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Updates for May 2nd

18 Apr - Brooklyn Community Gathers on Squatted Lot in #StopCopCity Solidarity

Report on community gathering on a squatted lot in Brooklyn, New York in solidarity with the movement to stop Cop City in Atlanta, Georgia.

MORE:

On February 12th 2023 a group of parents, educators and community members got together at a community garden in Brooklyn, to celebrate for a future without cops for children to grow up in. In solidarity with Highlander preschool and the movement in Atlanta to Stop Cop City, we gathered in an event that embodied a collective resistance to state and police oppression – a resistance through play, joy, music, dance, food sharing, and community building.

The event was held at the community garden, a squatted lot in Brooklyn, NY which was occupied over a decade ago when neighbors came together to clean it up and convert the land into what it is today – an urban farm, a community gathering space, a playground, and a chicken sanctuary situated a block from the subway in a historically low-income POC neighborhood; a food desert with very few green spaces and the few autonomous ones are constantly threatened by for-profit companies whose ideas of “development” is to turn gardens into condos. In recent years the community garden has also hosted a separate community group who provides a twice weekly free food distro. Over the years, the farm has been collectively built, defended, and managed in a non-hierarchical, opt-in fashion by neighbors and community members based on a, “give what you can, take what you need” ethos. In the gathering, we prefigured, if for only a few hours, a horizontal and self-managed communal society: members of local mutual aid groups that had seen information for the event on social media showed up with items to give away, set up a free store, and prepared mulled apple cider to warm us up; others who run a radical mobile library came early to help set up for the event. Friends who run a food pantry and warm food giveaway for the community cooked up a delicious warm meal over a bonfire. The invited musicians brought more musicians and singers for an ad hoc mini open mic session or radical songs.

Despite the adults having set up loosely scheduled activities for them, the children enjoyed themselves playing, climbing trees, socializing, and frolicking, making arts and crafts, grabbing snacks, and playing with the farm chickens... all self-guided, trusting their desires and bodies. They also helped build a mural to commemorate a fallen forest defender named Tortuguita, originally from Maracaibo, Venezuela, who was shot at least 13 times by the Georgia State Police during a surprise raid while they were in their tent defending the Weelaunee forest.

Tortuguita’s national and indigenous origins are worth bringing into context. The fight of environmental activists in many Latin American countries, especially from indigenous and afro-descendent activists, persists against local politicians and local and multinational corporations that look to put a price tag on living beings, on natural resources, and on our very lives and livelihoods. Therefore, the Stop Cop City movement is one that unites us all and follows a long transnational and international(ist) tradition of organizing and fighting against land and water exploitation.

As mothers and as children, we want to hold space for Tortuguita’s family, especially for their mother, Belkis Terán. On February 6, in an emotive intervention at a press conference to demand transparency and clarification of the events surrounding Tortuguita’s death, Belkis spoke about her child’s origin, their names, and their studies and environmental activism. Tortuguita put their ancestral knowledge, their life experience, academic preparation and experience as a student activist and organizer into practice for the Weelaunee forest defense. Belkis also issued a very valid complaint, that “[The] university teaches young

people to do good to others, to dream for a better world, to seek alternatives to the old problems and when they try to put these teachings in practice they are killed, arrested and treated like criminals [by] those who should protect them”. This highlights the neoliberal contradiction of what is expected for activists to do to fight for change and when activists put, not only their backs but literally their whole bodies into a rightful cause, they are then stigmatized and criminalized.

Children, who have yet to be crushed by the demands of adulthood under capitalism such as, work, production, and performance, are naturally curious learners. The right hemisphere which involves visual, auditory, and tactile processing are all fully developed in utero, while the left brain, which is responsible for verbal and sequential functioning, doesn't fully develop until age 12. As such, children are sensory learners, meaning they learn from touch and how experiences make them feel. A future without Cop City is one where children have unrestricted access to movement through the forest, an ability to be curious and explore without the grips of repression and control.

The wealthiest class will choose nature-based, self- led models of education. This can be seen from the high price tags on Waldorf and Montessori education in our cities. For children of the working class, our cities' budgets are focused on power, control, repression, and production. Art, nature, and curiosity are cut off from the table, a direct act of psychological warfare on the developmental well- being of the youngest in our society.

