

Charlottesville Clashes Typify Racial Turbulence in the United States

Durham socialists take direct action while ruling class seeks to reposition itself for a renewed political struggle

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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Thousands of people filled the streets in downtown Durham on August 18 after rumors circulated that the Ku Klux Klan had been granted a permit to march in the city.

Soon a standoff between anti-racist demonstrators and the police threatened to erupt into a rebellion. As the marchers moved to the Durham County old courthouse, four white men were confronted after making racist comments directed towards African Americans. Two arrests among the white men later followed. Another arrest was made after protesters refused a command by the police to disperse.

The events of August 18 reflect the rising tension in Durham and across the United States involving the continued existence of institutional racism. Reports from the demonstration indicate that some people were armed with axes and carbine rifles in an obviously open carry state in the South.

On the same day, August 18, Steve Bannon, the White House chief strategist was relieved of his duties within the administration of President Donald Trump. Bannon had given a number of what was described as “unauthorized interviews” to media outlets where he drew the ire of chief of staff Gen. John Kelly.

Trump’s apologist view of the neo-fascist and racist demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11 and 12, went up against the standard view of the American elites in regard to issues of race and political culture. Although the U.S. political and economic structures are permeated with racial and national oppression which remain the order of the day as it relates to the social status of African Americans, the posture of Wall Street and the Washington establishment is not to acknowledge this reality.

The display of neo-fascist sentiments on the campus of the University of Virginia and in downtown Charlottesville was far too much for anti-racist and social justice activists to contemplate without a response. Thousands came out into the streets to oppose the “Unite the Right” rally designed to preserve the Southern Confederate heritage.

Police units withdrew when the alt-right operatives went on the offensive attacking the anti-racists and anti-fascist contingents. Eventually the racist mob was not able to hold its event at the location of the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. In retaliation, one of their numbers plowed his vehicle into a crowd of anti-racist demonstrators, killing one young woman, Heather Heyer, and injuring 20 others, including five critically and four seriously.

People across the U.S. were outraged at this blatant act of right-wing terror. Demonstrations flourished spontaneously in various cities and towns from the east coast to the west.

What added further fuel to the crisis was the response of Trump to the developments in Charlottesville. He appeared to be blaming “both sides” for the disturbances and consequently the death of Heyer. The following Monday, August 14, the president then made a statement which seemed to be scripted condemning the neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klan members who marched through Charlottesville with burning torches chanting “we will not be replaced.”

A former KKK Grand Wizard told the corporate media that Trump must remember who put him in office. It was the white people and not the radical Left who voted for him in large numbers last November.

On August 15, Trump sought to add some luster to his non-existent “infrastructural program” through a press conference from Trump Towers where he was said to be on a “working vacation.” After a brief statement, he took questions which inevitably asked him about his views on white nationalists who have claimed that they are his supporters.

The president resurrected the “both sides are responsible” argument going even further insisting that not all of those present in the neo-fascist demonstrations were white nationalists, that some were “good people.” Taking to twitter on the morning of August 17, he reiterated this view while condemning what he called the “alt-Left.”

By the previous day, the White House manufacturing and business councils had been disbanded. Since the events in Charlottesville and Trump’s utterances on racism and neo-fascism, many leading council members from some of the largest multi-national corporations had resigned. All during the week of August 14-18, the stock market in New York experienced a precipitous decline, revealing the uncertainty over the direction of the current administration in Washington.

Durham Socialists Take Direct Action on Confederate Symbol

During an anti-racist rally on August 15, members of Workers World Party Durham branch led a political operation which took down a statue commemorating Confederate soldiers. Assisted by activists from other local organizations, those present sought to emphasize the necessity of anti-racists and anti-fascists to take matters into their own hands: to immediately remove symbols of the slave system independent of the official policies of the state.



Durham Workers World Party member
Taqiyah Fatima Thompson

Taqiyah Thompson, 22, a student at the Historical Black North Carolina Central University, climbed the statue and placed a rope around the neck of the soldier while others brought it tumbling down to destruction. No arrests were made at the time since Durham police claimed they had no jurisdiction due to the fact that the statue was on County property.

At a press conference called by WWP on Wednesday August 16, the activists relayed why they resorted to direct action. Thompson was quoted as saying:

"I did the right thing. Everyone who was there—the people did the right thing. The people will continue to keep making the right choices until every Confederate statue is gone, until white supremacy is gone. That statue is where it belongs. It needs to be in the garbage."

Chronicling the direct line from the Confederate withdrawal from the U.S. in 1861, the four year battle they waged to preserve slavery as an economic system and today's lethal force utilized by law-enforcement against the African American people, Thompson emphasized that racism and national oppression remain as vestiges of the historical legacy of America. Over the last four years there has been an upsurge in anti-racist demonstrations in response to the police killings of Black and Brown people.

Thompson went on to say at the WWP Durham press conference on August 16:

"The statue in Durham, North Carolina, said 'to the boys who wore the gray.' If we understand history, we know that those boys who wore the gray, today they wear blue, and they wear sheets over their heads."

Soon after the press conference concluded Thompson was accosted and taken into custody by Durham County sheriff deputies. It was announced that other arrests would take place and they did. Leading WWP members' homes were raided and personal property confiscated by the sheriff deputies. They have been charged with both felonies and misdemeanors.

By Thursday August 17, eight people had been arrested, charged and then released on \$10,000 bond. All of them remain committed to direct action against racist monuments

throughout the South and the country.



Durham anti-racist demonstration on August 18, 2017

National Campaign Launched to Defend Durham Activists

Immediately a nationwide effort to raise legal defense funds for the activists began. On August 17, when four other activists who were informed that warrants were issued for their arrests turned themselves in at the Durham County Courthouse, dozens of people in solidarity attempted to solicit arrest as well. Those without warrants were turned away by the County.

According to the Herald Sun:

“Peter Gull Gilbert, 36, Dante Emmanuel Strobino, 35, and Ngoc Loan Tran, 24, all of Durham, walked into the courtroom with their lawyer Scott Holmes, a private attorney and law professor at N.C. Central University.... Taylor Alexander Jun Cook, 24, turned himself in Thursday (August 17) afternoon. Three others – Raul Mauro Arce Jimenez, 26, of Durham; Elena Everett, 37, of Durham; and Aaron Caldwell, 24, of Raleigh surrendered at the Durham County magistrate’s office Thursday morning. All four faced warrants charging them with three misdemeanors – disorderly conduct by injury of a statue, damage to real property valued at more than \$200, and damage to real property – and two counts of felony inciting a riot to cause property damage in excess of \$1,500.”

Supporters of those charged are asking concerned people to demand that all of the felony and misdemeanor counts be dismissed. A statement released in the aftermath of the arrests says that people should call the DA (919-808-3010, press 4) – to insist the charges be dropped and for the sheriff and county prosecutors to halt all attempts to harass, detain or charge anti-racist activists.

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