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Updates for May 19th

3 May - Fifty years ago in Omaha...

A half century ago Black Panther David Rice was arrested for attending the Sunday service at Zion Baptist Church.

MORE:

by Michael Richardson (*Richardson Reports*)

Fifty years ago, May 3, 1970, David Rice, who later became Wopashitwe Mondo Eyen we Langa, attended the Sunday service at the Zion Baptist Church in Omaha, Nebraska. Rice, raised as a Catholic, was not in seek of salvation but was at Zion instead to awaken the congregation of Reverend Rudolph McNair.

McNair had been a subject of attention from Rice in the newsletter he edited for the National Committee to Combat Fascism, Freedom By Any Means Necessary, for hypocrisy in McNair's personal life. Rice later talked about his public battle with McNair. "I was working on our newsletter when I got a call from this dude who said a particular preacher had beat his wife in the Safeway parking lot. I got the lowdown. Now here was somebody church people had been trying to get rid of for years. I did know he had been active in the so-called civil rights movement, very active, and then he had gone quiet. Later on I found out that he turned to the mayor about his church receiving funds to operate certain programs. So for a time his quietness had been purchased."

"I guess he was with his girlfriend and the wife busted him and she didn't take too kindly to it and he assaulted her in the parking lot. This is somebody preaching sermons to his congregation about sin and goodness and evil."

Rice wrote an article for the newsletter about McNair and decided to attend McNair's church. "Myself and another Party member went to the service next Sunday, right around service time. After people found out what was in it, all kinds of people just rushing, practically knocking us over to get these newsletters. Well, we ran out of newsletters but it was kind of fruitful we had The Black Panther newspapers with us. When we ran out of our newsletters the people bought the Black Panther Party newspaper. Maybe a week or two after that the police came and a number of us were arrested. I was the only one from the chapter that was arrested."

Rice and seven church members were charged with disorderly conduct. Several were elderly members of the church. Reverend McNair told police he was pushed and grabbed by members of a group who blocked his way as he walked to the pulpit. McNair said the group shouted during the church service.

The eight people arrested went to court in June. Rice and the seven others were fined one dollar each for disturbing a church service. Municipal Judge Simon A. Simon told the eight, including several women, that church was not the place to "settle grievances." Several of the defendants testified they only grabbed McNair to restrain him after he clenched his fist as though to strike one of the women.

In August, McNair, used his new appointment to the Greater Omaha Community Action anti-poverty agency to fire Rice who was a community outreach worker. McNair gave Rice a termination notice. "I have noted a continuous recalcitrance on your part to comply with these directives....and in addition, the excessive time I have observed you spending in the headquarters of another organization, and the time wasted in conversation in this office...and the tardiness without explanation are unacceptable."

Rice understood McNair was intent on firing him. “The moment I heard Rudolph McNair was to be hired to be my supervisor I thought I’m about to not have a job and the day he was hired he came by my office and told me to pack up my stuff.”

That week, on August 17, 1970, a bomb exploded in a vacant house killing Patrolman Larry Minard. The Black Panther affiliate chapter members were suspected by police with Rice and Edward Poindexter the primary suspects.

Rice was fighting for his job at GOCA and appealed for an Equal Opportunity Commission hearing. Rice recalled he was preoccupied with lining up witnesses to get his job restored. “I believe it was a matter of days after the bombing we had the personnel hearing. McNair shows up at the hearing drunk. Somebody had to drive him home in fact. There were a bunch of people there testifying in my behalf. Anyway, needless to say, from in jail I couldn’t work for GOCA anymore.”

The two Panther leaders were arrested for the bombing and convicted in April 1971 after a controversial trial marred by conflicting police testimony; perjured testimony by Duane Peak, the confessed bomber; and a withheld FBI Laboratory report on the identity of the anonymous caller that lured Minard to his death. The pair were closely monitored by Director J. Edgar Hoover, who personally oversaw the manipulation of the police investigation. Federal Bureau of Investigation agents working under the clandestine COINTELPRO counterintelligence operation targeted the two men months earlier.

Rice and Poindexter received life without parole sentences. After imprisonment Rice changed his name to Wopashitwe Mondo Eyen we Langa, a composite name he created out of four African languages. Mondo died in the Nebraska State Penitentiary in March 2016 while serving his life sentence. Poindexter remains locked up at the maximum-security prison, a half century after his arrest for a crime he denies any role in.

Both Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts and Douglas County Attorney Don Kleine have been asked to reopen the murder investigation in light of documented FBI tampering. Ricketts will not answer the request. Kleine says he is waiting for new evidence. Neither man will acknowledge the known role of the FBI in seeking a wrongful conviction.

5 May - June 11th 2020: International Day of Solidarity with Marius Mason and All Long-Term Anarchist Prisoners

Call out for June 11th, an international day of solidarity with long-term anarchist prisoners, a 16 year running tradition.

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In the 16 years this tradition has been observed, June 11th has facilitated support and action inspired by imprisoned anarchists — from noise demonstrations outside of jails to letter-writing nights, from fundraisers to direct actions. Setting aside this day is one way of remembering anarchists who are serving long prison sentences, generating support for them, and inspiring solidarity actions.

Because social struggles phase in and out, this day is a way to make sure that our imprisoned comrades are not forgotten. June 11th is a way of combating amnesia, of trying to sustain a long-term memory in the anarchist space. June 11th is a day against oblivion.

The context of June 11th this year is one in which our lives have been wrenched out of normality. A scary time, but also a time for innovation. And an especially important time to remember and support our imprisoned loved ones. While calls to release people from jails, prisons, and ICE detention facilities during

the pandemic are growing louder and having some success, it's likely that many of our comrades' names will not be on the list for early release. Whether it's due to marginalized identities, terrorism enhancements, a history of standing up to guards and prison administration, or just being an outspoken anarchist, this means that their long sentences and already abhorrent health care and mistreatment could carry even worse consequences.

Our new daily lives and our responses to the pandemic can carry with them the memory and support for imprisoned anarchists. Where we are working fewer hours, we can write more letters. Where our kids are now learning from home, we can include prisoners' names in lessons about courage and about state repression. Where we give ourselves over to mutual aid projects, we can take inspiration from our comrades and invoke their contributions and memories.

In the last year, Connor Stevens of the Cleveland 4, all remaining members of the Conspiracy Cells of Fire urban guerrilla group in Greece, and Tamara Sol in Chile have been released from prison.

Eric King is still in segregation and now faces a 20 year charge added onto his sentence. His support team has started a legal defense fund, and his lawyer filed a motion in March for a hearing related to abuse against him.

Anna Beniamino co-initiated a hunger strike against especially-repressive prison conditions in May 2019. Alfredo Cospito and other imprisoned anarchists in Italy later joined this hunger strike. Alfredo reported experiencing health problems related to the strike.

Michael Kimble was put in solitary after defending a prisoner from being beaten by guards. In February he and his support team launched a fundraising campaign for a lawyer to overturn his conviction. Jeremy Hammond was called in October to testify in the same grand jury that re-imprisoned Chelsea Manning. Both refused to testify. In March, Jeremy was released from contempt as the grand jury concluded and was returned to the federal prison system.

