kind of low level criminal activity to make space for luxury condos.

TF SR: Yeah, that’s a really good answer. I’m glad that you could go into some of the history. That’s super interesting. Can you talk about where the development of the or destruction of that space is at?

Tony: I might back up a little bit if that’s okay. Before the movement around ‘Cop City’ began in the spring of 2021, there was a few different efforts to combat what was already happening there. There was ‘Stop the Swap,’ and that was in reaction to the Black Hall Studios swap of private land for public land. There’s the work of the South River Watershed Alliance. They specifically work around the river and how the city engages with it. Then there was ‘Save the Old Prison Farm.’

So like I said, there used to be a prison in the South River Forest

that was closed in 1990. Since it's been empty, there hasn't been a clear trajectory for it in the city. At different times, the city has proposed turning it into a park. But otherwise, it functions the way that it does now, which is as a place where people walk their dogs, ride bikes, so on and so forth, and also dump trash.

So after it came out that APF was planning to build this massive police training facility, two times the size of the police training facility in New York City, for reference, local activists came together and kind of tried to create an umbrella platform so that all these kind of different initiatives that were already in the works, could link up with each other, as well as to produce new energy around this specific project.

TFSR: So you're placing this in the context of existing struggles to defend and protect these common wild spaces in the city that people are benefiting from in all sorts of different ways, and past efforts at the announcement of the APF that this this destruction in this construction was going to be going on?

Can you talk a bit about when the actual attempted clearing of the forests started? And what the movement in the Atlanta area looked like? What were people doing to blockade it? I'm sure that there were a bunch of different things, whether it be like protests in front of corporate headquarters, or I've heard about forest blockades. Can you talk a little bit about what that looked like and how the how the police have reacted?

Tony: Sure. There's been no mass clear cutting of the forest to this day. Luckily, activists have been able to take initiative every step of the way during this movement. So when the project was announced by us, it was never really publicly announced by the city or by APF, almost no work had been done. So the land that Black Hall wants to swap with the city has been clear cut. They're in the process of turning it into a park. Michelle Obama Park is what they intend to call it. But so, activists, people who are interested in defending the forest have benefited greatly from taking the initiative here. Before really any big machinery was in the forest, people have been able to circulate through it and to learn the lay of the land.

Starting in the spring of 2021, people started doing barbecues, info shares, and all types of different events in the forest. This was before the city had actually approved the land lease to APF. So a lot of the early moments in the struggle, were oriented around putting pressure on city

council to not approve this land lease. But anyways, all throughout this time people are circulating throughout the forest. Actually, a lot of DIY shows and parties had started to happen in the forest. Partially due to the pandemic, partially due to gentrification, a lot of DIY venues in the city have shut down recently. So that milieu has kind of found a new home in the forest where they are able to do shows for free without any type of intervention from landlords or the police.

TFSR: That's pretty awesome. When you're referring to DIY, some listeners, depending on their context might think that that's specifically like punk. But just out of curiosity, what sort of shows or what sort of dance parties happened?

Tony: Yeah, all types of music really. The dance scene in particular has found a home here. There's an array of different crews in the city who have hosted parties in the forest. The DIY scene here isn't so structured around a particular style of music. There's a lot of different stuff that's happened there. The major way that we've been able to find out about the companies working on this project is through being present in the forest. People have been able to identify the companies actually involved in the destruction of the forest and in the construction of 'Cop City'. That includes Brasfield and Gorrie, who we believe to be the general contractor, Long Engineering, which is one of their subcontractors, Specialty Finishes Incorporated, Quality Glass, and formally Reeves Young.

Reeves Young was one of the big companies involved that was targeted early on in the movement. They were subjected to call-in campaigns, people did demonstrations at the homes of people involved in the company, there was a demonstration at their office in Atlanta. Then a specific campaign arose against them called SRY, or stop Reeves Young. Within two weeks of that project starting it came out there Reeves Young had dropped out of the project.