Double consciousness- the dialectic ability to see oneself and be able to perceive oneself from the white supremacist gaze, first coined by W. E. B. Dubois, is something Black people in the US have had to learn in order to survive the dangers of the white gaze. Free movement under policing has yielded deadly consequences as can be seen through Amadou Diallo's murder for opening his wallet, moving his arms freely, through Mike Brown from running from armed white men with guns, through Tamir's Rice's murder for holding a toy gun. Children who grow up in heavily policed areas are conditioned from a young age to be aware of how their free movements are perceived by others which causes a disconnection between the body and sensory learning, stifling creative growth. Sure, our children are resilient, we learn joy, we are creative, we play, we find ways to express and create despite policing and capitalism. But what would growth look like without the hyper vigilance of the police state?

Ironically, the right wing will often use children's need for safety as a pretext to increase policing. These myths keep us in a locked state: afraid of police violence, yet unable to imagine a safety mechanism without them. Policing does not increase safety for children. This can be seen by the skyrocketing cases of child abuse through the pandemic, despite police budget increases, and every act of violence from police within the schools.

At the solidarity event we danced and sang, “Cop City will never be built!” as we were led by a radical marching band on a parade around the block. The evening ended in celebration, toasting marshmallows by the fire.

Kid's Day was an example of the age-old concept of “it takes a village.” While in the farm and in the streets, the performers, other parents, and other marchers, kept our kids safe. From the comrade who used their body to block police entrance into the farm, to every parent who made sure no one fell off the playground, to the scout who checked for police activity during the time of the parade, to every community member keeping running toddlers from traffic, we kept us safe. We protect every child as a community.

Kid's Day is a snapshot, an insistent moment of what is possible when we win. When our cities become ours to explore. When our movements are free. When the forests can grow. When our children can have a childhood without cops. Solidarity with Atlanta and all occupations against policing. Another world is possible.

19 Apr - Alfredo Cospito suspends hunger strike

After almost 6 months of hunger strike, Alfredo Cospito announces that he is ending his hunger strike.

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His decision follows yesterday's decision by the Constitutional Court to agree to recognize mitigating circumstances for the attack at the carabinieri school of which he is accused and for which he risked life imprisonment. The end-of-life imprisonment, not only for him but for all prisoners was one of the two demands that motivated his hunger strike. Alfredo yesterday regained hope not to be sentenced to die in prison and to one day regain freedom. His prolonged fasting will not be without consequences on his long-term health and we already know that he has lost the sensitivity of one of his feet.

The second demand concerned isolation 41 bis, it found a strong international echo and provoked a strong solidarity. This struggle is not over, Alfredo, like hundreds of other prisoners, remains subject to this regime of torture. Let us continue to bring our solidarity to Alfredo and fight against isolation 41bis and against all prisons!

20 Apr - Snitch Suzie Savoie Swarmed and Deplatformed in Southern Oregon

Report on action ousting federal informant Suzanne Savoie from an environmental space in southern Oregon.

MORE:

On Sunday, April 16, 2023, a group of bee loving environmentalists successfully deplatformed an event that was being led by Green Scare snitch and cooperating defendant Suzanne Savoie. Despite snitching on her ex-comrades in 2006, Savoie continues to worm her way into environmental activist spaces.

Yes, it's been a longtime but Suzie we have not forgotten! You are an enemy to butterflies, ants and all critters who love the earth.

Suzie was scheduled to give a talk in the Southern Oregon town of Talent about pollinator gardens with her business Klamath-Siskiyou Native Seeds. But Suzie, as an unrepentant snitch and enemy to the environmental movement, is no friend of the bees! Prior to the event, the scene was buzzing with excitement as friendly faces swarmed the location and hung a banner featuring a cute image of The Vengeful, Vengeful Caterpillar announcing "Snitch Suzie NOT Welcome!" At this point, Suzie's team called the cops — of course! Once a snitch, still a snitch.

As event attendees arrived along with half a dozen police officers, environmentalists fluttered around distributing flyers about Suzie. Some intrepid pollinators were even able to infiltrate and disrupt the event by reading court documents from Suzie's sentencing about her "extraordinary cooperation" with the state.