Lisa of the Aachen bank robbery case was recently restricted by a prison magistrate from being able to leave prison on weekends and during the day.

As members of the struggles of the '60s and '70s complete their sentences, and younger partisans of recent struggles emerge from shorter stints in prison, we can connect with them in mutually-enriching relationships. The challenges of being released from prison can be mitigated by a strong community of support; communities of support can deepen their own understanding of prison by direct interaction with former prisoners. These relationships can strengthen each of their participants, and expand beyond in the form of new projects and initiatives to free those still held captive.

One important and often neglected aspect of prisoner support is aid to the families of the imprisoned. Family members – often constituting a prisoner's primary or only base of support – bear the emotional, financial, and mental hardships of their loved ones behind bars. The exorbitant costs of commissary, phone calls, and visits put undue strain on those who, in most cases, are already struggling to make ends meet. Social atomization, which leaves most of us feeling lost, can be hell for those whose close companions have been stolen by the state, and who lack communities of support. These struggles continue after prisoners are released, with friends and family trying to find them employment, places to live, help with parole or other forms of diffuse detention, etc. Project FANG provides travel funds to the families and friends of animal and earth liberation prisoners, allowing them to visit their imprisoned loved ones. The Rosenberg Fund for Children provides aid to the children of activists targeted by the state. Aside from supporting these projects, we encourage anarchists to form relationships with the families of anarchist

prisoners: some may not share our ideas (though many do!), but they do share our desire to see loved ones in prison survive and thrive.

As the world descends further into crisis, we are less and less able to evade questions about how we live, what sorts of relationships we create together, and what worlds we wish to inhabit. On the one hand, there is ever-increasing state power, the slavery of the individual to the technological system, and the anomic loneliness of modern life. On the other, there are complex and difficult possibilities of decentralized lifeways in which individual freedom and shared joys mix in an alchemy which affirms both. Our bonds, tempered over years of living and fighting together, can prove the starting point for these new forms of existence. Those behind bars – who we have kept present with us in our garden plots and forest wanderings, in the melodies of our songs and in the adrenaline rush of our night work – are a part of the new world we hope for. Let's not forget them for one moment.

5 May - Fundraiser to free political prisoner Sundiata Acoli, 83, from 47 years in prison

The New Jersey Appellate Court denied Sundiata's release on parole in a decision dated December 27, 2019. He gets a mandatory appeal to the New Jersey Supreme Court.

MORE:

by Florence Morgan (*San Francisco Bay View*)

Sundiata's attorney must get transcripts and will have other expenses, including printing, and of course his legal fees, as he prepares the next phase of this case. A minimum amount of \$20,000 is the fundraising goal. His attorney needs funds now. He has done a great job so far, on behalf of Sundiata, and no doubt will continue to do so.

Please give generously to ensure that lack of funds does not contribute to any delay in pursuing freedom for Sundiata, who is 83 years old and has been in prison for 47 years.

How we can help FREE SUNDIATA ACOLI

Make checks or money orders payable to Sundiata Acoli Freedom Campaign (or SAFC). Mail them to: Florence Morgan, 147-25 Northern Boulevard #5Q, Flushing, New York 11354.

Or, if paying via Pay Pal, use this email: SAFC766@gmail.com. And use this link to pay using the "pay with debit or credit card" option: tinyurl.com/SundiataFund2020

7 May - Call for International Week of Solidarity With Anarchist Prisoners 2020

Comrades have called for a week of international solidarity with anarchist political prisoners, from August 23rd through the 30th.

MORE:

A new decade has started on this planet. With the rise of right-wing movements and the slow decline of social democracy, we are looking into coming years of intense struggle with the state and capitalism. There are already many anarchists sitting in prisons for taking on this fight—forgotten or ignored by liberals and human rights NGOs for "violent" actions.

Quite often anarchists do get solidarity from parts of the society from which they are come. After all who can support one better than their own fellow humans trapped in the same misery of exploitation. However, we believe that responsibility for those facing repression in different parts of the world should not be only

on the shoulders of local communities, but of international anarchist movements. Through our collective actions we can not only more widely diffuse the resources that are available, but also keep the fires burning in the chests of those imprisoned through autonomous revolutionary love and direct actions!

This is a call for you to act in solidarity with imprisoned anarchists all around the world. From the 23rd of August 2020—the day of execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, you can do everything, limited only by your imagination. Put some of that vast imagination into action to make people feel your energy and show our collective strength in revolutionary struggle!

7 May - The Free Eric King Playlist

Introducing...*The Free Eric King Playlist*: tinyurl.com/EK-Playlist

MORE:

A list of songs and artists compiled by vegan anarchist political prisoner Eric King. Compiled from his prison cell, where he's facing an additional 20 years on trumped up charges. Enjoy the songs, read about and write to Eric, and let's bring him home where he belongs!

With songs by Against Me!, Ryan Harvey, Taylor Swift, The National, Liz Phair, Bon Iver, The Shins, Demi Lovato, Janelle Monáe, Tim Barry, Eric Church, and Laura Jane Grace.

Listen and donate via fundrazr.com/e1cKo1

7 May - Congressmembers to governors, 'Decarcerate now!'

These members of Congress – Reps. Ayanna Pressley, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Jan Schakowsky, Barbara Lee, Nydia Velasquez and Karen Bass and Sen. Cory Booker – wrote an open letter to the governors of New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Illinois and California urging them to decarcerate, that is, to release a large proportion of their prisoners, right now before they fall victim to the pandemic.

MORE:

by U.S. Reps. Ayanna Pressley, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Jan Schakowsky, Barbara Lee and Nydia M. Velázquez and Sen. Cory Booker (San Francisco Bay View)

Dear Governors Hogan, Cuomo, Murphy, Baker, Pritzker and Newsom:

We write to you, the Chairman of the National Governors Association and Governors of the five states that have been hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic, to express our grave concerns about the impact of this devastating public health crisis within our state correction and detention facilities. Based on the most recent reports, at least 1.18 million people in America have been infected with COVID-19, resulting in over 69,000 fatalities – the highest infection and death rates in the world.[i]

Further reporting by the *New York Times* has identified more than 28,300 infections and 273 deaths among people and staff within our federal, state and local correctional facilities.[ii] Additionally, the *Marshall Project* has tracked a 50 percent increase in infection rates in state corrections facilities in just the last week alone.[iii]

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We commend your leadership in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the general population and the millions of constituents we collectively represent. However, the health of our nation depends on the health

and safety of our most vulnerable communities, particularly those in congregate settings such as corrections facilities, where physical distancing is all but impossible.

It is essential that as we work to urgently defeat this virus, that we ensure the health and safety of every community, including people in state and local custody and the staff that work in these facilities. We strongly urge you to use your clemency and emergency powers to reduce the incarcerated population and limit the spread of this virus.

With the stroke of a pen, you could help save the lives of tens of thousands of juveniles, elderly and medically vulnerable people held in custody at the state and local level.

As you know, the unprecedented nature of this pandemic has required an unprecedented and compassionate response. The actions taken in states all across the country have undoubtedly saved millions of lives.