TFSR: That's awesome to be able to point to a success like that and be able to say 'we did that.' Are these companies that you're referring to, are they all local to Atlanta or do they have subsidiaries or are they subsidiaries of other corporations that are in other places? Like I remember when we've done interviews in the past about the 'Zone to Defend,' the ZAD in France. Vinci was the big company that was pushing a lot of the construction and they had subsidiaries in different places. In

fact, there were direct actions against I think a street car company or street street car manufacturing company, something like that, and also a highway extension that were being done by Vinci related company around Atlanta in solidarity with ZAD.

But yeah, can you talk a little bit about where these companies are based and how people have been drawing attention to them?

Tony: These companies, for the most part, are not local to Atlanta. They're regionally based companies. Some of these companies have offices and projects all over the US. Atlas Technical Consultants has projects all over the US.

TFSR: I guess bringing it back to the defense of the forest, there's a speaking tour right now going on on the West Coast, as well as various one offs around the country around the so called us that I found on the website 'Scenes from Atlanta Forest,' which is scenes.no.blogs.org. I'll link that in the show notes if anyone wants to get in on one of these discussions locally. I think that's an interesting approach to the idea of diffusing out the struggle against this one specific locality by informing people of what's going on. This has been a longtime strategy in mass mobilizations or an eco defense struggles, has been to go to places and say, "Hey, here's what's going on. Here's why you need to know about it. Come get engaged if you want to in various ways," but also because of the diffusion of these companies that are profiting off of this and actually doing the on the ground work, because you're not focusing just on the city of Atlanta or the APF or what have you. It's sort of like, lends to an opportunity for people to bring home to different places where those companies are present or other projects that they're working on to do solidarity in the communities that they're in. And also, because these companies are engaged in this sort of destructive practice in Atlanta, if it doesn't happen in Atlanta, if the project does not succeed to build Cop City, they're just going to try to put it somewhere else. Those corporations that you mentioned, Waffle House, Bank of America, etc. They're not local, just to the Atlanta area.

So yeah. Can you talk about what sort of solidarity actions have been taken or other locations that you're aware of?

Tony: Well, I just want to reiterate that there is a speaking tour happening right now up the West Coast and up the East Coast. There's a few dates

in between those places. Definitely get plugged into those if there's one happening near you. We want people to come to the forest. Like you said, we do not believe this is a local struggle. Police will be trained here from all over the country. It'll be the biggest police training facility in the US. If you can't come to the forest, then like you said, these companies have offices all over the place. So it should be easy to participate in whatever context you're in.

There are so many actions that have happened outside of Atlanta. It's hard to recount them. There's been actions at the Brasfield and Gorrie headquarters in Alabama, there's been solidarity actions in California, in New York, and Columbia. All over the country really, and outside the US as well.

As an aside, I think one of the novel things about this movement is that there's an equal emphasis on the defense of the forest itself here in Atlanta, as well as an offense against the companies involved, and against the Atlanta Police Foundation. So we would like people to come to the forest and we think defending the forest physically is a big part of the struggle. But equally important, is to put pressure on the contractors and the subcontractors involved. Does that make sense?

TFSR: Yeah!

You mentioned there's been blockades, occupations, and tree sits in the forest. Are they ongoing? I guess you may not want to give the cops a tip off by answering that question. I don't know. But are these standoff occupations or are these the sort of thing where contractors are expected to show up to start doing work or cutting and then suddenly those trees have signs that maybe they're spiked? Or that there's someone up in the tree very clearly or suspended between two. What has that looked like so far?

Tony: So, the forest is continuously occupied. The activity of the police and the contractors changes almost on a daily basis. Months ago there would be maybe a week of work, or week of attempted work, and then nothing for several weeks. More recently, there's been a lot of police activity every other day, maybe, the police do sweeps through the forest. Mostly just trying to find and destroy encampments out there. There's been very minimal work recently. We think that's due to the presence of people in the forest basically continuously.

