

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

***January 19, 2023
Media Advisory***

Social Justice Groups Comment on Police Killing of Activist

On January 18th, 2023, a Georgia State Trooper shot and killed Tortuguita, a forest defender protesting cop city in Weelaunee Forest, during a violent clearing operation led by a multi-agency collaboration of state forces. Stop Cop City is a local, national, and global movement that has the overwhelming support of Atlanta residents. The message from the vast majority of Atlanta residents for over a year has been clear: there is no place for cop city in Atlanta. The city of Atlanta, Atlanta Police Foundation, and private corporations backing cop city have worked quickly and sneakily to utilize questionable and undemocratic tactics and processes to force the leasing of Weelaunee Forest. The vast majority of city residents, particularly those who live in the forest and who will have to be exposed to heightened police terror and unprecedented environmental racism, did not even know about the proposed police facility until it was too late. Months of public comments, op-eds, news articles, protests, statements, and more have been completely ignored and misrepresented by the City of Atlanta, Atlanta Police, and vested parties who have claimed to speak on a fictionalized “community’s” behalf while in reality making no serious attempts to do just that. Just last month, several protestors were charged with domestic terrorism. These charges seriously disturb the lives of people who have dedicated themselves to the welfare of the environment and Atlanta, and can lead to devastating prison sentences. They also serve as a blanketed chilling effect on rightful dissidence by countless children, teachers, environmental activists, city residents, concerned observers, and community members. It is hard for us to believe that this action of attaching the label “domestic terrorist” to young people fighting for a world with more trees and less violence was not intended to silence residents of their right to protest. It is hard for us to believe that labeling individuals or a movement with “domestic terror” is not inextricably linked to the extra-judicial murder of someone just yesterday.

Details are just emerging about this murder. Officials have begun referring to the deceased as a man, an untruth that neglects their lived experience as a non-binary person. Every communication uttered by state officials has shown extreme negligence. We are clearly observing a concerted effort by city and state forces to paint a picture of a dangerous “criminal” who had to die. This is a lie. This is always a lie. We are gathered in part here to disturb this dangerous propaganda. The deceased was a community caregiver who ran a mutual aid project that redistributed thousands of dollars and resources to those in need. They were a volunteer medic. Their people are from Venezuela and they spoke Spanish. They helped to build housing in Florida for low-income folks devastated by hurricane damage. As friends and loved ones are learning of their murder, they are sharing glimpses of who they truly were. They went by many names. Those who loved them called them Tortuguita, or little turtle, the most. Their given name was Manuel. Tortuguita was a “sweet, warm, very smart and caring” person. They were an “extremely fun person to talk to” and remained “calm and cool headed in stressful situations.”

The statements made by Georgia officials in the last 24 hours claim that Tortuguita shot at police officers, resulting in bodily injury to one, and provoking the response of self defense. We will wait to believe these words and demand the unedited body cam footage is released to the public by Saturday, January 21st. Our deep skepticism has been underscored by the planting of drugs on the 92 year old Katherine Johnston who was killed in her own home in Atlanta due to police error and posthumously blamed for the injuries of 3 officers who actually shot one another; by the 2015 shooting of a Dekalb county resident, the murder of his dog, and the shooting of one officer by another in the unsanctioned raid on this innocent person's house; and the countless examples of friendly fire incidents that are repackaged and sold to the public by police to serve their interests and disguise their ineptitude.

A person was killed by the Georgia State Patrol just hours ago and rather than using air time to explain how a trained officer could kill an individual in the absence of due process, we have observed the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, State & City Police, and the Georgia governor immediately lean into a centuries long tradition of claiming self defense. As of the release of this statement, our mayor, Andre Dickens, has not even acknowledged the murder of a civilian at the hands of state authorities, mimicking instead the words offered by right-wing Governor, Brian Kemp, which focuses on the bodily injury of a state trooper rather than the loss of life we are currently mourning. Claims of self defense and the fixation on police as victims are tools we are all too familiar with. Such claims were made by the Dekalb County officer who murdered a completely naked and defenseless man named Anthony Hill in an apartment parking lot in 2015 and by the state deputized young white man Kyle Rittenhouse who killed protestor Anthony Huber in Kenosha in 2020. The claim of self defense is the same one that we have heard told to us by elders of the civil rights movement and through the transcripts of history, wherein activists are made out to be dangerous and threatening so as to justify repression, imprisonment, and in this case, death.

A person is dead, and the GBI, the City of Atlanta, State Troopers, and police cannot bring them back. They cannot convince us that this person needed to die. We are unconvinced and unwilling to back down in the face of dozens and hundreds more dead at the hands of an expanded and unaccountable police force and in the face of environmental catastrophe if cop city is to be built. We are currently navigating a climate where individuals face life-altering charges, where community groups are being intimidated through surveillance and legal inquiry, and where thousands of people's demands to seek an end to cop city are still unheeded by the powers that be, even as the Weelaunee forest floor is still warm with Tortuguita's blood. We assert that Atlanta, a city whose officials attempt to radio out a progressive and pro-Black veneer, but is a city where protest is met with death, and inquiry is met with legal intimidation, is not a city that can claim any moral clarity or even justify its bottom line. A life has been lost. Let the city and state officials of Atlanta, Georgia use this as a moment of deep inward clarity to support the family and family community of the deceased and to finally cease its war on its own residents and ecosystem by declaring that cop city will never be built. The world is watching you, Atlanta.

Atlanta Justice Alliance
Buford Highway People's Hub
Community Movement Builders
Demilitarize Atlanta 2 Palestine coalition
Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR)
Georgia Detention Watch
ICE Breakers
Jewish Voice for Peace, Atlanta Chapter
Malcolm X Grassroots Movement
Migrant Equity Southeast
Palestine Youth Movement, Atlanta Chapter
Party for Socialism & Liberation
Project South
Resurgens Collective
Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ)
Stop Cop City Black Coalition
Sur Legal Collective
The Ruckus Society
Weelaunee Coalition
Women on the Rise Georgia
Somos South GA