But those same actions have not been deployed when it comes to our correction and detention facilities. Overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and inadequate access to medical care have made our prisons and detention centers a petri dish for infectious disease outbreaks. We cannot afford to slow walk our response to this pandemic. Despite conventional wisdom, what happens in our corrections and detention facilities has a significant effect on the health and safety of our broader community.

A recent study by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has found that the failure to aggressively decarcerate and reduce the incarcerated population could add 100,000 fatalities to our nation's overall death count – among people both in and outside of jail.^[iv] As elected officials, the health and safety of our constituents is a top priority. We cannot pick and choose who among us is deserving of being saved but, instead, we must prioritize the safety and wellbeing of as many people as possible.

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It is the responsibility of every elected leader, especially our nation's governors, to use every tool available to prevent COVID-19 from robbing us of any more lives. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) social distancing guidelines have helped to "flatten the curve" of the outbreak and prevent our health care systems from being overwhelmed. While evidence shows we have been relatively effective in limiting the spread of the virus at the community level, our nation's corrections systems have not.

In fact, according to the *New York Times*, 8 of the top 10 clusters of the coronavirus are located in state correctional facilities.^[v] As states ramp up their testing capacity, these numbers have only gotten worse.^[vi] Physical and social distancing in compliance with CDC guidelines is virtually impossible in prison and jail. The conditions as they stand simply don't allow for individuals to be easily distant from one another and constituent calls from people behind the wall have identified that many prisons are unable to implement these policies in a meaningful way.

Moreover, the racially disparate tragedies associated with COVID-19 are not lost on any of us.

Data by the CDC and state and local public health departments has laid bare the reality that Black and Latinx communities are disproportionately affected by serious illness and death when it comes to COVID-19.^[vii] Decades of structural racism and inequality have predisposed communities of color to underlying health conditions like diabetes, asthma, and hypertension and ultimately led to a heightened vulnerability to this disease.

The racial composition of our nation's carceral system, which disproportionately locks up Black and brown people, further amplifies our concerns regarding the scale of devastation of COVID-19 in our prisons, jails and detention centers.

As New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Illinois and California continue to experience high infection rates due to this pandemic, it should not be surprising that the prisons in your states have been incubators for COVID-19. Recent reporting has identified tragic and preventable cases of incarcerated people who could have been released but weren't due to inaction.

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In New York, Darlene "Lulu" Benson-Seay became the first woman to die of COVID-19 in the state's correctional system, days after the first woman, Andrea Circle Bear, died in federal custody after giving birth while on a ventilator.[viii] In Massachusetts, more than 70 women at Massachusetts Correctional Institute-Framingham have contracted the virus, accounting for an infection rate of 35 percent, and putting these individuals at greater risk for serious illness.[ix]

It should be noted that nearly 80 percent of women in jail are mothers and often the primary caretakers of minor children, making the likelihood of serious illness even more devastating, as it could potentially leave many children without a parent.[x] Even more worrisome, in California, the number of COVID-19 cases has nearly tripled over the last two weeks.[xi]

It is also crucial that we take the personal health and safety of correctional staff into consideration when it comes to decarceration, as the current conditions have caused many to contract the virus and placed their families and communities at risk as they come in and out of these facilities each day.

Additionally, this pandemic has already had a devastating effect on our economy – an effect felt most acutely by frontline workers and low-income communities. Like you, we are eager to restart the economy, but we also know it would be irresponsible to allow businesses to reopen until we have successfully flattened the curve.

The reality is that we cannot flatten the curve while we continue to allow overcrowded prisons, jails and detention centers to be vectors of infections. Our economic well-being is tied directly to controlling the spread of the coronavirus within these facilities and we cannot control the spread unless and until we decarcerate.

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As Governors you have the power to take immediate steps to avert further tragedy from taking root in our state corrections systems. We call on you to immediately use your executive clemency and emergency powers to grant release of adults aged 50 and older, medically vulnerable populations with underlying conditions such as HIV/AIDS, diabetes, asthma, and heart disease, pregnant individuals, juveniles, and individuals with less than one year left on their sentence, irrespective of the offense and who don't pose a reasonable risk to public safety.

You are uniquely situated to intervene on behalf of the communities we serve, and to exemplify the values of humanity and compassion that motivate us and that our constituents look to us to uphold. Decarceration is not just the most meaningful preventive measure, but an urgent necessity to avoid suffering and death for numbers of elders and other vulnerable incarcerated people.

As the chief executives of our nation's state prison systems, which account for about 90 percent of the incarceration population, you are more suited than any and all other public officials in the United States to promote life-saving solutions to curb this pandemic's impact on vulnerable members of our society.[xii] We strongly urge you to start commuting sentences immediately as a measure to protect all of us, including the most vulnerable.

We strongly urge you to start commuting sentences immediately as a measure to protect all of us, including the most vulnerable. The COVID-19 pandemic doesn't need to be a death sentence for the individuals and staff in our state corrections and detention systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic doesn't need to be a death sentence for the individuals and staff in our state corrections and detention systems. Each of you has the power to stop this preventable tragedy from being even more devastating and we implore you to do so with the urgency necessary to match the scale of this unprecedented public health crisis.

Sincerely,

Ayanna Pressley, United States Representative, Massachusetts District 7
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, United States Representative, New York District 14
Jan Schakowsky, United States Representative, Illinois District 9
Barbara Lee, United States Representative, California District 13
Cory Booker, United States Senator, New Jersey
Nydia M. Velázquez, United States Representative, New York District 7
Karen Bass, United States Representative, California District 37

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7 May - Alabama's Prosecutors Want a COVID Bailout. They Shouldn't Get It.

Court fines and fees unfairly perpetuate cycles of poverty for disadvantaged Americans, but that has not stopped many hundreds of towns from deriving at least 10 percent of their budgets this way.

MORE:

by Rory Fleming (*Filter Magazine*)

The problem is particularly entrenched in the Deep South. Most of the municipalities getting over half their budgets this way are located in only four states: Georgia, Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma.

When towns are funded this way, they often become speed traps, with local police stopping people for going 5 or 10 miles over the limit, sometimes having placed barely visible signs reducing speed limits on rarely used roads.

And when prosecutors are directly funded this way, it's not surprising to see a huge influx in charged cases and incarceration. Alabama is among the states with the most corrupt funding mechanisms, where prosecutor's offices keep the money that they themselves raise through civil forfeitures, diversion programs, fines and court fees. It's about the most glaring conflict of interests imaginable.

In Alabama, where court fees and fines constitute an unconscionable 70 percent of state prosecutors' budgets, COVID-19 has thrown into sharp relief the real cost of staying afloat on the backs of the criminalized poor. Normal hearings have been suspended by the Alabama Supreme Court for public health and safety reasons during the pandemic. As a result, much of the money that usually would be flowing to prosecutors has been cut off.

The state's elected district attorneys have begun to panic. When the county clerk sent Limestone County District Attorney Brian C.T. Jones the numbers, Jones told a local news station that he replied, "I understand we cannot operate like this." DA Jones also noted that he saw the budget effects in Mobile County, saying that "it's just devastating."

