



Conversations in Urban Education

The Struggle for Cops Off Campus

Abstract

The following transcript is a roundtable interview with campus-based organizers from Police Free Penn who reflected on the challenges, opportunities, and abolitionist gains from their campaign to abolish policing at the University of Pennsylvania. The interview discusses the challenges of coalition-building in a campus setting, the importance of being in a joint struggle with local organizing outside of the university, and the ways they organize using an abolitionist framework.

Keywords

[police](#), [campus](#), [sites of struggle](#), [coalition building](#)

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Figure 1. "Repair" by Olly Costello.

Could you all tell us about the history and origins of Police Free Penn, and anything you think organizers on other campuses should know about [...] starting similar projects or campaigns at their universities?

CHRISTOPHER ROGERS: Police Free Penn began deep in the early days of the pandemic—in June of 2020. Before we even had a routine of what the pandemic was. On May 31st of 2020, there was an incredible moment of police violence perpetrated by the Philadelphia Police Department [PPD] here in the city along the 52nd Street corridor in West Philadelphia. This eventually led to one of the largest police brutality settlements in the city's history, because of the way that they brutalized and used chemical weapons along a residential corridor.

In response to seeing some of the righteous rage from the community and the outpouring of support for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor throughout that summer, the Black Philly Radical Collective (BPRC) called to abolish the PPD. The BPRC had a platform that called for an end to the war on Black Philadelphia now. From this platform, the question came up for us on what our role was in this moment—as people affiliated with Penn—one of the wealthiest institutions in the city, one of the wealthiest institutions in the state. Penn has one of the largest private police forces in the state, which also utilizes the sort of knowledge that comes out of the university to reinforce the police state. **We asked ourselves what is our responsibility to disrupt, dismantle, and how could we use this campus as a site of struggle to lift up the rising call towards abolition.**

We were committed to doing this in a way that is not just us, getting in direct fights with our administrators or us engaging in abolitionist book clubs—but building a platform for action and experimentation. We recognized the importance of showing up in solidarity with ongoing, community-grounded movements in Philadelphia, and using those as building blocks towards the abolitionist vision that was set forth by the Black Philly Radical Collective. Through this process, Police Free Penn brought together undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, staff members, alumni—all those who are interested and have some form of stake or say around this institution. **We want to be able to invite them into a much longer and larger, radical movement.**

JAKE NUSSBAUM: One thing we learned in June of 2020 was that Penn Police were involved in the police violence on 52nd Street. It was a real moment of interconnection that I think maybe hadn't always been as spectacularly visible to

abolitionist organizers at Penn. University police joined PPD to violently repress Black dissent and Black protest. It was a crystallization moment for many of us of a lot of different things we had been thinking about or experiencing in our lives on campus. **We asked: If our campus is an intersection of all of these different carceral geographies, what are they, and therefore, what is our multipronged abolitionist response?** Our own Police Free Penn platform called for Penn to decriminalize, divest, defund, disband, reinvest, redress, and reimagine. You can go to our [Medium page](#) to read the specifics of our platform in more detail. Even in formulating those demands, we realized how interconnected all of these struggles were, from reparations to police abolition to prison abolition, to the right to protest.

JANAY DRAUGHN: Abolition drags you into everything—Palestine solidarity, housing justice, healthcare—everything. Police Free Penn, and abolition more broadly, has compelled us to be fuller thinkers—to be dissatisfied with what the university is, what it says it will be. The summer of 2020 caused organizing formations at Penn to take abolition seriously and articulate an abolitionist critique more clearly. I’ve noticed people’s demands on campus have become more nuanced, critical, and connected to other struggles throughout the city.

One of the campaigns that Police Free Penn supported was the Coalition to Save the University City (UC) Townhomes. The UC Townhomes, located only a few blocks from Penn’s campus, are a housing development in the Black Bottom, a historically Black neighborhood in West Philadelphia, that was targeted by the city for demolition. The fight to save the UC Townhomes required organizers on campus to think about coalition-building and the politics of abolition more broadly.

As Ruth Wilson Gilmore has said, “universities are crossroads,” bringing together people from disparate backgrounds, skill sets, and relations to power into a shared, yet contested site. How has Police Free Penn been able to build and sustain your work across different factions, and really resist the siloing that universities often can create in organizing?

