

United States: Defund the police - Assessing the state of the movement

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Haley Pessin looks at the advances and setbacks of the defund movement and how the Left fits into these efforts

As President Joe Biden officially began his tenure alongside Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, no shortage of commentators [attributed his election victory to Black voters](#). Of course, such observations are part of a [long history](#) of politicians and mainstream media treating Black people as a guaranteed, monolithic voting bloc to court at election time; candidates promise to deliver on issues of racial and economic justice, only to fall far short once in office.

In his [inaugural address](#), Biden acknowledged these voters and last summer's mass protests against anti-Black racism, stating, "The cry for racial justice some 400 years in the making...will be deferred no longer." However, no such lofty commitments to racial justice featured in his campaign, even as the [largest anti-racist uprising](#) in U.S. history raised a clear demand in cities across the country: ["defund the police."](#) Instead, Biden ran primarily as the alternative to the blatant white supremacist politics of Donald Trump—a low bar to clear—while strongly opposing the far-reaching reforms that activists have advocated.



The clear demand of last summer's rebellion

Not only is Biden [against defunding the police](#), he has called to [increase funding for police departments](#), which already receive a combined [annual \\$115 billion](#). This continues Biden's [long record](#) of bolstering policies such as the 1994 Crime Bill that led to a massive expansion of policing and prisons. This legislation vastly increased contact between people living in segregated, predominantly Black neighborhoods and the armed forces of the state, while heightening the criminalization of Black people throughout U.S. society, making [them six times more likely to be killed in a police encounter](#) than white people, regardless of whether they were [unarmed](#), had [called the police for help](#), or were merely existing [in their own homes](#).

Last summer's anti-racist uprising marked a watershed moment as a majority of Americans shifted against the "law and order" politics that permeate Biden's political career. Ideas about the fundamentally racist nature of policing that were once deemed "radical" have become common sense for many people who are now thinking through alternatives to the police. Those who participated in the rebellion are [less likely to hold illusions](#) that the new administration will be

responsive to these demands without [continued pressure](#) and [mobilization](#). On Thursday January 21, [anti-racist protesters](#) in Portland took to the streets to mark Biden's first full day in office. At the same time, the far-right forces Trump has emboldened will likely remain a threat, even if they have been temporarily subdued since storming the Capitol.

As we enter the Biden era, it is worth taking a step back to assess the current state of the movement to defund the police, what factors have led to advances and setbacks in different localities, and where the Left fits into these efforts.

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The full scale of organizing to defund the police is difficult to quantify, given that these fights have largely happened at the local level with little national coordination. A September 2020 study by [Bloomberg City Labs](#) offers insight into how many cities have launched defund campaigns, but also illustrates how resistant politicians remain to cutting police budgets. According to the study, in 34 out of the 50 largest US cities "more than half actually increased spending or kept it unchanged as a percentage of their discretionary spending." In addition, the majority of these cities spent over a quarter of their total budgets on the police.

There are a few notable exceptions, such as Los Angeles where voters passed [Measure J, also known as the "Reimagine LA County"](#) mandate, which stipulates that 10% of the city's general fund be diverted to alternatives to policing and incarceration, not police and prisons. Importantly, the measure has no sunset clause, meaning its effects extend through future city budgets. Related efforts by students, parents, and teachers also succeeded in [pressuring local school boards to end contracts between schools and local police departments](#) in Denver, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Oakland, Seattle, San Francisco, San Jose, and Portland. Most recently, the [City Council in Austin](#) voted to divert funding from the city's police budget toward permanent supportive housing.

Elsewhere, however, these efforts have proven more complicated. For instance, Minneapolis made headlines when its city council announced plans to [dismantle its police department](#), only to [repeatedly delay voting](#) on the matter. While the council ultimately shifted [\\$8 million](#) from the police to other social services, they did so without reducing the size of the police department. Meanwhile, a separate body known as the Charter Commission denied voters the option to decide the future of the police department on the November ballot.

Similarly, the New York City Council attempted to pass off a [budget](#) that shifted \$1 billion from the police department to school resource officers (i.e. cops in schools). Several months later, Democratic Mayor Bill De Blasio approved a [new class of 900 NYPD officers](#) while [threatening to lay off up to 22,000 public sector workers](#). It is worth noting that New York's state attorney general [recently filed a federal lawsuit](#) against De Blasio and the department's police commissioner, alleging the NYPD repeatedly violated protesters' rights and used excessive force throughout the summer protests.