Now, the Alabama District Attorneys Association is asking the legislature to green-light a bailout to the tune of \$8 million. This comes as the number of unemployment claims from Alabama residents is skyrocketing.

"If that measure doesn't pass, then every single office will close," claimed DA Jones.

But is that really true? A middle-ground between continuing on full budget and closing altogether would be laying off or furloughing a number of assistant prosecutors. That would be an appropriate way to adjust to a crisis situation, and one mirroring the hardships being endured by Alabamians in regular jobs. Prosecutors won't like it, but citizens may be less concerned when both violent and property crime in Alabama seem to be decreasing, overall.

Several Alabama DAs have already been flushing working-class people's tax dollars away for years.

Many assistant prosecutors, especially in more populous jurisdictions, do not prosecute the most serious violent crimes like rapes or murders. Such cases are left to the veterans. Forking out \$8 million in public money to keep

excess prosecutors around, just to make sure that every low-level drug charge or petty theft is zealously pursued, sounds like an excellent way to further damage public relations with law enforcement at a time of heightened stress.

Most legislatures have a hard time saying no to the district attorney lobby, and Alabama is a particularly carceral state. But COVID-19 could be an opportunity for lawmakers to change direction.

They could either grant much less than \$8 million to the DAs, or no extra money at all. That money could be better spent, for example, on helping Black Alabamians get through the current health crisis, since Black people in America are dying at higher rates. Fiscal conservatives in the legislature could also argue to keep the money but lower taxes next year, which in their opinion would help stimulate the hard-hit economy.

In many ways, several Alabama DAs have already been flushing working-class people's tax dollars away for years.

Limestone County DA Jones recalled that Mobile was hard-hit, but that's also where DA Ashley Rich seeks and obtains the death penalty more than virtually any other local prosecutor in the nation. The death penalty is extremely expensive, with some trials costing over \$1 million each. Not only that, but Rich also has a penchant for prosecutorial misconduct; in 2014, the conservative Alabama Court of Appeals reversed a death sentence she obtained because she could not stop referring to improperly introduced and inflammatory evidence at trial. Such self-inflicted procedures are hardly a profitable use of public funds.

The pandemic could provide political cover to do something about this. Or will Alabama lawmakers suddenly forget their fiscal conservatism in bailing out the people who deserve it least?

8 May - Ramsey Orta, who filmed the death of Eric Garner, should be released from prison, supporters say

Retaliatory harassment, surveillance, caging, physical abuse, death threats, and poisoning are all tactics the United States government may classify as torture. Yet they have all been employed—and therefore tacitly sanctioned—by the New York City Police Department and the New York state government against Ramsey Orta, the man who filmed the infamous death of Eric Garner at the hands of law enforcement.

MORE:

by Ella Fassler (*Daily Kos*)

On August 2, 2014, roughly three weeks after he released the footage of police choking Garner as he pleaded, "I can't breathe" 11 times, Orta was arrested. Orta says he was selling weed and that the officers framed him with possession of an unlicensed gun. "Smile, motherfucker," one officer reportedly remarked as a gang of police surrounded him, holding cell phones near his face. Like the vast majority of people charged with a crime in the United States, he accepted a plea deal rather than risk longer-term confinement following an expensive trial.

His fiancée, Deja, says Orta has been "ping-ponged" across the state's carceral system over the course of three years.

"It's designed to break you, and that's what it's really doing to him," Deja told Prism. She said he's been systematically targeted from the beginning with bogus disciplinary infractions that led to long stints in solitary confinement and prolonged his incarceration.

"The mental, the physical, the verbal abuse, it's just been so much. He just explains it as, you know, 'Deja, I'm tired,'" she said grimly. "You know what that means."

After 10 transfers, Orta landed at Mid-State Correctional Facility in upstate New York and is set for release this July.

But Deja and the rest of his support team fear that authorities at Mid-State may try to lengthen his confinement, or worse. On April 15, WeCopwatch put out an urgent statement detailing how officers threatened to expose Orta to the novel coronavirus. Several days later, he fell sick with a fever, which turned out to be a false alarm. Then on April 21, WeCopwatch reported that corrections officers threatened Orta again.

"You aren't going to make it home, cause you want to snitch on us. You want to post about us? Suck my d**ck you ni**er bitch. Go write about that on your Facebook page," they allegedly said.

According to the Support Ramsey Orta Facebook page, as of April 29, four corrections officers and nine incarcerated people had tested positive for the virus at Mid-State. Authorities at the prison aren't providing people with the information or the supplies needed to protect themselves, and the facility is reportedly denying Orta showers, soap, tissue, cleaning supplies, and enough food.

"They don't even know who has it," said Deja. "We don't know who the people who had it were in contact with."

As of May 5, 13 people incarcerated in New York and four prison staff members have died from the virus.

The state of New York incarcerates roughly 42,700 people in its prisons and holds more than 14,000 people in its jail system. The number of people in New York City jail custody, according to its own statistics, decreased by 1,100 from March 16 to April 6.

However, advocates and incarcerated people—who point out that it is impossible to socially distance behind bars—say this isn't enough and urge New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo to immediately grant clemency to vulnerable populations.

"New York's constitution allows the governor to grant clemency to any person who is impacted by the state prison system," said David George, associate director of Release Aging People from Prisons in an interview with *Vice*. "At any point, Cuomo can grant release or a sentence reduction to any one of the tens of thousands of New Yorkers in his prison system. He has total control. He doesn't have to go through a state agency or anything bureaucratic. It's totally up to him." To date, Cuomo hasn't used his power to release anyone during the pandemic.

Supporters for Orta are encouraging people to increase the pressure by calling and emailing Cuomo's office and individuals within the New York State Department of Corrections.

Prisons across the country, which confine 21% of the world's incarcerated population, are quickly becoming death camps. There isn't a standardized reporting mechanism, making it difficult to assess the scope of the problem, but the ACLU has tracked more than 200 deaths behind bars. In April, a 30-year-old Native American woman in federal prison on drug charges gave birth while on a ventilator, then died of COVID-19.

The ACLU sponsored an epidemiological model that assesses the death toll in the United States while taking the virus' interaction with the incarcerated population into account, a factor the Trump administration failed to consider in its projections.

"As many as 200,000 people could die from COVID-19—double the government estimate—if we continue to ignore incarcerated people in our public health response," they reported. Black, brown, and indigenous

communities are dying at an alarmingly disproportionate rate, and this rate is further exacerbated by jails and prison infections.

As these communities know all too well, the system cannot be trusted to do the right thing. Concessions must be forced.

“Deja and I do not have faith in Midstate, NYSDOCC, or the Governor to do what is right,” WeCopwatch wrote in a statement. “That is not their job. But we do have faith in all of you. Your love and concern not only for Ramsey, but for the world you wish to live in is what gives us hope.”

11 May - Demonstration at Neuse CI in Solidarity with Prisoners Facing Outbreak

Report back from recent noise demonstration and car caravan in North Carolina, in solidarity with prisoners who are also organizing in the face of continued COVID-19 infections.