JANAY DRAUGHN: The people who have anchored me to think about abolition more broadly as I came into organizing doing things for the first time were from harm reduction, housing, all kinds of different movement sectors and organizing

backgrounds. **This shifted my thinking from focusing on the campus towards thinking about what it means to struggle alongside Black Philly and to articulate their demands as we unsettle the university.**

CHRISTOPHER ROGERS: I can't deny the influence of having a presence of radical organizing within the city. For other campus-based organizers, it's critical to grapple with the question of, what are you grounding your visions within. The idea of a university as a crossroads, and we're coming together to figure out a vision and ways of enacting things that lead towards an abolitionist world in the short window of our transient lives that we spend on these campuses is a very daunting task. What really supported Police Free Penn is the recognition and the platform work that was created by the Black Philly Radical Collective, which oriented us towards thinking about our relationship to these clear, present, and realizable campaigns that already existed. We're responding to calls that already exist in the community. And this creates the potential for us to not just think of ourselves in a limited way through our titles within the university—as a student, postdoc, or faculty member—but rather seeing where we are within this larger spectrum, and bringing those insights, information sharing.

We need to be able to see this from all sides to recognize our accountability to a movement which is larger than this university. The goal of this is not to realize this sort of transformed university, nor to realize “abolition university™.” **The goal of this is to recognize our responsibility and to a larger radical movement that is meant to be determined by the people who are already here within those communities.** Don't just think about how we transform this site, but really the potential that this site might not need to exist any longer. And if that is the case, then the question ain't about how do we convince the administrator to change the policy to make a more “welcoming” campus. The goal becomes we need to get \$20 billion out of this fucking institution and back into the people's hands, and what are the strategies that will help us do that.

This orientation allowed us to have a sense of collective and coalitional vision. But we're still navigating through the struggles of intergenerational approaches and different power imbalances that are part of the hierarchies of universities. **If you're a faculty member and you've got research dollars, I feel like there's a tax that comes along with being involved in radical struggle. You need to be mobilizing those funds and putting them in service of the aspirations that you claim.** These are the types of things we are struggling around now in terms of like, what does it mean to sustain a broad coalition.

JAKE NUSSBAUM: The anthropology department at Penn is housed in this colonial museum that steals objects and remains from the community and misuses them and does all kinds of experiments on them. This practice and structure of anti-Blackness is something I noticed immediately when I came as a student but did not have a forum or a community to think through that issue from a campaign-oriented, material change standpoint. I would talk about it with other people in my department but it would always be on kind of an intellectualizing level. It's not a knock on those people, but the opportunity to get out of the silo came through connecting with people who were taking a much more structural perspective on what the university is, and an abolitionist perspective on what the university is, and how the different elements of this institution are connected. It's not like a clear strategy on how to bring people together, moreso in the university we are all in silos, and many of us are confronting these issues. By taking this sort of nonsectarian abolitionist approach, we were able to come together and do so much that we wouldn't have been able to do if we just tried to organize within our departments.

Each university's relationship with policing can look different. So I was wondering if you all could speak to what relationship you see between university policing at Penn or anything you want to highlight that's specific and unique to how policing functions at Penn, and how that relates to policing within surrounding communities and neighborhoods.

CHRISTOPHER ROGERS: Penn, just on paper, has one of the largest private police forces in the state. When we started Police Free Penn, Maureen Rush was the president of the Philadelphia Police Foundation, which is the nonprofit entity that uses private partnerships with corporations and other institutions to raise money to kind of support the Philadelphia Police.

After the police violence that took place on 52nd Street, Maureen Rush posted a video celebrating that through her efforts, she was able to buy new SWAT equipment to give to the Philadelphia Police. So there's also the importance of Penn as this corporation, as a corporate institution, and how it seeks to convene and support the police.

Penn's commitment to policing shows up in a really interesting way when examining the history of University City. University City, the neighborhood which

was concocted after the demise of the Black Bottom of West Philadelphia, is one of the most policed sections in the City of Philadelphia.

Penn's investment in policing is not just an investment in the police on campus, but it also extends out and creates a whole dragnet of the entire West Philadelphia neighborhood, which is tied to its real estate program, and its real estate incentives that they provide to faculty and other people that they are trying to recruit to campus.

JAKE NUSSBAUM: Penn, from my perspective, essentially uses police to create so-called safety within very specific areas right off campus. Historically, Penn Police would patrol campus, then they patrolled, let's say to 42nd Street, and they did that at the same time as Penn put a ton of investment into specific public schools that were in that district, and started giving rebates and incentives to faculty to buy housing in that district.

