

Attempt to topple Christopher Columbus statue in Chicago's Grant Park prompts standoff with police, arrests and rebuke of mayor

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A protester and Chicago police clash after protesters tried to topple the Christopher Columbus statue in Grant Park after a rally calling for the defunding of the Chicago Police Department on July 17, 2020. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

At least 1,000 people swarmed the Christopher Columbus statue in Grant Park on Friday evening in a failed attempt to topple it after a march turned tense and chaotic when some people began throwing fireworks and cans at the police, who in turn struck members of the crowd with batons.

Following a rally in support of Black and Indigenous people, hundreds of protesters marched south on Columbus Drive shortly after 7 p.m. Then a person shouted that some Chicago police units, whom they had been trying to separate the crowd from by using bike-wielding citizen “marshals,” had left to protect the statue of the controversial historical figure.

The confrontation resulted in at least 12 arrests, according to the police department. A group of elected officials also released a statement condemning what they said were aggressive tactics used to quell protesters and journalists.

“We unequivocally condemn Mayor Lori Lightfoot’s decision to send the Chicago police to beat, arrest, and terrorize the demonstrators and journalists gathered in Grant Park tonight,” read the statement, released late Friday.

It was signed by Alderwoman Jeanette Taylor, Alderwoman Rossana Rodriguez Sanchez, Alderman Byron Sigcho Lopez, Alderman Carlos Ramirez Rosa, State Rep. Representative Delia Ramirez, democratic nominee LaKesia Collins and State Sen. Robert Peters.

Dozens of people in the crowd who were clad in all-black clothing rushed the nearby statue, surrounding the short stone wall that circled it. Some began throwing objects, such as cans and fireworks, at the officers. A few people tried to climb over the wall and were met with officers smacking their batons at them.

“This is not the way! ... We don’t want them to shoot us,” a man shouted to the group throwing items. He was told by someone in the crowd to back off.

Soon, the police were pushed back, and dozens of people climbed over the wall, wading through the thinning smoke from earlier fireworks and other incendiary devices. Someone scaled the statue and caught a rope that was tossed up from the crowd, beginning about a half-hour-long attempt to yank down the statue.

At one point, demonstrators held onto two lines of rope attached to the statue as the crowd cheered on, “Columbus was a murderer. Columbus was a thief.”

By 7:40 p.m., police reinforcements had arrived at the scene, leading to a standoff in front of the statue. They were joined later by more officers, who soon released an aerosol that stung the eyes of the crowd and led to some coughing in tears. Police forced out those inside the wall surrounding the statue and circled the perimeter.

As officers moved down the hill, they pushed aside the bike-wielding protesters trying to stop them, sometimes whipping out batons or shoving the bicycles at them. The standoff shifted to north of the statue, as the crowd, still out-numbering the cops, began clapping in unison despite having a few hundred people leave by that point.

A heavy influx of police officers around the area pushed protesters away from the statue by 8:30 p.m., according to a livestream from WBBM-Ch.2.

About 18 officers were injured, some of whom were treated at the scene and others at area hospitals, Chicago police spokesman Thomas Ahern said. About a dozen people were arrested and face pending charges ranging from battery to a police officer to mob action, Ahern said. He said the aerosol used by officers was pepper spray.

“Officers were there to not only protect the property, but they were to ensure the safety of the protestors and their First Amendment right to protest peacefully when the crowd turned on the police, literally ambushed the police with all their projectiles,” Ahern said.

At least five civilians were hospitalized from the area, Chicago Fire Department spokesman Larry Langford said.

Though the statue remained standing by the time the crowd left, it and the surrounding wall were sheathed in overlapping anti-police graffiti messages.

The Columbus statues in Grant Park and the city’s Little Italy neighborhood have been the source of recent controversy and targets for vandalism. Mayor Lori Lightfoot has said she doesn’t want them taken down, but instead used to help educate people about “the full history” of the U.S.