MORE:

On Friday, May 8th, there was a noisy car demo outside of Neuse Correctional Institution in Goldsboro, North Carolina, a facility with one of the nations highest outbreak cases of COVID-19. So far, well over 400 incarcerated people have tested positive and at least three have died. The demo was organized by multiple chapters of All of Us or None of US from across the state, as well as the Empty Cage’s Collective. Prisoners inside Neuse Correctional Institution also organized their own protest in early April, after the first signs of the outbreak.

Over 20 cars and 40 people turned out from all over North Carolina and a few cars from Virginia joined as well. Together, the procession drove past the prison a few times, with some individuals acting as pallbearers leaving “body bags” in the parking lot to symbolize and pay respects to those lives lost at the hands of North Carolina DPS’ gross negligence and mishandling of the epidemic raging throughout their system.

Our caravan was prevented from driving into the parking lot of the prison by prison guards, and when turning around to continue by the prison on the main road, a large line of Sheriff’s began blocking traffic. With the caravan stopped in front of the facility, people began standing outside their cars, waving flags and gesturing to prisoners, who could be seen inside waving and jumping up and down. We later saw that facebook posts were made by the loved ones of those inside, saying they could see and hear the protest and were hyped on it. Eventually our procession was able to leave and regroup nearby, with no arrests.

North Carolina DPS Continues to Fail at Even Basic Care

These deaths were preventable. North Carolina DPS has been beyond negligent during this crisis, doing all kinds of reckless or malicious things that could only help the virus spread—which it has—in facilities across the state. This includes not taking temperatures, double-bunking prisoners, knowingly mixing positive prisoners with people who are still negative, not making hand sanitizer or bleach available, and not sharing test results with prisoners.

This report from one of a contact inside Neuse makes all this abundantly and tragically clear:

“I have a weak immune system due to HIV and now have been exposed to COVID-19 here at Neuse Correctional. I could have been protected from the virus when I put in a sick-call and was taken to the nurse station and seen by the nurse. I told him about my worry of getting the virus because of my weak immune system due to having HIV. He told me I shouldn’t be on the same yard and dorm as the other inmates the dorm I was in was half infected.

But the administration still put me on the dorm that was infected. I told the nurses and Sergeants that I was sleeping and surrounded by inmates who have the virus, and sure enough three days later I was infected with the virus. I'm now getting no help or the care I need. I'm sweating every night with night sweats and bad headaches and chest pain and can't get no help. I'm worried about getting the flu or pneumonia. They stopped checking our temperatures two weeks ago.

My body feels hot and weak all the time. Please help me so I can make it home to my family before it is too late. I don't have but five more months left of the eleven month sentence for my nonviolent crime."

National Grievance Petitions

This protest also intentionally coincided with the mass mailing of a national grievance petition to the US Department of Justice on May 7th. Hundreds of incarcerated individuals simultaneously mailed this legal form, which was drafted by North Carolina incarcerated individuals themselves.

Their demands are: an end to solitary confinement practices; improved food and medical treatment; an end to costs paid for infractions; an end to the new JPay policy which has drastically reduced family and friends' ability to send money inside, and accordingly increased violence among incarcerated individuals; and a wide array of changes related to how the prisons respond to the extreme crisis of the coronavirus behind bars.

This weekend also saw demonstrations outside of Central Prison in time with national grievance petition, and an annual Mother's Day demonstration at NCCIW, both in Raleigh.

13 May - He was one of NY's most famous prisoners. Now he's one of its oldest—and most vulnerable.

San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin's father and other aging prisoners are begging the courts to release them during the pandemic.

MORE:

by Samantha Michaels (*Mother Jones*)

San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin was at home cooking on Saturday afternoon when his dad, David Gilbert, called from a prison in upstate New York. Boudin was glad to hear his father's voice. But he was worried about his old man: Someone in the cell next to him had tested positive for the coronavirus.

At 75, Gilbert is one of the oldest prisoners in the state. Even calling his son is risky for him now, since hundreds of guys at Shawangunk Correctional Facility share the same phones to call home. Before dialing his son, Gilbert wrapped the receiver with an undershirt to avoid touching it to his face. He would hand-wash the shirt after returning to his cell.

As the coronavirus sweeps through the country's prisons and jails, Gilbert is one of the tens of thousands of elderly inmates at high risk for complications. In New York, about 2,600 prisoners were at least 60 years old in 2018. A greater number have other serious underlying conditions. Now Gilbert is part of a group of vulnerable inmates petitioning a court to protect them from the deadly virus by releasing them early.

In 1981, when Boudin was just 14 months old, his mother, Kathy Boudin, and Gilbert—both members of the leftist Weather Underground group—were arrested for serving as getaway drivers during the notorious Brinks heist, which resulted in the deaths of a company guard and two police officers. Boudin was raised in Chicago by his parents' professor friends, fellow Weathermen Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn. He got to know his own mother and father through phone calls. They liked to tell him fictional adventure stories—

Gilbert calling to share a chapter one day, and Kathy Boudin following up later with another. She was paroled in 2003, the year Boudin became a Rhodes Scholar. Gilbert received a longer sentence and has many years left in prison. Boudin visited him last November, on the same day he learned he had been elected as San Francisco's DA.

Since then, the coronavirus has sickened at least 20 incarcerated people at Shawangunk, and 414 in other New York state prisons. Fifteen inmates have died. Nationally, the percentage of people in state prisons who are 55 and older more than tripled between 2000 and 2016, to 150,000 people, according to a recent *Marshall Project* analysis, which noted that for the first time ever, these older adults compose a greater percentage of the prison population than people between the ages of 18 and 24.

Gilbert is trying to be careful: He's skipping some meals to avoid the crowded mess hall, and forgoing breaks outside and exercise in the yard. But his cell has a wall of bars that open onto a pathway, so he's regularly within six feet of other people. "We're really worried about him," says Boudin, who notes that his dad has underlying medical problems, including hypothyroid disorder and damage to his digestive system, that have been exacerbated by the decades he's spent in prison.

And the prison, Boudin argues, cannot keep his father safe. Social distancing is virtually impossible behind bars, and protective equipment and tests are in short supply. Because of this, many states have started releasing some people early, especially those who committed nonviolent crimes, are almost done with their sentences, and have medical conditions that put them at greater risk of complications.

But New York, an epicenter of the virus, has been relatively slow to let them go. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has resisted using his clemency powers to release people, leaving stacks of applications—including Gilbert's—pending. The state has only freed 162 inmates, less than half of 1 percent of its prison population, in response to the pandemic. All of them were 55 and older and convicted of nonviolent crimes, with less than 90 days remaining on their sentence. By comparison, California, where Boudin is based, has let 3,500 prisoners go home early in response to the pandemic, or nearly 3 percent of its total prison population.

Gilbert and 21 other people in Ulster County prisons filed a habeas corpus petition for release on Monday with help from the Legal Aid Society of New York. The inmates argue their continued imprisonment during the pandemic, in facilities where they are at substantially higher risk of infection, violates the Eighth Amendment. "By design and operation, New York state prisons make it impossible for [them] to engage in the necessary hygiene, cleaning, and social distancing measures that experts implore all of us to take to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission," their petition states. Infrequent testing in New York prisons means the infection rate is likely much higher than has been reported. "In the absence of executive action by Governor Cuomo, courts must act to protect our clients' constitutional rights to be protected from cruel and unusual punishment," says Lauren Jones, their attorney.