And then on the other side of that boundary, you have the neoliberal decimation of the social safety net in a poor Black neighborhood. Policing goes right to that line: that neighborhood is disinvested in and becomes poorer, houses get blighted, and start to fall apart. And there's no policing happening there until Penn decides it wants to go a little further, and then it pushes its police force out a little further, and tries to make that area, "safe for Penn faculty and students."

This pattern explains in some ways why you now have Penn showing up to repress Black uprising and Black political dissent on 52nd Street—even though campus ends at 38th or 39th Street. There's a very strategic relationship between the police, Penn's investments in education, its incentivizing of gentrification, poverty, disincentivization, blight, etc. that are all racial effects of racist decimation of the social safety net. This specifically impacts West Philly, which is a historically Black neighborhood, so there is of course anti-Blackness that's built into that protocol as well.

JANAY DRAUGHN: Yeah, I'm thinking through Penn's historically strong connection to state power at the national level. Penn is a spotlight for the Congressional hearings, federal investigations, and when there was one threat against Zionists on campus, Penn sent an email notifying students they called in the FBI. The ease in which Penn colludes with larger police forces that have always been very open about their hand in oppression, violence, and premature death.

CHRISTOPHER ROGERS: Some of the superpredator research that informed the 1994 Crime Bill came through Penn. This insidiousness continues today with these robotic dogs and AI policing robots that [are] coming out of research that is actively emerging through the University of Pennsylvania. Knowledge from Penn is used to reinforce the carceral state.

Amidst escalating campus-based repression of Palestine solidarity organizing that inherently increases surveillance and repression of other forms of radical student organizing, what are some of the biggest challenges Police Free Penn is facing at this moment, and what are some wins that you all are proud of that you've made?

JANAY DRAUGHN: One disclaimer first, political orientations like abolition are bound up with anticolonial, decolonial struggle. Chris and I were doxxed because our names were tied to Police Free Penn and an article in the student newspaper. Police Free Penn signed Campus Against Occupation's statement after October 7th, and people found us and doxxed us. One of the most direct ways of attempting to expose someone to harm and surveillance by classmates, professors, and Penn Police is through doxxing. Penn's organizing scene is not very Black. With Chris and I being visible organizers who are both Black... we became easy targets for our opposition to articulate a disdain for abolition, a disdain for critique of colonial systems. In terms of wins, we made the personal relationships we've fostered, the political relationships with different organizations, specifically between Police Free Penn and Penn Against Occupation have gotten really strong. It's been a big win to be able to sustain campaigns even under such heavy surveillance and repression.

CHRISTOPHER ROGERS: One of the most important wins among student organizing I see right now is the shift in hegemony. The idea of U.S. foreign policy as "on the side of progress" has failed. Utterly failed. So now we are not talking, now we are way beyond the sort of statement. The idea of the campus email by the president being a thing that's going to pacify—that will be received by students and cause them to go, "You know what, our university is way past that" is failing. And that is because of the work that has been led by the Penn Against Occupation organizers. In addition to the growing influence of the Faculty for Justice in Palestine, and their relationship to the Philly Palestine Coalition, the win is I feel like it has never been more evident of the lies, the illusion of sort of

administrative institutional power and its connections with zionism. That has never been more evident than now and has opened up a platform to talk about the history of these sort of lies and illusions, and how it relates to Penn's parasitic relationship to Black Philadelphia. Specifically, how university knowledge and experiments have led to harmful outcomes for communities. That genealogy and history has created the current conditions on campus. This institution is not a neutral site, it's actually used to reproduce the racial capitalist order that we exist in.

Another part of this is the idea of the university as preparation for the "real world," you go through this sort of nonexisting space, and it's preparing you to go into the real world, while at the same time it's evident that the university is a site of struggle—and folks who are at the university have a responsibility to engage in that struggle. And I feel like that's never been more evident. So the cultural strength of resistance is the confluence of all these movements—abolitionist movement, Palestine solidarity work, housing justice work, and so on.

JAKE NUSSBAUM: We have small victories in what is an incredibly difficult time for thinking about what can we do to stop genocide. But one of them was this beautiful action in which this massive pro-Palestinian march arrives at the University City Townhomes and is greeted by residents of the townhomes who then get up and are talking about the interconnected struggle between, you know, staying in their homes as low income Black Philadelphians in West Philadelphia, and occupying forces in Palestine, Gaza, settlements, etc.