Suzie's talk was scheduled for 1-3PM but she simply could not continue amidst the buzzing, humming and shouting. The event ended over an hour early when a tearful Suzie was escorted to her gray Toyota Tacoma with Oregon license plate 216KPY by multiple police officers. Suzie's head was hung low... but did she notice that a mischievous moth had placed a flyer about her underneath her windshield wiper?

Once someone has cooperated with the federal government, they may be called on to do so again. If we want a world that is safe for bees, lizards, butterflies, and moths, we must say: no platform for snitches!

21 Apr - North Carolina Judge Convicts Journalists Of 'Trespassing' While Covering Eviction Of Homeless Encampment

A judge in North Carolina found two journalists with the Asheville Blade guilty of "trespassing" on Christmas in 2021 when they stayed in a public park to cover Asheville police as officers evicted a homeless encampment.

MORE:

by Kevin Gosztola (*Shadowproof*)

Veronica Coit and Matilda Bliss were “sentenced to pay \$25 fines and court costs.” Coit received an additional sentence of “one year of unsupervised probation with a 10-day suspended [prison] sentence,” according to the Asheville Citizen-Times.

The Asheville Blade reporters immediately appealed the decision by Judge Calvin Hill, and a jury trial was tentatively scheduled for May 1.

“In today’s bench trial of Blade journalists Veronica Coit and Matilda Bliss, judge Calvin Hill declared them guilty of trespassing, ignored freedom of press, openly sided with [Asheville Police Department’s] claim [that it] can order reporters off public land,” the Asheville Blade stated.

Hill, according to the media organization, apparently contended that no evidence had been presented to show that Coit and Bliss were journalists. The prosecutor did not even take this position.

The Asheville Blade is a “leftist local news co-op” that focuses on “hard-hitting journalism, in-depth investigation and sharp views” from Asheville. They are reader-supported (primarily through Patreon) and have been around for more than a decade.

Beginning on December 19, 2021, those in the Asheville community gathered at Aston Park for five evenings to urge the City of Asheville to leave people without any shelter alone in the park after it closed at 10 p.m. They took a stand on Christmas, and police responded by sweeping the encampment and arresting six people, including Coit and Bliss.

All six arrestees were “released from custody on the condition that they do not return to Aston Park,” the Asheville Free Press reported.

The American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina, Freedom of the Press Foundation, Reporters Without Borders, National Press Club, and Committee to Protect Journalists backed Coit and Bliss and urged the City of Asheville to abandon their prosecution.

Body camera footage was released after the groups requested that the Buncombe Superior Court in Asheville make the video public. The footage showed that police had ordered the arrest of Coit and Bliss because they were “videotaping.”

Seth Stern, the advocacy director for Freedom of the Press Foundation, said the footage also showed that the Asheville Blade reporters had “recorded the sweep from a distance and did not obstruct police.”

In the released footage, Asheville Police Department Lieutenant Mike McClanahan asks Bliss if they are leaving. “Clearly, I have marked identification as press,” Bliss responds. To which the police lieutenant replies, “Clearly, you are trespassing.”

Coit is singled out by officers similarly. They tell police they are “covering a story” and identify themselves as press.

“These two journalists were serving the public interest by documenting this event, and their presence is protected by the First Amendment,” stated Clayton Weimers, the executive director of the United States Bureau for Reporters Without Borders. “The charges against them for trespassing are a poor attempt by local officials to intimidate the press and public from being able to monitor law enforcement.”

Weimers spoke to Asheville Citizen-Times and highlighted the fact that more and more local governments in the U.S. are passing ordinances to prohibit reporting from homeless encampments.

“I think this is the first guilty verdict in one of these cases, and I hate to think about what kind of precedent we’re setting here.”

The trial was the fourth trial since 2018 against journalists for “offenses allegedly committed while gathering and reporting news,” according to the Freedom of the Press Foundation’s U.S. Press Freedom Tracker.

“Bliss and Coit were never accused of harming or obstructing police or anyone and it’s ridiculous the case even got to this point,” Stern declared after the verdict. “Asheville’s crackdown on free speech doesn’t end with journalists—the same prosecutors are trying mutual aid workers for ‘felony littering.’ Seriously.”

“Every reporter, everyone who’s ever criticized any official or cop should find the push to punish our journalists chilling,” the Asheville Blade concluded. “We remain determined to keep fighting.”