TFSR: Are the cops employing a lot of the same infrastructure they'd be using to evict homeless encampments? I mean, around here, forested areas are often, if they're near enough to the city, places where people camp because there's shade, and there's some protection from the elements and a little bit of like, privacy.

Tony: Yeah, exactly. And as a matter of fact, there are houseless people who live in the forest. Generally, there's people in the city who circulate through the forest. So the police will come in and rip up tents, slash sleeping bags, dump out water, so on and so forth. Sometimes this is houseless people just living in the forest. Also it would it be right to imagine bikers using the paths in the forest while this is happening, I think generally that's worked to our favor, and kind of lends itself to the novelty of the struggle unlike other land struggles is that there's kind of an ambiguity of use in the forest. The police will find someone in the forest and there's a good chance they'll just tell them to get out of there, because they don't know if they're a part of the movement or if they're just some kids or what.

TFSR: Yes, so that's an interesting opportunity to make the job of clearing the forest by the cops as an action of urban cleansing, or gentrification. It's sort of complicating the job of the cops doing that sort of thing in multiple ways, including by actively being in solidarity with folks that are trying to reside in that space.

Tony: Definitely. Another big tool that the movement has utilized that we haven't talked about is the Week of Actions. So since the start of the movement, there's been three weeks of action, not including the most recent one. Basically that's just a kind of invitation to come host events in the forest, come be in the forest, and that draws out a lot of local people into the forest. So not necessarily people who are sleeping there every day, or who are coming out to police raids, but people who want to do fungi walks or people who want to do shows. Things like that.

TFSR: That's interesting, because it's also actively creating... I was listening to some podcasts that was like the socialist about city engineering and about reshaping cities in a non capitalist manner. I can drop a link in the show notes if I keep this. It was kind of interesting. I just listened to the first episode of it. But one of the things, one of the points that they made was how American culture didn't develop around, I

guess in some places in the northeast, it did, but like “American Anglo hegemonic culture” didn’t develop around having squares in the middle of cities where people would come and share space and share food and whatever else. A lot of it was based off of people living on the streets together and being neighbors. So you know, you’ve got your Sesame Street model where everyone comes down and shares space and what have you. So by redirecting folks into this space that maybe they didn’t even explore before, like you said, people are learning the terrain, learning the residents of the forest, making relationships, but also integrating it to some degree into their social life and into this cultural resistance that they’ve got going on. I think that’s pretty cool. That’s kind of novel.

Tony: Totally, I jokingly refer to the week of actions to our friends as our Woodstock. I think if you come, if you’re there, it makes sense. You know?

TFSR: There’s a week of action solidarity between July 23 and the 30th announced. What do you think’s gonna happen? Sort of more the same of what you’ve been expressing is going to be happening? How would people join up and participate in this?

Tony: We strive the whole time to create as open a model as possible for participation. The Week of Actions are kind of our attempt to do that in a certain way. If people want to host an event, they’re totally more than welcome to. If people just want to come and experience the forest, that’s fine, too. Generally is is a time where people stay in the forest. I think at the last Week of Action there was maybe 200 people staying in the forest throughout the week.

TFSR: Often when ecological, anti fascist, anti capitalist, and other struggles engage in a location, there’s a narrative that’s drawn that participants are outside agitators getting funding from some shadowy group and are often white middle class folks who have the time and the resources to engage. I wonder like, has this dynamic come up? Can you talk a bit about the wider who’s participating in the local struggle there?

Tony: There’s widespread local participation in the movement. There’s so many facets of it, that it’s impossible to be connected to all of them. There’s

this narrative that, like you said, that it's outside agitators or something of the like. But that couldn't be further from the truth. I mean, if you drive around South Atlanta, there's 'Defend the Forest' signs in people's yards, there's 'Defend the Forest' signs in businesses windows. I don't know how else to put it: widespread local participation in the movement. Like I said, from the various kind of DIY cultures, to the kind of broader left. There's new participation also frequently in the forest. It's not uncommon to see people you hadn't seen before or at various events to see groups or people who haven't participated before. I don't know what more I can say about that.

