

# Proud Boys, extremists joining anti-vaccine protests being held across Ohio

Laura A. Bischoff The Columbus Dispatch

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Anti-vaccine demonstrations across Ohio in recent weeks are drawing extremists that include conspiracy theorists, white supremacists and people who misappropriate the Holocaust.

Outside the Ohio Statehouse on Tuesday a man displayed a Proud Boys flag while wearing the group's signature black and yellow polo shirt. Another man carried signs saying "End Medical Facism (sic) Now" and "Nuremberg Trials 2.0 Coming." They were among hundreds of demonstrators who rallied in favor of an anti-vaccination bill.

**House Bill 248:** Ohio legislative leaders hit the brakes on anti-vaccination bill as supporters hold rally outside Statehouse

Outside of Natalie's Coal-fired Pizza in Worthington on Aug. 14, the Proud Boys stood alongside Moms Against DeWine, Ohio Advocates for Medical Freedom and a man who posted an extensive video where he spewed antisemitic rhetoric.

The Anti-Defamation League identifies the Proud Boys as a multi-state group that expresses misogynistic, transphobic and anti-immigrant views as well as some white supremacist and antisemitic ideologies.

Natalie's co-owner Charlie Jackson declined to comment on the protest, which came after the music venue announced it would require masks or proof of vaccination for employees and customers.

**COVID vaccines:**Heading to a concert this weekend? Bring proof of vaccination to these Columbus-area venues

Proud Boys members could be seen at anti-vaccine protests outside of Kettering Medical Center near Dayton and Mount Carmel East in Columbus, according to photos posted by media outlets. Other demonstrations have been held in Akron, Mansfield, Cincinnati, northern Kentucky and elsewhere.

## **Anti-vaccine protests outgrowth of lockdown protests**

University of Dayton Associate Professor of Sociology Paul Becker, who studies hate groups and extremism, photographed people wearing Proud Boys gear and carrying signs that liken vaccine mandates to Nazi Germany at the protest outside of Natalie's.

He called the latest round of protests an extension of the push back against COVID-19 lockdowns last year.

"It's just going to get worse," Becker predicted.

Howie Beigelman, director of the Ohio Jewish Communities, said his organization is tracking the protests.

"Sometimes there are people being antisemitic or misappropriating Holocaust terminology regarding the vaccines," he said. "It's really unfortunate. You can have a fair policy discussion on this but not one single thing happening on this is comparable to the Holocaust."

Some of same groups backing HB 248, such as Free Ohio Now, also protested school closures, business shutdowns and stay at home orders at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. Shutdown protesters at the Ohio Statehouse carried an antisemitic sign showing a rat and the star of David and some antisemitic comments were directed at former Ohio Health Department director Dr. Amy Acton, who is Jewish.

In Ohio and other states, rallies against lockdowns and mask mandates early in the pandemic attracted fringe groups, including the Proud Boys. Some of the same groups showed up at the Ohio Statehouse to protest Joe Biden's election on Jan. 6.

## Protesters support House Bill 248

The protests are tangentially tied to House Bill 248, which would block public and private groups from mandating vaccines, require K-12 schools to explicitly tell parents about existing ways to skip childhood vaccinations, and eliminate a requirement that college students living in dorms show proof of vaccination against meningitis.

Legislative leaders announced this week they're hitting the brakes on the bill for now.

**More:Ohio legislative leaders hit the brakes on anti-vaccination bill as supporters hold rally outside Statehouse**

State Rep. Beth Liston, D-Dublin, a physician who holds a master's degree in public health, has become a lightning rod for criticism by supporters of HB 248. A member of the House Health Committee, Liston's pushback against those who spread misinformation prompted boos from the crowd at the Statehouse on Tuesday. And Liston is outspoken about the danger of extremists influencing public policy.

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"I think it highlights that those who are advocating against vaccines and common sense safety measures are extreme fringe groups who hold views that are not consistent with Ohioans. We are seeing conspiracy theorists, white supremacists and fringe elements making a lot of noise," said Liston. "I would be concerned about their impact on policy being made in Ohio."

House Bill 248 represents a wish list for those who are skeptical of vaccines and worried about the prospect of businesses and government mandates. They argue that individuals should have the freedom to choose what medical treatments they take.

Businesses and hospitals oppose the bill, saying employers should have the right to require workers to abide by certain safety protocols, such as getting flu shots or vaccinations.

Pat Tiberi of the Ohio Business Roundtable, which opposes HB 248, said his organization has been targeted by anti-vaccine protesters. "They don't want the government telling them what to do but they want the government to tell an employer what to do," Tiberi said.

*Laura Bischoff is a reporter for the USA TODAY Network Ohio Bureau, which serves the Columbus Dispatch, Cincinnati Enquirer, Akron Beacon Journal and 18 other affiliated news organizations across Ohio.*