This continues a trend of the last four decades during which police budgets have skyrocketed, [whether crime rates were rising or falling](#). The claim that we cannot defund the police due to

current crime rates or gun violence is a red herring. Nowhere have calls to defund the police meant simply allowing crime to run rampant. Rather, [as Mariame Kaba argues](#), those who call for defunding the police also champion alternatives to policing that can actually address the root causes of crime and oppression:

When people, especially white people, consider a world without the police, they envision a society as violent as our current one, merely without law enforcement — and they shudder...People like me who want to abolish prisons and police, however, have a vision of a different society, built on cooperation instead of individualism, on mutual aid instead of self-preservation. What would the country look like if it had [billions](#) of extra dollars to spend on housing, food and education for all? This change in society wouldn't happen immediately, but the protests show that many people are ready to embrace a different vision of safety and justice.

In reality, opposition to defunding the police is not practical, but political. The most vicious attacks on the movement came from the Trump administration and the Right, who [sought \(unsuccessfully\) to deploy the military](#) to crush protests and withhold federal funding to so-called [“anarchist jurisdictions.”](#) It was Democrats, however, who blamed calls to “defund the police” for costing them at the ballot box. In a [post-election call](#) between Nancy Pelosi and her caucus, Democrats singled out the demand in explaining why they had lost seats in competitive races against House Republicans or had won by slimmer margins than predicted. As a result, some Democrats have [considered reversing their support for the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act](#) so as not to risk alienating moderate voters, even though it would enact moderate reforms like limiting qualified immunity and encouraging state and local governments to ban chokeholds ([which are already illegal in some states](#), but continue to be used by police). The Act does not even mention defunding the police. Later, ahead of Georgia's Senate runoffs, [Biden warned civil rights leaders](#) that painting Democrats as supportive of defunding the police was “how [Republicans] beat the living hell out of us across the country.”

This divide [between reforming and abolishing the police] has advanced as a result of the movement, but it also suggests the necessity of ongoing, coordinated action if we are to raise the cost of Democrats claiming to care about racial justice while opposing demands that undermine the role of the police in maintaining a racist, unequal status quo.

This handwringing echoes attempts by the liberal establishment to discipline the left-wing of the Democratic Party, such as when former President Barack Obama disparaged the demand to defund the police as a “snappy slogan.” This is more than a call to change the language activists use in order to placate moderates. [Biden's plan for criminal justice reform](#) mimics Obama's [21st Century Task Force on Policing](#) in its focus on improving community-police relations, while other Democrats' [proposals to address police misconduct](#) recycle some of the same meager policy changes, such as body cameras and diversity training. These are reforms that have already been implemented and have [failed](#) to stop police from killing disproportionate numbers of Black people [in cities like Minneapolis](#), where George Floyd's murder sparked a militant, multiracial rebellion.

Obama's comments reflect the fundamental divide between reforms that merely tinker with policing and those that take power away from the police by reducing their overall presence in Black and Brown communities. As [Kaba writes](#), "[T]he only way that we will address oppressive policing is to abolish the police. Therefore all of the 'reforms' that focus on strengthening the police or 'morphing' policing into something more invisible but still as deadly should be opposed." This divide has advanced as a result of the movement, but it also suggests the necessity of ongoing, coordinated action if we are to raise the cost of Democrats claiming to care about racial justice while opposing demands that undermine the role of the police in maintaining a racist, unequal status quo.



A Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Conference in Atlanta

A central challenge for the movement remains the lack of national forums in which activists can assess these set-backs and begin to develop strategies to overcome them. [The formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee \(SNCC\)](#) provides a useful model: what began as a conference of 200 people became one of the leading organizations of the Civil Rights era, making it possible to sustain organizing against Jim Crow laws that began with semi-spontaneous sit-ins in cities across the South. This is not to suggest that an exact historical template exists for today's movement, but we can imagine similar forums being organized online—and in person when it's safe again to do so—with the explicit aim of developing networks through which to call national days of actions, to draw lessons from places where defund campaigns have been successful, and to connect new layers of radical activists with veteran abolitionists in developing strategies and next steps for the movement.

The two groups closest to such a formation—the [Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation \(BLMGNF\)](#) and [Movement for Black Lives \(M4BL\)](#)—comprise multiple chapters and affiliate organizations, but both groups are intentionally decentralized and only loosely coordinated across the country. In lieu of organizing activists to better agitate for their demands after the summer uprising, BLMGNF primarily directed its energy toward mobilizing voters to defeat Trump and [getting a hearing within the Biden administration](#) (a request that [Biden has so far ignored](#)). Relatedly, M4BL's August National Black National Convention was modeled not on the founding conference of SNCC, but on the [1972 National Black Political Convention](#) in Gary, Indiana, whose primary legacy has been the election of more Black politicians. In both cases, the question of which strategies and national initiatives to focus on were predetermined. Although both BLMGNF and M4BL have elevated the profiles of key Black activists, neither currently provides ongoing organizing spaces in which potentially thousands of rank and file activists can easily, collectively, and democratically determine national priorities and share resources beyond, as well as within, these organizations.