That rally was then written about in a public statement from the Penn president, essentially criminalizing, in you might even say nineteenth-century terms, about these "violent" and "unhinged" protests coming through campus, and thankfully no one was injured. This characterization and framing is very revealing, that there's now this dual move to criminalize the organizers of the Save the UC Townhomes movement, which Police Free Penn has been involved in, and organizers calling for a permanent ceasefire, and an end to the occupation and the genocide.

CHRISTOPHER ROGERS: It's a losing move. Like it's a move that you only do when you're losing, first of all. And it is further evidence that these two movement horizons are intimately connected. **There's no way to be a committed abolitionist without fighting for a free Palestine.**

Since 2015, there has really been a resurgence nationally in the number of college-in-prison programs across the U.S., and then more recently the 1994 ban on Pell Grants was lifted, and that lift took effect in the summer of 2023. One of the things that's expected in the larger national landscape in relation to higher education is that the reinstatement of Pell Grants for incarcerated people is expected to dramatically expand access to college coursework for people inside. And yet, education on the outside still kind of remains widely inaccessible for a variety of reasons to formerly imprisoned people. That's in part likely due to university requirements demanding applicants disclose conviction records—which can be used as a discriminatory practice in the admissions process—the sheer cost of tuition, potential housing constraints due to parole, etc.

Given these conditions, and within the larger neoliberal university, how do you see campaigns for cops off campus connected to the need to expand educational access for formerly imprisoned people for free college?

CHRISTOPHER ROGERS: So Penn is a \$20 billion institution, one of the largest employers in the city. Due to the deep pockets and resources Penn has, some people believe that it should educate most of Philadelphia. Yet, in practice, the educational institution that does that work is the Community College of Philadelphia. The Community College of Philadelphia is the institution that the working class of Philadelphia has the most access to and most support from. One of the things that we see at Penn is the idea that a select few formerly incarcerated people can come into the university and become “worthy”—as if granting them access to the university can be used as a way to wash away the institution's legacy.

There is this attempt to sort of “take off the stench of incarceration” as if it's an individual problem and not the ways that the system has been set up to demonize and otherize folks. In terms of our abolitionist work, there is something about this narrative—the idea of the exception—that we have to dismantle.

The ways that people who are affiliated with the institution are positioned as the model minorities or a version of the [talented tenth](#) allows for this notion that what we need is just more formerly incarcerated people within the talented tenth, so to speak, and not a full dismantling of the carceral state. This is one of the

challenges that comes up in all organizing when we talk about who we are in community with; we need to have those relationships with groups who are organizing from the inside.

JANAY DRAUGHN: Yeah, this narrative Chris named, masks how Penn produces those violent realities where people have to be reformed in order to participate in society. For example, Dr. Kligman made retinol, patented it for himself, and made tons of money for Penn. He built prestige for Penn's medical school, and he made retinol by experimenting on incarcerated men at Holmesburg Prison. Of course, Penn never was like, "Yeah, he experimented on people, caused them to suffer extreme harm." But as a group, we've been thinking about how reproduction of academic knowledge creates suffering and death for people, and for Black people, Philly residents, who have already been criminalized.

JAKE NUSSBAUM: Yeah, I'll add as a general practice, Police Free Penn has worked to be in solidarity [with] and uplift community organizers that are doing this kind of work regularly and really in community with people directly impacted. And I don't want to reify the "town and gown" boundary too much, because as we've already discussed there are many of us who have a foot in each and it's a false binary.

That being said, we really try to work with community organizers who are leading these different struggles. So I think in some ways it might just be a matter of coincidence and timing that we're not necessarily as deeply involved with certain kinds of abolitionist prison education programs. But also one reason for that is because this university, which includes all of us, has such a terrible track record of being a leader in any of these fields.

It does harm in all of these fields. So when you say college in prisons, the first thing that comes to mind is the Kligman experiments and Penn's involvement in abusing Black prisoners at Holmesburg. So our general approach has been to partner with community organizations that are significantly invested in this work, in part because we're students. We come and go. Many of us have left Philly after their involvement in Police Free Penn, while many of us stay because of the involvement in Police Free Penn, and actually we articulate and change our approach to how we want to be in the world.

As a best practice we try to uplift Black community organizing, uplift abolitionist community organizing, and I think we've been able to do that successfully. We've done a mutual aid fundraiser for this organization called [Freedom Side School](#).

So we were raising money to give to this other organization that has done much more significant work with incarcerated people and formerly incarcerated people and creating educational programs for the youth. So there's just a lot of different ways that we are trying to align ourselves with community first ... self-determination practices, and uplift them, rather than presume to know that just because we're inside the university.

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