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White supremacist met by mass protest at University of Florida

By Fred Mazelis

21 October 2017

Mass protests greeted white supremacist Richard Spencer at the University of Florida on Thursday. Spencer's neo-fascist backers in the auditorium at the Phillips Center at the University of Florida Gainesville campus faced hundreds of anti-Nazi students and other Gainesville residents.

In advance of the event, thousands, ignoring the advice of university President Kent Fuchs and others to simply ignore Spencer, signed up on a Facebook page, "No Nazis at UF—Protest Richard Spencer." Hundreds gained entry to the auditorium, where they continuously interrupted the neo-Nazi advocate with chants such as "Go Home Nazis!, Go Home Spencer!"

The overwhelming rejection of the neo-Nazis came despite efforts to prevent many from entering the center. According to the *Miami Herald*, only 456 of the 700 seats were occupied. The white supremacists, having paid for the rental, were allowed to determine who could enter, and many were denied permission. These included individuals with anti-Nazi slogans on T-shirts as well as some who had written phone numbers on their arms, an indication that they were prepared for possible arrest.

Samantha Schuyler, who was forcibly prevented from entering, was quoted as saying, "I think it's racism. It's arbitrary. They told me to leave. Then they dragged me."

Despite these efforts, the white supremacists were heavily outnumbered inside the venue. Only about 15 raised their hands when Spencer called on those who agree with the “Alt-Right” to identify themselves. Outside, hundreds more marched in protest, chanting “We Don’t Want Your Nazi Hate,” among other slogans. Spencer claimed victory but shut down the meeting 30 minutes early.

In remarks he was able to make amidst the protests, Spencer gave further indication of the strategy behind the efforts to build a fascist movement in the US. Echoing similar comments from former Trump adviser Stephen Bannon, Spencer said, “I, like millions of other white people in their 20s and 30s now, have a dramatically different ‘lived’ experience than our parents. Our parents can remember peak America. They can remember the America of ‘50s diners and ice cream dates and drive-in movie theaters.” The establishment media, using remarks like these, calls Spencer and his ilk “white nationalists,” rather than fascists or neo-fascists.

Spencer and his National Policy Institute have depicted themselves as defenders of free speech and demanded the right to rent facilities at public institutions such as the University of Florida. The Gainesville event was the first one held since the August 12 Nazi rampage at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, which ended with one protester, Heather Heyer, killed after being run down by an auto driven by a neo-Fascist who had come to the event.

President Donald Trump subsequently blamed both the club-carrying fascists, who marched through the campus shouting anti-Semitic slogans, and the anti-fascist protesters for the violence, and said there were “very fine people” among the neo-Nazis.

The protests at the University of Florida were relatively peaceful, with two arrests and several minor injuries following clashes between a handful of white supremacists and protesters. As the action was winding up, however, a single gunshot was heard at a nearby bus stop. WEAR-TV, a local television station, reported that an argument had led to gunfire when a man, later identified as 28-year-old Tyler Tenbrink, exited a vehicle and fired one shot, which missed its intended targets.

The license plate of the car was provided to the authorities, and Tenbrink and two others, Colton and William Fears, were arrested later that evening about 20 miles north of Gainesville. They were charged with attempted murder. The three men, from Texas, had apparently taunted the protesters with Nazi salutes and pro-Hitler chants before Tenbrink took out his weapon. Tenbrink is reportedly being held on \$3 million bond and the Fears brothers on \$1 million each.

Earlier in the week, in response to the planned speech at the University of Florida, right-wing Republican Governor Rick Scott declared a state of emergency for Alachua County. On this pretext the authorities mobilized the University of Florida Police Department, the Gainesville Police Department, the Alachua County Sheriff’s Department and the Florida Highway Patrol. Hundreds of heavily armed police were deployed on the streets of Gainesville, with roads blocked by cement and dump trucks. Soldiers in riot gear were stationed in the balcony of the Phillips Center during the meeting. The university reported that it had spent more than \$500,000 in security measures.

The state of emergency was declared in the name of “public safety.” As in all such cases, however, it was used both to deter mass protest and also for training purposes for future actions to be directed against the working class.