



# THE FOREST WAS A HOME FOR US

An interview with Stop Cop City organizer Ayeola Omolara Kaplan

On September 5, 2023, five people chained themselves to equipment at the Cop City construction site in the clear-cut Weelaunee Forest, where they delivered “The People’s Stop Work Order.” The construction of this project and the destruction of the South River Forest have continued despite over 100,000 Atlanta residents signing a ballot initiative calling for a referendum on the issue. The City of Atlanta has fought the referendum with lawsuits and technical obstructions.

The group that chained themselves to the equipment included two ministers and other people of faith. They held banners that read “Stop Work Now” and “No Cop City.”

The movement opposing Cop City has faced overt repression. Georgia Attorney General Christopher Carr has announced indictments against 61 Cop City protesters over the past year. Civil rights groups across the country have condemned the charges, and in June DeKalb County District Attorney Sherry Boston announced that her office would not join the State in prosecution of the domestic terrorism charges, citing a lack of evidence. On November 6th, the RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act) defendants were arraigned, and held a dance party on their way into the courthouse, to celebrate the joy of ongoing resistance and show that together, we are not afraid.

Ayeola Omolara Kaplan was one of those arrested and jailed after the People’s Stop Work Order action. She is a Black and queer Atlanta based pop-surrealist painter. Ayeola believes that art paired with consistent and meaningful direct actions can help shift the current paradigm into a revolutionary one. In a press statement about her action, she said, “This movement cannot be won with a ballot alone; we must organize together

for mass direct actions if we want to have a chance at protecting our community and saving our planet.”

In October, Ayeola spoke with the Earth First! Journal about being a longtime organizer in Atlanta, about the ongoing fight to Stop Cop City and defend a beloved forest that has been clear-cut, and how she fights fear and despair to find hope through action.

**EF!J: What moved you to take action to deliver the People’s Stop Work Order?**

**AOK:** I decided to protest in the way that I did because the Stop Cop City movement stalled a little bit after the day that people gathered in the forest for a music festival [March 5], and many people there were arrested and jailed. It kind of shook the Stop Cop City movement. Since then, there have been a lot less creative actions anywhere near the forest. We needed to push back against the fear that was swelling up in people, this fear of protest being criminalized, the fear of getting a RICO charge for speaking out. It felt important to me to be one of the people to step forward and say, It’s okay to feel afraid, but it’s not okay to stop acting.

I was also moved to protest in the way that I did because of the other strategies and tactics that have been involved in this fight: the fight for the referendum, the constant calls on our mayor to take action, the petitions, the phone calls, protests outside of companies that were funding the building of Cop City. All of that happening at once inspired me to try and go in a different avenue through nonviolent direct action, through civil disobedience, because especially with the referendum, the mayor and our elected officials are working very hard to make sure that the signatures are not counted and that the referendum doesn’t make it to the ballot. Because of that, I felt it was important to show that electoral politics, voting on whether or not

we should have Cop City, that isn't the only route that we can take. We can actually physically stop Cop City when we put our bodies on the line, when we show up in the now clear-cut forest to stop it from being built. I felt like civil disobedience was an act that we haven't explored as much as we could. The construction site is active right now. They're about to pour concrete. They're about to actually build Cop City, and we're in a much better position if we can stop them from building it instead of trying to deal with it after it's already been built.

I also felt that taking action on the construction site would help people see the state of the forest. For so many of us in Atlanta who were involved in the movement before the forest was clear-cut, the forest was kind of a second home for many of us. It was a home. People were living in the forest. Since the beginning of the movement, the forest was a place where people could come who were aligned in desiring a healthy planet and a just world. It was a place where we could all come together and share space and build ideas together. As a Jewish person, we had a lot of Jewish services held in the forest. I helped organize a Yom Kippur event and Purim event in the forest. We had Shabbat in the forest. It was really a second home. So when I took my recent action, I really wanted to get cameras on the forest and have people see, you know, this is the state of our second home.

**EF!J: The fight to defend the Atlanta Forest has had a huge amount of support and has been a flashpoint for a lot of people from different areas of struggle. It has also faced so many challenges and heartbreak. Could you share your thoughts about continuing to fight not only when there are swells of momentum, but also when it seems like maybe we won't win, when things are really discouraging or when we're in deep grief and despair.**

**AOK:** What helped me push forward in moments where people were feeling a little bit hopeless or a little bit stalled was engaging in community with people who cared about the issue in the way that I did. When you're at home alone, all you have is media. If you're not engaging in conscious community, it's very possible to feel defeat already, even if you haven't already been defeated. Having the forest be clear-cut has made it really hard for people to gather together. But we still continue to show up however we can for each other. That's what immediately builds back up my hope.