The organized Left could have played a role in facilitating the creation of these forums. Unfortunately, a sober assessment suggests that much of the organized Left, including the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA), was unprepared to take advantage of the political openings created by the anti-racist uprising and did not shift course soon enough to relate to it in lasting and meaningful ways. As [Mike Davis argues](#) of both the uprising and the pandemic, "The left needs to

face the fact that despite the huge popularity of its ideas and the dynamic example of BLM we remain clueless and disorganized as a national force. We need to stop looking for electoral silver-linings and get ourselves together. Renew our commitment to BLM and work like hell to build a multi-issue national coalition for life and justice.”

This is not to say individuals on the Left did not attend or participate in protests; many undoubtedly did, such as those in DSA's AfroSocialist and Socialists of Color Caucus (AFROSOC) and DSA members already involved in anti-racist work. In a positive example, members of AFROSOC and the DSA's Racial Justice Working Group built an open organizing call, which resulted in the [Mass March to Defund and Abolish the Police](#) endorsed by over fifty organizations and drawing out 3-5,000 people ahead of the city's budget vote. Yet, without a robust national orientation on the struggle at its height or national committees to coordinate our response, we were left unable to make a significant contribution, either by using the organization's resources to coordinate actions around the country, bringing new activists into existing organizations, or assisting in the creation of labor, Left, and grassroots coalitions that could continue organizing after the protests had subsided.

While we cannot predict exactly when, where, or under what circumstances social movements will develop, we know the conditions that precipitated the Minneapolis rebellion exist in cities across the country...It is essential for socialists to develop our analysis and activity on the basis of these conditions so that we can relate to upsurges in struggle when they do occur.

It does not help that there are currents on the Left that [downplay the importance of social movement organizing as compared to elections](#). In this formulation, electing the “right people” is approached as a goal in itself, rather than a means to build on and amplify the demands and activity that masses of working-class people are already taking. That calls to defund the police have gained traction anywhere is not primarily a function of office holders, but of mass action. As illustrated in Chicago, where [DSA Chicago censured Alderman Andre Vasquez](#) for approving a budget that did not defund the police, having a strong movement outside the electoral arena is crucial for holding politicians accountable when they vote against the interests of that movement. This should inform which areas of work we prioritize not just when these movements are most active, but in between periods of mass protest.

Working class struggle and social movements do not occur on an electoral timeline. Even a bigger Left more rooted in workplaces and communities will not always be able to predict what issue or event will be the breaking point that turns atomized, local struggles into national awakenings and rebellion. Before video of George Floyd's murder went viral, the nation watched as the white vigilantes who murdered Ahmad Aubrey [walked free](#), yet fear of the pandemic and stay-at-home orders made the prospect of mass resistance seem impossible. Three months later, millions of people had taken to the streets. While we cannot predict exactly when, where, or under what circumstances social movements will develop, we know the conditions that precipitated the Minneapolis rebellion exist in cities across the country. This is why masses of people were able to see this anger and militancy as justified, and to generalize it.

It is essential for socialists to develop our analysis and activity on the basis of these conditions so that we can relate to upsurges in struggle when they do occur. These are moments in which ideas

can change rapidly as masses of people become open to more radical solutions than what the political establishment has on offer. The summer uprising was a good example of this, as ideas typically seen as radical were forced into mainstream conversation virtually overnight. These struggles were led by Black youth, but the consciousness, participation, and solidarity they generated extended to non-Black people, including in rural, majority-white regions and even [former sundown towns](#). At the height of protests, an astounding [54% of Americans](#) felt the burning of a police station in Minneapolis was “justified” or “partially justified.” And in exit polls for the November elections, [voters cited racial justice as the second most important issue](#) facing the country, after the economy.

The question is how socialists can prepare for these moments, with the understanding that a system built on extreme inequality—and that centrally relies on racial oppression and policing to maintain order—will eventually produce resistance. A new layer of activists has already learned important lessons in a matter of months: how to organize a march, how to force the police to retreat and to navigate right-wing violence, how to coordinate safety and sustenance through mutual aid, particularly while protesting in a pandemic, and how to build and work in coalition with disparate political forces while agitating for shared goals. All of these skills, while specific to this particular movement, are equally relevant to the project of building working class power, which requires masses of people acting on their own behalf and coming to recognize that our social power lies in collective action—[especially as workers](#)—not in waiting on someone else to save us.

The struggle for Black liberation [has always played a leading role](#) in the class struggle overall. Socialists should see our contribution as helping to cohere the experience and lessons of the leading militants, particularly the many Black activists, who have become leaders in these struggles into lasting organizations (including our own). In this way, we can help lay the basis for stronger, more organized struggles that are better able to fight for and win our demands the next time the police kill a Black person or a city cuts social services while wasting billions of dollars on the police.

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P.S.

- Tempest. Posted February 1, 2021:
<https://tempestmag.org/2021/02/defund-the-police/>