Some of the prisoners who filed the petition are elderly and have served decades in prison; others have weakened immune systems from medication, cancer, or HIV, or struggle to breathe because of asthma, emphysema, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. One of the petitioners, Julio Rivera, reports that when he goes to his prison's medical clinic to get insulin for his diabetes, he often encounters 20 or 30 other people there, and must stand closer than six feet next to some of them in line.

Another petitioner, Robert Drach, says that the medical unit where he receives chemotherapy also houses men who tested positive for COVID-19. Their family members worry they may not make it out of prison alive. "They deserve to get a second chance," says Geannie Chalk, whose brother Richard Lee Chalk, 61, another petitioner, has atrial fibrillation, diabetes, asthma, hypertension, and sleep apnea. "There are nights my wife and I cannot even close our eyes" to sleep, says Roy Williams Sr., whose son Roy, 47, takes an

immunosuppressive drug three times a day to treat his Crohn's disease at Eastern prison, where 17 people have tested positive for COVID-19.

Gilbert and the other men in the petition argue they are not a public safety risk, and that continuing to lock them up is unnecessary during the pandemic. New York's Department of Corrections and Community Supervision declined to comment on the pending litigation.

In the nearly 40 years that Gilbert has spent in prison, he has never once received a disciplinary infraction, according to his attorneys. And during that time, he has become a mentor to younger incarcerated men. Jerome Wright, a civil rights activist, first met Gilbert at Great Meadow Correctional Facility in the 1980s. The two men worked together to develop peer education classes in prison about the AIDS epidemic. "I was much younger than him, in my 20s, and he was instrumental in quelling a lot of fear that the younger guys had about the prevalence of HIV infection, how you got it, and the conspiracy theories," Wright recalls. "He would talk to us about what we could do to protect ourselves and our family. Because of his calm, quiet way of talking and the celebrity he had in the fight for justice for Black and brown people, we would listen to him. He was one of the mentors that helped me develop as a young man."

Boudin says his father has also influenced how he approaches his job as district attorney. When Boudin campaigned last year for office, after years working as a public defender, he made national headlines by pledging to request prison sentences only as a last resort—an unusual stance for a prosecutor. During the pandemic, he has tried to find alternatives to jail for people who are older or medically vulnerable. And he helped reduce San Francisco's jail population by 40 percent since January. Crime has dropped too, and the infection rate in the city's jails has remained relatively low, even with widespread testing: Three inmates have tested positive so far (all three during intake). In jails in Chicago and New York City, by comparison, hundreds have been sickened by the virus. Boudin hopes to convince Gov. Gavin Newsom to enact statewide policy changes that could help release more elderly and medically vulnerable people from prisons during the pandemic.

Boudin tends to condemn his parents' crime. "There are three families that don't have a father anymore because of the crime that my parents participated in," he told *NPR*'s Terry Gross recently. (Gilbert was not armed during the Brinks heist and did not attack anyone, but received a 75-year-to-life sentence under New York's felony murder law.) As a district attorney, Boudin also emphasizes that public safety is his top goal. But his father and the other aging, sick prisoners in Ulster County have long since rehabilitated, he says, and keeping them in prison needlessly puts them at risk of death without any benefit to the broader community. "They are not a public safety risk," he says. "They have all served long prison terms—they've changed, they've grown old."

Research shows that, overwhelmingly, people usually age out of crime: One study of New York prisoners who were 65 or older found that only 4 percent were convicted of another crime after their release, compared to 16 percent of men younger than 50. Studies in other states have shown even lower recidivism rates for the elderly.

His dad continues to call regularly with updates. It's a strange feeling, fielding the calls from New York during breaks from his own work to get people out of San Francisco's jails. "I grew up feeling largely powerless to help my father," Boudin tells me. "And now I'm district attorney, and I have a really concrete power and responsibility." He pauses: "It's an intense contrast, to have the responsibility and power to make these decisions with regard to so many people who are accused of crimes in San Francisco—and to be so powerless when it comes to my father."

14 May - NSA Whistleblower Reality Winner Files Appeal For Compassionate Release During COVID-19 Pandemic

NSA whistleblower Reality Winner appealed a federal court decision, which rejected her request for compassionate release from Federal Medical Center Carswell in Fort Worth, Texas.

MORE:

by Kevin Gosztola (*Shadowproof*)

“The entire basis for Reality’s motion—and so many like hers—is that she cannot afford to wait until she is removed from FMC Carswell in a stretcher, or worse, before she is afforded relief,” Winner’s attorneys declared.

Winner’s legal team further contended the appeal may force the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals to clarify how courts throughout the United States should apply the First Step Act. That could help numerous individuals seeking release during the coronavirus pandemic.

“A favorable decision will pave the way for other prisoners to seek relief in accordance with the clear intent of the First Step Act,” according to her attorneys.

Winner pled guilty in 2018 to one count of violating the Espionage Act when she disclosed an NSA report to *The Intercept*. She believed the report contained evidence that Russian hackers targeted United States voter registration systems during the 2016 election.

She has served more than half of her 63-month sentence, and her attorneys believe she should be released to home confinement to serve the remaining 19 months of her sentence.

But Judge Randal Hall sided with the Justice Department on April 24 and contended the “medical prison,” where Winner is incarcerated, is “presumably better equipped than most to deal with any onset of COVID-19 in its inmates.”

Hall argued Winner had not “carried the burden of demonstrating that her specific medical conditions” placed her “at a risk substantial enough to justify her early release.”

The motion for an appeal, which was filed in the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals, contends the district court’s ruling was “erroneous” because it was “based on sheer speculation, ignored the contrary evidence, and denied Reality the ability to [present] additional supporting evidence at hearing.”

“In holding that Reality failed to meet her burden to demonstrate ‘extraordinary and compelling’ circumstances justifying her release, the trial court went out of its way to speculate, without any evidence at all, that FMC Carswell is ‘better equipped’ to handle the global pandemic.”

Furthermore, Winner’s attorneys insisted the court “ignored the evidence provided by Reality that BOP’s response on the whole, and FMC Carswell’s response in particular, is and has been, woefully inadequate.”

Reacting to the appeal, Billie Winner-Davis told *Shadowproof*, “I hope that the [appeals] court will seriously consider releasing my daughter, Reality Winner, from prison at this time.”

“Every day I fear for her health and safety. I fear that she may actually become sick with COVID-19, and I fear that she will not have the necessary care.”

In the decision against compassionate release, Hall wrote, “The court would be remiss not to point out Winner’s incongruous complaint that she is at greater risk because of the preventative measures undertaken by the prison in response to COVID-19.”

Hall bought into the prosecutors’ argument that it did not make sense for Winner to complain about restrictions in the facility, when they are supposed to protect her. Yet, Winner’s attorneys made it clear that restrictions on “prison life” are “counter-productive” and may be impacting her mental and physical health.

For example, prisoners are kept in their cells with other inmates for up to eleven hours per day. Recreational activities are canceled, however, inmates still pile into a mess hall for bologna sandwiches twice a day.

