

U.S.

# ‘Antifa’ Grows as Left-Wing Faction Set to, Literally, Fight the Far Right

By THOMAS FULLER, ALAN FEUER and SERGE F. KOVALESKI AUG. 17, 2017

OAKLAND, Calif. — Last weekend, when a 27-year-old bike messenger showed up at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Va., he came ready for battle. He joined a human chain that stretched in front of Emancipation Park and linked his arms with others, blocking waves of white supremacists — some of them in full Nazi regalia — from entering.

“As soon as they got close,” said the young man, who declined to give his real name and goes by Frank Sabaté after the famous Spanish anarchist, “they started swinging clubs, fists, shields. I’m not embarrassed to say that we were not shy in defending ourselves.”

Sabaté is an adherent of a controversial force on the left known as antifa. The term, a contraction of the word “anti-fascist,” describes the loose affiliation of radical activists who have surfaced in recent months at events around the country and have openly scuffled with white supremacists, right-wing extremists and, in some cases, ordinary supporters of President Trump. Energized in part by Mr. Trump’s election, they have sparred with their conservative opponents at political rallies and college campus speaking engagements, arguing that one crucial way to combat the far right is to confront its supporters on the streets.

Unlike most of the counterdemonstrators in Charlottesville and elsewhere, members of antifa have shown no qualms about using their fists, sticks or canisters of pepper spray to meet an array of right-wing antagonists whom they call a fascist threat to American democracy. As explained this week by a dozen adherents of the

movement, the ascendant new right in the country requires a physical response.

“People are starting to understand that neo-Nazis don’t care if you’re quiet, you’re peaceful,” said Emily Rose Nauert, a 20-year-old antifa member who became a symbol of the movement in April when a white nationalist leader punched her in the face during a melee near the University of California, Berkeley.

“You need violence in order to protect nonviolence,” Ms. Nauert added. “That’s what’s very obviously necessary right now. It’s full-on war, basically.”

Others on the left disagree, saying antifa’s methods harm the fight against right-wing extremism and have allowed Mr. Trump to argue that the two sides are equivalent. These critics point to the power of peaceful disobedience during the civil rights era, when mass marches and lunch-counter protests in the South slowly eroded the legal enshrinement of discrimination.

“We’re against violence, just straight up,” said Heidi Beirich, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project, which tracks hate groups. “If you want to protest racists and anti-Semites, it needs to be peacefully and hopefully somewhere away from where those guys are rallying.”

Antifa adherents — some armed with sticks and masked in bandannas — played a visible role in the running street battles in Charlottesville, but it is impossible to know how many people count themselves as members of the movement. Its followers acknowledge it is secretive, without official leaders and organized into autonomous local cells. It is also only one in a constellation of activist movements that have come together in the past several months to the fight the far right.

Driven by a range of political passions — including anticapitalism, environmentalism, and gay and indigenous rights — the diverse collection of anarchists, communists and socialists has found common cause in opposing right-wing extremists and white supremacists. In the fight against the far right, antifa has allied itself at times with local clergy, members of the Black Lives Matter movement and grass-roots social-justice activists. It has also supported niche groups like Black Bloc fighters, who scrapped with right-wing forces in Berkeley this year, and By Any Means Necessary, a coalition formed more than two decades

ago to protest California's ban on affirmative action for universities.

George Ciccariello-Maher, a professor at Drexel University in Philadelphia who counts himself as both an antifa follower and a scholar of the movement, said it did not have a single origin story. The group has antecedents in Europe, especially Germany and Italy, where its early followers traded shots with Nazis in the 1930s and fought against Benito Mussolini's Blackshirts. Its more recent history has roots in the straight-edge punk rock music scene, the anti-globalization protests of the 1990s and the Occupy Wall Street movement.

The closest thing antifa may have to a guiding principle is that ideologies it identifies as fascistic or based on a belief in genetic inferiority cannot be reasoned with and must be physically resisted. Its adherents express disdain for mainstream liberal politics, seeing it as inadequately muscular, and tend to fight the right through what they call "direct actions" rather than relying on government authorities.

"When you look at this grave and dangerous threat — and the violence it has already caused — is it more dangerous to do nothing and tolerate it, or should we confront it?" Frank Sabaté said. "Their existence itself is violent and dangerous, so I don't think using force or violence to oppose them is unethical."