21 Apr - These Women Face Death by Incarceration, But They're Organizing for Their Lives

When she was 20 years old, Sheená King was sentenced to life without parole. Two years earlier, King's boyfriend had coerced her into fatally shooting another woman, threatening to kill her and her family if she refused. She was convicted of murder, which, in Pennsylvania, mandates life without parole.

MORE:

by Victoria Law (*Truthout*)

It's a sentence that King, now age 50, and other advocates call "death by incarceration."

"Freedom is ensured when my ashes are shipped to my daughter in a cardboard box," she explained in a newly released report on women and trans people serving similar sentences.

The term "death by incarceration" encompasses those like King who have been sentenced to life without parole. In recent years, it has also expanded to include people who are serving life sentences that allow for parole as well as virtual life sentences of 50 years or more. More than 203,000 people, or one in every seven people in U.S. prisons, are serving one of these types of sentences.

In Pennsylvania, 8,242 people (or 12 percent of the state's prison population) are serving one of these sentences. The state has the second-highest amount of life without parole sentences — 5,375 people — in the nation. (Florida, which has 10,438 people serving life without parole, is first for that dubious distinction).

As of March 2023, Pennsylvania's two women's prisons confined 1,871 women, trans and gender-nonconforming people. Of those, 197 — or over 10 percent — are serving life without parole sentences.

Given their relatively small percentage, the experiences of people sentenced to death by incarceration are often overlooked and under-reported. Now, a new report brings their stories — which often start with violence from loved ones — to the forefront.

"From Victim to Victor" draws from surveys and follow-up interviews detailing the life histories, prison experiences and policy recommendations of 73 women and trans people serving similar sentences in Pennsylvania's women's prisons. The report is researched and written by incarcerated people in partnership with outside advocates from the Abolitionist Law Center, the Human Rights Coalition and Let's Get Free: The Women and Trans Prisoner Defense Committee.

While its scope is limited to those in Pennsylvania's women's prisons, the report reflects the reality of women and trans people serving lengthy or lifelong sentences nationwide — and their efforts to challenge the system that has doomed them to die behind bars.

"For decades I have felt like a discarded thing, locked away from society thousands of miles from home and forgotten by all except a handful of people who care deeply for me," King, who wrote the report's introduction, told *Truthout* by e-message. "I participated in writing the report for the women around me who feel as I feel but aren't able to articulate or to give voice to their emotions. It is incumbent upon me to speak for those who cannot."

A Common Story Arc: A Lifetime of Patriarchal Violence

Over 60 percent of the women and trans people surveyed for the report had never been arrested before the arrest that led to their sentencing. Strikingly, 75 percent had been abused as children. More often than not, the violence happened at the hands of men that they knew — fathers, mothers' boyfriends, uncles, brothers or family friends.

The violence often continued into adulthood. More than 80 percent said that they later became involved in abusive romantic relationships. Their accounts point to a common story arc in women's prisons: a lifetime of patriarchal violence.

That story arc isn't limited to Pennsylvania. Nationally, 86 percent of those in women's jails reported experiencing sexual violence before arrest; 77 percent also reported partner violence.

One-third of those who responded to the survey were convicted for the death of a romantic partner. In 85 percent of those cases, participants reported that that partner had been abusive. In convictions for the death of someone other than a romantic partner, such as King's, male violence frequently played a significant role.

That's what happened to Jamie Silvonek. She was 14 years old when her 20-year-old boyfriend, whom she described as controlling and violent, killed her mother, who had opposed their relationship. Silvonek was charged with first-degree murder as an adult and sentenced to 35 years to life.

For the next four years, she was incarcerated in Muncy's Youthful Offender Unit, where children are held in isolation away from incarcerated adults. But Silvonek was still in the presence of adult prison staff who regularly abused her verbally and emotionally.

"They regularly forced me to stand in front of their office while they verbally disparaged and humiliated me. They sometimes forced me to stand in front of their office for hours at a time as they degraded and taunted me," she recounted for the report. When she attempted to report their abuse, they retaliated by writing her numerous misconduct tickets. Those tickets increased her isolation and fraught mental state, preventing her from talking with her family and lessening the few opportunities to interact with other young people in that unit.