Just to speak more about local participation in the movement. The narrative from the police about the movement being made up of outside agitators, comes after the forest was violently raided by the police and a number of the people who are arrested had IDs from outside of the state. That day, I would say within two hours of the raid, a press conference was called by people in the neighborhood, maybe 50 people showed up. As soon as the press showed up, the police left and there was speech after speech from people in Atlanta, from people in the neighborhood, about support for the movement, denouncing the violent activity of the police, and so on and so forth.

It's also worth mentioning that there's been a meaningful engagement from the Muskogee in the struggle. There's been two Muskogee summits in the forest, which is historically referred to as the Weelaunee forest. I believe both summits brought out hundreds of people, Muskogee returning to their ancestral lands.

TFSR: For folks that are considering this or considering seeing if there's a local event that they can attend to learn more about it, or they want to just do their own research about it. Do you have any resources that you would direct people to on the topic?

Tony: Yeah! You can follow us on social media on Instagram or Twitter at [@DefendtheAtlantaForest](#). If you're interested in the campaign about the contractors, you can visit, [StopReevesYoung.com](#). And if you're interested in donating, you can visit [Opencollective.com/ForestJusticeDefenseFund](#).

TFSR: Again, that list of upcoming events is at least partially compiled on Scenes From the Atlanta Force, which is [scenes.noblogs.org](#)

Tony: Yeah, thanks for saying that.

TFSR: Well cool. Was there anything that I didn't ask you about that you want to mention during this conversation? I was stoked to get to check out the folks that are putting on a presentation of it upcoming, I think in early July, in at the Lamplighter in Richmond were going to be showing this documentary Riotsville. It looks like it just came out last year or whatever. That's super fascinating. Considering the tumultuous history of civil rights and Black liberation movements that you've mentioned, and the importance of locality of Atlanta in that struggle. It's cool to look back 50 years and see this this bit of history that definitely leads into today. Especially the US training facilities, that there's so much footage of there were military. Well, maybe you could talk about the documentary. Have you seen it?

Tony: I have seen it. Yeah, it's a great documentary. Definitely would recommend checking it out. It shows firsthand, dated 50 years ago, what the type of training will look like that will be occurring here in Atlanta, which is basically just simulated riots. It's fascinating.

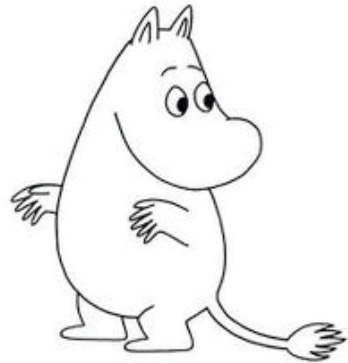
TFSR: Yeah. Like the contextualized decision by the federal government to take the approach, even after these multiple Commission reports that would say, "Here's why there's urban unrest, here's why there's unrest in Black communities sparked often by the killing of someone by police or by the assassination of a civil rights leader. Here's what happens. Here's why it happens. Here's how they could, if they had the interest, make sure this didn't happen," including some of the reports talking about how basically, people need food, shelter, housing, educational opportunities, job opportunities, just all these different social program type stuff, and administration after administration, just saying, "mmmmm or we could just train more National Guard to go out and bayonet them in the streets."

Tony: I mean, from our perspective Black Hall Studios, action movie production, and police activity is kind of the state's idea of the future. It's like, people should sit at home and watch Netflix. And if they don't, then we have a massive militarized police force to make sure that they do.

TFSR: Batons and circuses. Well, awesome. Thanks a lot, Tony, for

having this conversation and for the work y'all are doing and it's been great to chat with you.

Tony: Yeah, thanks so much.



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