Another antifa activist, Asha, 28, from Philadelphia, who also declined to give her full name, said that "when people advocate for genocide and white supremacy, that is violence." She added, "If we just stand back, we are allowing them to build a movement whose end goal is genocide."

In the days after the violent events in Charlottesville, some antifa members responded with an angry call to arms, saying they could not back down from what they described as the "aggressors" on the right, even if it meant an escalation into gunfights.

"I hope we never get there," said a 29-year-old antifa anarchist from California who goes by the pseudonym Tony Hooligan. "But we are willing to get there."

Not all antifa followers are as belligerent, nor are their tactics exclusively violent. When not attending what he called "big mobilizations" like the one in Charlottesville, Frank Sabaté has done ordinary community organizing, advocating

prison reform and distributing anarchist literature at punk rock shows. Others say they do the same in antifa strongholds like Philadelphia, the Bay Area of California and the Pacific Northwest.

The Berkeley campus has been a particular hotbed of antifa activity, and university officials have criticized the group. In February, black-clad protesters, some of whom identified themselves as antifa, smashed windows, threw gasoline bombs and broke into a campus building, causing \$100,000 in damage.

“The very notion of contesting ideas and perspectives with violence is antithetical to everything a university stands for,” said Dan Mogulof, a spokesman.

One of antifa’s chief functions, members said, is to monitor right-wing and white supremacist websites like The Daily Stormer and to expose the extremist groups in dispatches on their own websites like [ItsGoingDown.org](http://ItsGoingDown.org). According to James Anderson, who helps run [ItsGoingDown](http://ItsGoingDown.org), interest in the site has spiked since the events in Charlottesville, with more than 4,000 followers added for a total of over 23,000.

But antifa is “not some new sexy thing,” Mr. Anderson added. He noted that some of those who had scuffled with those on the right at Mr. Trump’s inauguration or at more recent events in New Orleans and Portland, Ore., were veterans of actions at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul in 2008, where hundreds of people were arrested, and at Occupy encampments in cities across the country.

Nonetheless, Mr. Anderson said, the far right’s resurgence under Mr. Trump has created a fresh sense of urgency. “Suddenly,” he said, “people are coming into your town with hate. It has to be confronted.”

One of the most vivid examples of antifa violence occurred in January at Mr. Trump’s inauguration, where a masked member of the movement punched the prominent white supremacist Richard B. Spencer (who was pepper-sprayed by an antifa activist in Charlottesville). That single blow started a national debate over whether it was morally justifiable to “punch a Nazi.”

Mr. Spencer, an avid opponent of the left, still drew distinctions among factions within the left-wing community.

“It’s important to differentiate antifa from liberals,” he said. “I don’t think it’s an overstatement to say that antifa believes in whatever means necessary. They have a sadistic streak.”

Other right-wing figures, like Gavin McInnes, the founder of the Proud Boys, a so-called conservative fraternity of Western chauvinists, have said antifa has done itself no favors by assuming that its enemies all share the same views. Mr. McInnes was invited to Charlottesville but declined to go, he said, because of the presence of explicit white supremacists like Mr. Spencer.

In the past, antifa activists have engaged with people who were clearly something less than outright neo-Nazis, raising questions about who, if anyone, deserves to be punched and whether there is such a thing as legitimate political violence.

Like many of their opponents, some antifa members insist that they are merely reacting to pre-existing aggression.

“The essence of their message is violence,” Jed, an antifa organizer in New York who asked that his name not be used, said of his right-wing foes. “The other side” — his side — “is just responding.”

But Ms. Nauert said she believed that, now more than ever, “physical confrontation” would be needed.

“In the end,” she said, “that’s what it’s going to take — because Nazis and white supremacists are not around to talk.”

### ***Correction: August 18, 2017***

An earlier version of this article misstated the location of the 2008 Republican National Convention. It was in St. Paul, not Minneapolis.

Thomas Fuller reported from Oakland, and Alan Feuer and Serge F. Kovaleski from New York. Caitlin Dickerson contributed reporting from New York, and Sonner Kehrt from Berkeley, Calif. Alain Delaqu erie contributed research.

A version of this article appears in print on August 18, 2017, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Left-Wing Faction Ready to Swing Its Fists at the Far Right.