Another thing that helps me push through despair or hopelessness is knowing that we can't wait around for something to push us into action. We've been kind of conditioned in our society to believe that justice comes from a leader, that we should wait for an individual to take the first step. But one of the things that I've learned is that anything you want to do, anything you

want to see done, any change that you want to have happen, you have to actively pursue that pathway forward. It isn't just going to fall into your lap. Through [this community] I was able to connect to people who had the same vision that I had. We didn't have to wait for everybody in the city to be on the same page. If you want something done, you can do it with just a few people. Two, three, four people can still make a big impact. It's so important, not just for you, not just for your own feelings of doing something that matters. It's important for the movement for us all to push ourselves to take actions.

When you're feeling despair, you have to create that hope yourself. You have to create that spark that keeps you going and everyone else going. You have a duty as an activist to push past that despair and to shine a light that can guide people out of despair into hope. That hope leads you into action.

**EF!J: The fight to Stop Cop City has made people think a lot about the power of coalition and solidarity and tactical diversity. What's your perspective on that?**

**AOK:** Coalitions are a huge part of the Stop Cop City fight, and it's such a beautiful thing to see. This fight isn't propped up by one single organization. It's a fight that's taken on by people all over the country, all over the world, individuals, different groups, different communities, different identities. The intersections of the people involved in the fight to Stop Cop City mirror the intersections of the people who would be affected by Cop City being built. I love how so many people are finding a place to be involved in this struggle that speaks directly to how police brutality, over-policing, militarization of police, environmental destruction affect us all in different ways.

I'm a part of many different coalitions. I'm a part of a disability coalition, interfaith coalition. I'm a Black person. I'm a Jewish person. There's so many different intersections within my own identity that I can choose to highlight and focus on. One thing that's been really exciting for me is the Interfaith Coalition. The construction site action was such an inter spiritual, interfaith moment. The phrase "we pray with our feet" came up a lot. It's a part of prayer across so many different faiths to protest injustices of any kind.

And there has been so much solidarity, and not just empty words. People from all around the world are taking actions to uplift and amplify the story of what's happening in Atlanta. These issues affect so many people in so many different ways. I've seen images from Ireland, France. I've seen people in India be inspired and take action because of the Stop Cop City fight. It's such an incredible uniting. It's brought people together because we can all find something about Cop City that is oppositional to our freedom.

As a Jewish antizionist woman, I think it's important right now to point out the way that the Zionist project mirrors the American settler project, which is part of what we are fighting when we defend the Atlanta forest. Zionism and American nationalism are willing to murder people to take land. Zionism wants to erase Palestine. The goal of Cop City is to erase the Weelaunee Forest. I want to help more people identify with the antizionist struggle and to understand that Zionism goes against Jewish values.

**EF'J: One thing about the movement to Stop Cop City is how intergenerational it seems. I've been hearing a lot of perspectives from really young people with a lot of enthusiasm and then also from people who thought they were totally burned out on resistance work, but this fight has reignited them. What do you think this struggle has meant for new people coming in, as well as for more experienced people and for movement elders?**

**AOK:** I think this struggle has been a really beautiful introduction to organizing and direct action for people who are newly coming into struggling against the state and the police and capitalism in general. That's because of the way that different people are tackling the issue. People see how our politicians, officials, corporations or businesses respond to people taking action against deforestation and police militarization. Whether you act violently, nonviolently, peacefully. No matter what you're doing, you're going to face opposition. There's really no one right way to struggle. There's only a wrong way, which is to not struggle at all.

I think people are realizing that what we're fighting against is so deeply rooted in capitalism and oppression, and when you're organizing against it, you have to have a lot of faith in the people you're organizing with and you can't just expect that if you do one thing, it'll lead to the solution that you hope for. This is a long struggle. It's a lot of work and we face a lot of obstacles. It's definitely not easy, or else we'd have all of the freedoms and justice we want. I think it's really good for people to see that. I think it's really good for people who are becoming activists to see that this is a lifelong struggle.