“Nobody, inmates or staff, is wearing masks. At times, the facility operates without adequate hand sanitizer or soap. Public use areas like the telephones are not cleaned between uses. And prison staff cross-pollinate with all of the inmates without taking any extra precautions.”

“Indeed, the BOP ‘response’ makes matters worse for Reality and threatens to turn her 63-month sentence into a death sentence. She should be allowed to serve the remainder of her sentence—approximately 19 months—in home confinement with her family who will love and take care of her,” Winner’s legal team stated.

The district court latched on to the fact that Winner had not exhausted “administrative remedies” when it rejected her appeal. But as her attorneys pointed out, “Courts have found requiring prisoners to exhaust such remedies is ‘futile and/or inapplicable in view of the exigency of the global pandemic.’”

In other words, expecting a prisoner, like Winner, to exhaust remedies before hearing her complaint puts any prisoner who believes they are in danger at further risk.

On May 13th, Amnesty International USA called for Winner’s release from FMC Carswell.

“Given the totality of the circumstances, including the time she has already served, the lack of a public interest defense granted to her, and the risk posed by COVID-19, Winner should be released as soon as possible,” the human rights organization declared.

Amnesty International USA additionally noted, “Prisons are dangerous hotspots for COVID-19. The conditions in which prisoners are held, often in overcrowded facilities and without proper access to sanitation, makes it impossible for detainees to effectively take preventive steps against the disease. In the U.S., as of May 12th, at least 2,818 people held in federal prisons have tested positive for COVID-19 and 50 people held have died.”

Winner-Davis shared that she is “deeply concerned about the irreparable damage that is being done” to her daughter’s “mental state.”

“Over the last several weeks, I have heard my daughter tell me, ‘Mom, I am not okay,’ and as her mother, this tears me apart.”

15 May - Demand that Sacred Pipe be Returned to Oso Blanco

We are starting a letter-writing campaign to Warden Martinez, asking for the sacred pipe to be returned to Oso Blanco.

MORE:

Ono Blanco's sacred pipe was taken by Chaplain El-Sadiq, who has been harassing Native prisoners since he got the position. Request of Warden Martinez that he intervene and stop Chaplain El-Sadiq from depriving Native folks of ceremonial and religious materials—sage, et cetera, and to return the sacred pipe to Byron Shane Chubbuck (Oso Blanco's state name). Further, encourage the warden to compel the Chaplain to desist in his harassment of Native prisoners in USP Victorville.

Letters should be addressed to:

Warden Martinez

USP Victorville

Post Office Box 5400

Adelanto, California 92301

16 May - COVID-19 + Marius Mason

As of this writing, Marius has been in quarantine with other prisoners in a separate area since April 25, when he tested positive for the corona virus.

MORE:

Marius has underlying factors that make him vulnerable to COVID 19, and legal options are being pursued, thanks to his attorney.

To support Marius: Paypal at supportmariusmason@riseup.net or Venmo @supportmariusmason or order a Marius t-shirt at akpress.org/free-marius-mason-shirt.html

Inmates in quarantine do still have access to phone calls and snail mail letters, but recently lost access to email, and letters can take an extended time to get to them. Prisoners have not been able to have visitors for quite some time, and at present, the visiting room is being used to house those in quarantine. The quarantine was for 18 days, but may well extend longer.

Prisoners at some state and federal prisons around the country have applied for, and a smaller number have been granted, compassionate release. As of 5-16-20, the Danbury, Connecticut facility that Marius is housed at reported 30 inmates and 5 staff who have tested positive, and one prisoner has died. Obviously, this is a very liquid situation; you can find updated numbers at bop.gov/coronavirus/.

Please write to Marius. Letters are so very important, especially now. He cannot reply to all, due to limits on his communication, but hearing about what others are doing and sharing supportive words are critical in these times that are frightening for everyone, but have even less predictability in a prison setting. There are no news sources in the quarantine area where he is now, so he appreciates news updates, on the virus, but also what others in the activist, art and literary world are doing. At present, no cards, use only white paper and envelopes, and hold off sending books because he does not know if they would get through under current conditions.

16 May - Approved for Coronavirus Release and Still Stuck on Rikers Island

A detainee at Rikers Island was cleared for release because of the coronavirus. Six weeks later, he's still in jail.

MORE:

by Natasha Lennard (*The Intercept*)

In early April, the Manhattan District Attorney's Office consented to the release of David Campbell from Rikers Island jail on the condition of electronic monitoring. At the time, Campbell was one of 270 people that the DA's office had deemed eligible for release in light of the perilous spread of the novel coronavirus in New York prisons and jails. Six weeks have since passed, and Campbell remains incarcerated, sharing a dormitory with over 30 others in the jail complex where they sleep 2 feet apart from each other.

Any hope of early release, once sparked by the DA's letter, has all but dissipated for the 32-year-old former funeral director and anti-fascist activist. Campbell now expects to see out the remaining five months of his one-year jail term.

The DA's consent was never an assurance of release on electronic monitoring; such authority lies with the New York City Department of Correction Commissioner, with the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice leading the review of sentences during the pandemic. Concerns persist around the deadly spread of Covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, through New York City's incarcerated populations. And while around 1,400 individuals have been released from city jails since late March, Campbell's situation — a state of limbo, with scant information available about when or if he will be released — remains the reality for many prisoners like him serving short sentences.

"Most of the people in here have given up hope for release," Campbell told me over the phone from Rikers this week. "The hope can weigh you down, so most of us have pivoted back to preparing to stay here until our release dates."

Campbell said that, despite hundreds of releases from Rikers during the pandemic, social distancing remains impossible in a dormitory at two-thirds capacity. Many guards, he said, do not wear masks in public areas, despite Department of Correction rules. And while incarcerated people themselves now have better access to masks and hand soap — in part thanks to a recent prisoner strike, and in part thanks to donations from rappers Jay-Z and Meek Mill — Campbell believes that conditions remain rife for infections to spread.

Campbell is not, by any means, among the most vulnerable of the incarcerated on Rikers Island when it comes to risks posed by the coronavirus. He is young and healthy. He is white; over 80 percent of Covid-19 fatalities in New York prisons have been people of color. Nor is Campbell, perhaps, the most obvious case for early release: Last October he pleaded guilty to two counts of felony assault and an 18-month-sentence, of which he expected to serve 12 months. Those released so far due to the pandemic were individuals serving sentences of a year or less, parolees who were sent back to jail on technical violations, and those who were held on bail and released by judges.

Yet Campbell's case is illustrative of the apparent chaos and confusion attending New York City's release procedures. He stands as a reminder, too, as city officials determine who is and is not deserving of release during a health emergency, that we should reject the notion that justice was somehow served at the original point of sentencing.

Campbell has not been able to glean any information about the status of his case, or any specifics accounting for the delay in his release, from either the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice or the Department of Correction. And neither of the agencies were able to provide me with any answers either.

Campbell told me that other prisoners in his dormitory are in the same uncertain position. "A number of the guys still in my dorm were told they were approved for release with ankle bands and haven't heard more," he said. "There were a few who were told they would be released and were on the bus to cross the

bridge to leave Rikers Island, wearing civilian clothes, and they were tapped on the shoulder by officers and sent back.”