Others also described how the violence they faced on the outside continued past the prison gates. "I've been the topic and receiver of physical and emotional abuse that traumatized me before prison, just to be thrown away into another abuser's arms called the Department of Corrections," Kimberly Joynes told *Truthout*.

Abuse perpetrated by prison staff is not uncommon. Between 2016 and 2018, the latest years for which data is available, prisons and jails nationwide reported 45,581 allegations of staff sexual harassment and abuse. Fewer than 2,200 allegations were substantiated. A lack of substantiation does not mean that an assault did not occur; it simply indicates that investigators report that they did not find enough evidence to determine whether it occurred.

That's what happened to Tracey Nadirah Shaw, who had been repeatedly raped by a prison officer for four years. The officer had threatened her family if she reported his assaults, causing her to remain quiet. The attacks stopped only after she was moved to a different housing unit. Years later, she learned he was

applying to become manager of her housing unit. She reported his rapes to prison authorities, her family and an outside monitoring agency. Prison investigators dismissed her claims as not only unfounded but, because so much time had elapsed, frivolous.

Injustice in the "Justice" System

By June 1, 2003, Sarita Miller's use of crack cocaine, which had started as a way to block out her father's abuse, had become an "insatiable desperateness." One night, she went to her dealer, intending to get crack from him. They drove to the home of another person, Rita Nagel, whom Miller hoped would give them money.

"I knew that Ms. Nagel was friendly with some of the drug addicts," Miller explained. "She would show compassion and allow some of us to wash her car, run errands, etc." Miller planned to fabricate a sob story to get a few dollars. Instead, she said, once Nagel opened her door, "My co-defendant pushed his way in and began brutalizing her. I stood back frozen and watched. I did nothing to help her. I couldn't believe it!"

When her co-defendant threatened to do the same to her if she did not act, she hit Nagel in the head with a hammer. Nagel died from their attack. Miller was charged with first-degree murder and robbery.

At trial, Miller's dealer took the stand and told a different story — that Miller alone had killed Nagel, then later took him to the apartment to see the dead body. He was offered immunity in exchange for his testimony. A jailhouse informant, who later received probation for robbery and assault, told a similar story — that Miller had boasted about the murder while in jail.

In addition, prosecutors called Miller's female lover, who testified that Miller had allegedly confessed the murder. But they didn't limit questioning to the alleged confession. Instead, Miller recalled, "My lesbian affair was brought up in front of the jury and my sexual performance with my ex-partner [was also discussed.]" Miller was convicted and sentenced to life without parole.

She wasn't the only one whose sexuality was used to demonize her in front of the jury. Michelle Hetzel, who was convicted after her husband killed her ex-girlfriend, recalled, "My relationship with a girl was the biggest talking point. At trial the rings we exchanged were passed around to the jury. The rainbow sticker on my car was photographed and blown up for the jury."

Her request for a separate trial was denied. Her attorney never brought up her husband's abuse nor the fact that he had been her foster brother, that he was seven years older than her, and that their relationship began when she was a minor.

Hetzel and her husband were both convicted and sentenced to life without parole.

Over half of the report's participants were incarcerated for a crime involving a white victim. This includes Miller, who is Black and Muslim, and Hetzel, who is white. Studies have indicated that sentences are often higher in cases involving deaths of white victims, particularly white women.

Pennsylvania is one of nine states that requires life without parole for felony murder, or being present when a death occurs during another criminal act. More than 20 percent of the report's participants are imprisoned for felony murder.

Transformation — and Prison Obstacles

Despite the prospect of dying in prison, many of these women have attempted to transform their lives. While in county jail, Miller completed her high school diploma and took college classes. Once in state prison, she enrolled in classes and self-help groups, including violence prevention, substance abuse programs, victim awareness, financial literacy classes and vocational programs.

She began therapy to address past physical and sexual abuse from adult relatives and to understand how that violence shaped her life and actions. She also decided to ensure that incarcerated women had their own outlet for their voices, collaborating with Let's Get Free, a Pittsburgh-based group supporting imprisoned women and trans people, to publish *Daughters*, a biannual magazine specifically by and for incarcerated women.