I also like that this struggle has brought in older organizers, people who have been organizing since Occupy Wall Street, since Standing Rock, Black Lives Matter, Occupy Ice, people from all different organizing struggles are coming to target Cop City because it connects to all those different struggles. I think it's reawakening people who have been organizing for a long time.

Stop Cop City has reignited me because it's such a genuine fight. There's no gray area. It's so clear-cut. People are trying to protect the environment and the state is trying to protect itself from the people who will

turn against it as conditions deteriorate. The state isn't taking any action to protect us from climate change or police brutality, or inflation, or the wage gap. There are so many ways that people are suffering, and the fact that the state is pouring so much money in policing us really just shows that they see us as the problem. Us, the people who are struggling to survive under capitalism. They're choosing to ignore homelessness, choosing to ignore underfunded schools, our health care system, while putting so much money into militarizing the police. It infuriates so many people. I think a lot of activists recognize that this is, in some ways, the last straw.

**EF'J: How are you feeling about the upcoming November weekend of action in Atlanta to Block Cop City?**

**AOK:** I'm extremely excited about the Block Cop City action because no matter how it goes, it's going to be a direct showing of people who are willing to put their bodies on the line to stop the destruction of the forests and the building of a militarized police training center. It's so important that we don't stand still and wait for the perfect moment to do something or wait for the perfect idea. I think that more and more people are willing to do whatever it takes to stop Cop City from being built. It feels like there's a revitalization to the fight.

**EF'J: Do you have anything else you want to share?**

**AOK:** I just want to say that the construction site action was very much an action directed towards other people in our movement. It was very much to show that getting arrested, having something on my record just pales in comparison to the harm that happens if we aren't willing to take risks like that.

There are things that make it hard for me to be on the front lines and risk arrest. I'm a woman. I'm queer, I'm Black, Jewish. I have all these intersections that make me somewhat of a target. But at the same time, I know that I still have a lot of privilege, and I feel like nothing, none of those risks matter when the planet is in such jeopardy.

Being in jail made me feel even more encouraged to dedicate as much time as I can to organizing because the conditions in the jail were horrible. 90% of the time that I was there, I did not have access to clean water. I was put in a cell with a toilet that did not work. The people who were in jail with me were all there for nonviolent crimes. They had not been proven guilty. All of them were there because they could not afford to pay bail.

As a Jewish person, I believe that people are created to live on the planet in a way that's harmonious with

nature and I believe we were meant to protect the earth too. So when we refuse to take any risks, when we refuse to organize, when we block out the world because it's hard, we are throwing away the gift of our own life. It's a gift to have a body, to have a mind that has consciousness, that has a heart to feel empathy for the animals and the trees and to feel connected to the water, the sky, the sun. It's such a gift to have life, and the best thing we can do is use that life to protect life. Chaining yourself to a bulldozer in a clear-cut field, standing with the fallen trees and standing against the machinery created to destroy the forest. There's just so much symbolism in that.

Personally, it was getting really hard for me to live with myself knowing that there's so much destruction happening on the planet, and the most that I could do is something on the internet? We have to physically be out there protecting the planet. We have to physically be out there on the front lines. Because the damage that's happening to our world is physical, it's not in the digital realm. So we have to take actions in the flesh.

A lot of us have schedules and lives that prevent us from taking actions. We're so focused on our own individual

survival and our families that we neglect to recognize that the whole Earth is our family and not just the people living in it, but the forest too, the animals, the water. We have to prioritize the physical fight.

So, yeah, like the people in Earth First!, we really got to put the earth first. The situation couldn't be more dire. And I know that the worse it gets, the more people are willing to do whatever they can to fight against the destruction of our communities and our planet.

It's simple math that there's so many more physical human beings who want to protect the planet than there are physical human beings willing to prevent us from protecting the planet, even if we're unable to gather in the numbers that we need to take the actions that we need to take. So we have to do it even in small numbers. We have to do it with whoever we can.

And there's so much joy that comes from that. Every day since that action, I've felt more myself.



Editor's note: As this issue of the EF!J was going to print, 500 people in Atlanta participated in a mass action to Block Cop City. Marching nonviolently with puppets, clergy, a brass band, tree saplings, and people of all ages, the demonstrators were met with tear gas and rubber bullets, and faced militarized police fully dressed in riot gear with tanks and water cannons. Nonetheless, construction was stopped for two days. Days later, six concrete trucks were torched, and the company which owned them, Ernst Concrete, dropped out of the Cop City project and took down its website. Direct action gets the goods! Cop City will never be built!