It is not clear whether the problem is in part related to accessing monitoring devices, including ankle monitors in New York City, or an issue of bureaucratic decision-making during a time of crisis. The Department of Correction has said that it does not issue ankle monitors, and the Mayor’s Office has not yet responded to requests for information on possible reasons for release delays, either with regards to Campbell’s case or more generally.

“We don’t comment on individual cases,” Colby Hamilton, the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice chief of public affairs, told me by email last month. “We have released more than 300 people who are now serving the remainder of their short-term city sentences outside jails, on furlough but still in Department of Correction custody.”

For Campbell’s friends and supporters, however, general statements about releases offer little solace. “We don’t even know what the delay is. No one seems to want to take responsibility for making the decision to release him or even to make a statement about it that isn’t later contradicted by someone else,” noted a statement from the Campbell’s support committee, which had been advocating for Campbell’s freedom ever since he was prosecuted, many months prior to the explosion of Covid-19 cases on Rikers Island.

Campbell’s charges, including for gang assault, were always excessive. I had been planning to write about his case for that very reason, long before the pandemic struck and exploded in prison populations. In January 2018, two weeks before Campbell was due to move to Paris to study French translation, he was arrested during a brawl outside an alt-right event in Manhattan hosted by the vile alt-right commentator Mike Cernovich.

Campbell and other anti-fascists had rallied in protest. A fight broke out between far-right revelers and the anti-fascists opposing the gathering of racist, misogynists. Campbell was the only person arrested from the fray, during which a police officer broke his leg in two places. He alone was hit with multiple felony charges.

I visited Rikers late last year to interview Campbell. He spoke with deep regret about kicking a 56-year-old alt-right member who was already on the ground, who sustained head injuries. “I feel bad about what happened to the gentleman that was injured the night I was arrested and my part in it,” he later wrote me in a letter from jail. “I do not feel bad, however, about going out to oppose the far right.”

Had Campbell gone to trial and been found guilty he would have faced a minimum of three and a half years in prison for gang assault alone — a vague charge in which an individual can be held legally responsible for the actions of others involved in a fight with three or more people. This in addition to an assault charge associated with injuring the man on the ground. Instead of risking trial, Campbell pleaded out and began his time in Rikers.

Now, the same DA’s office that so vigorously pursued charges against Campbell in the purported interest of public safety asserts that he is deemed safe to be released with electronic monitoring. In Campbell’s case, as in countless others, it should not have taken a pandemic to expose the myth of carceral justice’s claims to uphold public safety.

As of late April, at least 365 people of the 4,000 remaining detainees on Rikers Island had tested positive for the virus. The jail complex has been the epidemic center of the epidemic center, with an estimated infection rate seven times higher than in the rest of New York City last month.

Until about a week ago, Campbell's dormitory was quarantined, with prisoners unable to leave its vicinity. "It's opened up a bit. We can go to the mess hall. I've been going to work in the yard," he told me. Campbell said that incarcerated people had, after over a month, been able to have their fingernails and toenails trimmed by a jail's barbershop worker; prisoners are, of course, not permitted clippers.

Fear of the virus remains a constant. A few nights ago, Campbell told me that a man in his late sixties with underlying asthma was carried out of the dorm coughing and wheezing; he was taken to hospital and has not yet returned. There's no evidence that the man had contracted Covid-19, but the incident spiked already heightened fears for those waiting anxiously for news of further releases.

"The Department of Correction is doing everything we can to safely and humanely house people in our custody amid the broader COVID-19 crisis. We have made tremendous efforts to increase social distancing throughout our facilities, and escalated our hygiene and sanitation protocols in accordance with guidance from the City's Department of Health," said the Department of Correction's Deputy Commissioner for Public Information Peter Thorne, "We work closely with Correctional Health Services to ensure that those who are symptomatic are promptly quarantined and referred for treatment as necessary." A recent ruling from the New York Supreme Court agreed that the state and city officials took "aggressive" steps to address the Covid-19 pandemic in their jails.

Meanwhile, 4,000 people remain incarcerated on Rikers Island, where two individuals have been confirmed dead from Covid-19-related causes. Conditions, even if improved through depopulation of the jail, remain at odds with best practices for safety against virus contraction. "They say they're sanitizing all common areas three times a day; that's bullshit," Campbell told me this week. It's also not the point: For those in Campbell's position, approved for release but still held in one of the country's most notorious jails during a pandemic, any more days of continued incarceration is cruelty on top of injustice.

17 May - Letters to Judge Wood

Although the Kings Bay Plowshares 7 defendants did not want letters sent to Judge Wood asking for leniency, many supporters have wanted to write asking that they not be sent to prison in a time of COVID-19.

MORE:

There is still time to write directly to the judge. If you know individuals personally you can attest to their good character and actions.

While sentencing has been set for May 28 and 29, it now appears that most of the defendants will ask for a delay until they can appear in open court in person with family and supporters present. The May sentencing would likely be by remote video conferencing. But nothing is definite at this time.

Letters can be sent to:
Honorable Lisa Godbey Wood
U.S. District Court
Southern District of Georgia
801 Gloucester Street
Brunswick, Georgia 31520

Possible writing points:

- I am writing to implore you to sentence all the Kings Bay Seven nuclear weapons protesters to time served.
- Such a decision would recognize not only that the government has already exacted a penalty with various levels of confinement over the last two years, but that imprisonment of the defendants in the time of Covid-19 is a penalty that far exceeds the normal weight of imprisonment in terms of its impact on the emotional and physical health of the defendants.
- Indeed, imprisonment during this pandemic endangers the lives of the defendants, none of whom present a danger to the general public and all of whom have devoted their lives to serving others.
- Should you believe you must impose further punishment on the defendants, I ask that you consider home confinement.
- Thank you for considering my request.

21 May - Wet'suwet'en Solidarity Screening

WHAT: Short Film

WHEN: 8:00pm, Thursday, May 21st

WHERE: Zoom Screening Room <bit.ly/3c1feib>

COST: FREE, but this is a fundraiser (donation details below)

MORE:

Wet'suwet'en strong! MACC NYC invites you to a weekly solidarity screening of the film "INVASION," followed by discussion and fundraising.

In this era of "reconciliation," Indigenous land continues to be taken at gunpoint. "INVASION" is a film about the Unist'ot'en Camp, Gidimt'en checkpoint and the larger Wet'suwet'en Nation standing up to the Canadian government and corporations who perpetuate colonial violence against Indigenous people. Coastal Gas-Link continues its construction in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These events are coordinated by non-Indigenous people for the purpose of sharing what we've learned, and raising money to support the Wet'suwet'en Nation. We are indebted to written and video documentation by the Wet'suwet'en Nation and Yintah Access, and live discussions hosted by Indigenous Kinship Collective.

All are welcome regardless of ability to donate.

If you can't make it to the screening but want to contribute, please donate at paypal.me/pools/c/8o7PKE01OI

RSVP required! Email maccmutualaid@protonmail.com to get the meeting ID and password! We will send out the meeting ID and password on the day of the event.