

2.A.12.

Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation

“Copwatch: Keeping an Eye on the Cops” (1995)

Many radicals began to monitor police encounters, on the assumption that such public visibility would reduce incidents of police brutality. The most frequent effort, as much a tactic as an organization, was called copwatch. This article, originally published in a special issue of the newspaper of the New York arm of the anarchist organization Love and Rage, outlines the broad theory and action of copwatch programs. While the article focuses on Minneapolis, copwatch efforts could be found in major cities around the country at this time. Armed with cameras, notebooks, and a provisional legal knowledge, activists would noticeably observe police stops.

How can ordinary citizens protect ourselves from the violence of lawless police? What can we do when the police act like just another street gang, one with blue colors? In cities and neighborhoods around the country, people have organized copwatch patrols. They follow police on their beats, as they go about their “business,” and record their behavior with cameras or video cameras. They take notes. This is completely legal, so long as the people do not physically “interfere with police business.” Even that might be arguably legal, when the police are engaged in criminal behavior. But just by following and watching the cops, people break down the blue wall of secrecy which surrounds the police. It undermines the confidence of the police that they can do whatever they want with impunity. And it gives other people the message that the police need to be watched. It shows people that the cops’ authority can be questioned and encourages them to question it themselves.

For example, there is a copwatch project in Minneapolis organized by Anti-Racist Action (ARA). They are inspired by the tradition of the Black Panther Party, which organized people to watch the cops. A group has been going out every other Friday or Saturday evening for almost a year now in downtown Minneapolis. They talk to people and hand out information about ARA and what to do if arrested and, of course, watch the police. During arrests and traffic stops they are witnesses to police conduct and intervene as much as possible. When they are loud enough, the police sometimes let go the person they were arresting and focus on the copwatchers.

The Minneapolis copwatchers are generally perceived as a white group. While people of color also do copwatch, being seen as “white” has some advantages. It gives them the privilege to take things further with the police. They can sometimes get away with things cops rarely tolerate from people of color. They feel that it is important for white folks to take a stand against the cops, to show that they are not all loyal to this oppressive system.

A similar patrol has been organized in Boston. Instead of concentrating on a single area the Boston copwatch uses a car, a police scanner, and a cellular phone to make sure that they are there when the cops are taking action against people in the community.

The police force is one of the most oppressive institutions in many people's lives, especially people of color and working-class people. It is hard to find any African American who has not been harassed, arrested, or assaulted by the police; it is not a question of whether or not it has happened but how many times. Taking a stand against the police is a move against a kind of racism and class oppression that is only slightly more disguised than nazi skinhead violence but is actually more concentrated and real. The police, after all, have the power of the law and the state behind them.

The main way to "fight crime" is to create decent jobs and a just society. On the road to that new world it will be necessary to do away with specialized police (and military) forces over and above the rest of society. The police see themselves as at war with the rest of the population. This makes them perfect tools for the white corporate rich men who rule us. Moving to a free society will require replacing the specialized police with self-policing, with a democratic, popular militia system. Copwatch is a step in that direction.

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Herman Bell et al.

"An Appeal from US Political Prisoners/POWs: Mobilize to Save Mumia Abu-Jamal!" (1999)

The incarceration and looming death sentence of journalist and former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal catalyzed a new wave of activism against the prison system in the mid-1990s. For many, as evident in this letter, written and signed by thirty longtime US political prisoners from a variety of anti-racist and anticolonial movements, Mumia served as a symbol of the problem of the prison system. Not long after this letter circulated, groups of activists staged civil disobedience protest at the Liberty Bell and subsequently at the US Supreme Court in support of Mumia. His death sentence was overturned in 2001, though as of 2020 he remains in prison.

We are prisoners of war and political prisoners (POW/PPs) within the United States. We were variously imprisoned for a range of activities: struggle against white supremacy and colonialism, opposition to the economics of global plunder and class exploitation, efforts against sexism and discrimination, a general unwillingness to abide the multiple ways human beings are demeaned and delimited in this society. We stand for self-determination for all oppressed peo-