King completed every program offered at SCI Muncy, including graduating with an associate's degree in religious education, a bachelor's degree in Christian counseling and completing 32 vocational programs. She also became certified as a peer educator to help others undergoing similar struggles.

Joynes, too, has completed every program offered at SCI Cambridge Springs, the state's other women's prison. She is now taking correspondence courses from Colorado State University toward two bachelors' degrees — one in sociology and another in psychology.

Silvonek is also enrolled in college. She is also learning to advocate not only for herself but for others who were ensnared in the legal system as juveniles. "At 22, I am far from the insecure, impulsive 13-year-old child I once was. I am working hard to become a woman that my family and community is proud of," she wrote in an e-message to *Truthout*.

But their pathways to transformation aren't easy in a prison environment. Many, including King, described struggling with mental health with little to no support from prison medical staff. Instead, staff frequently punish them when they most need mental health support. Silvonek attempted suicide several times; each time, she was stripped of her clothing, placed in solitary confinement and denied reading materials and access to her family.

Participants also described being punished for minor rules violations, most often for contraband, or items that they were not allowed to have. These items were often not dangerous at all. King, for instance, was sent to solitary for 30 days for having fruit salad. Other contraband for which women have been punished include perfume, earrings, a lamp, ketchup and a seasoning packet.

Impacts of Incarceration

Nationwide, the majority of people in prison are parents. Two-thirds of the report's participants have children. Nearly 60 percent of those parents were arrested before their children were 5 years old. Not surprisingly, their lengthy imprisonment has frayed their relationships. Several said that they did not know much about their children's lives, while others had lost touch altogether.

King's children were 3 years old and 4 months old when she was arrested. She was fortunate that her mother and sisters cared for them, avoiding foster care and permanent separation. Still, she said that her incarceration devastated her family. "At ages 30 and 33, [my children] still have enduring effects of my incarceration," she wrote. Her son is currently serving the same sentence as her — a life sentence without the possibility of parole for first-degree murder.

Not only have family ties been frayed, but those sentenced to death by incarceration fear aging and dying behind bars.

Joynes and King were 20 when they entered prison. King recently turned 50 and Joynes will be 62 this summer. Without clemency or legislative change, they face decades — and death — in prison.

Nearly half of all Pennsylvanians serving life without parole are over age 50. More than 21 percent are age 60 or older. While report participants ranged from ages 20 to 80, the average age was 55 years old. They described witnessing neglect of those who were aging and expressed fear that they, too, might be treated horrifically as they lost the ability to care for themselves.

"[Life without parole] means you will die in a dirty diaper, begging for someone to come help you and be abused for losing your memory," 57-year-old Maria Spencer stated in the report.

Causing a Tsunami and Creating Change

For those serving life without parole, clemency, in the form of a sentence commutation, is currently their only chance for release.

While some states allow their governors discretion to commute sentences, Pennsylvania requires unanimous approval from all five members of the Board of Pardons and Parole. Even if the board grants unanimous approval, the governor can still deny clemency. Between 1999 and 2022, only 57 lifers received commutation; 45 were granted by Tom Wolf between 2015 and 2022. In contrast, between 1970 and 1995, Pennsylvania governors commuted 285 life sentences.

As of 2020, 8,242 people in the state were serving a sentence characterized as death by incarceration. The report highlights three bills that could provide other avenues for that elusive second chance.

Senate Bill 135 would provide parole eligibility for those serving a life-without-parole sentence except for those convicted in the deaths of law enforcement.

SB 136 would ensure that all incarcerated people are able to see the parole board once they turn 55 years old, have served 25 years of their sentence, or have been diagnosed with a chronic, terminal or debilitating illness. The law is similar to one in California, which requires that people who reach age 50 and have served 20 years in prison be eligible for a parole hearing.

SB 385, or Alternative Sentences for Domestic Violence Survivors, would mandate the court consider an individual's history of partner abuse as a mitigating factor in the sentencing process, allowing the court to impose a sentence below the state's sentencing guidelines. It also gives the judge the discretion to not imprison the person at all. Survivors who are already incarcerated would receive consideration for resentencing or release. New York passed a similar bill in 2019.

Behind bars, Sheená King and Kimberly Joynes have been active in advocating for all three. King urges those around her to encourage their families to contact lawmakers, attend rallies and vote for candidates who support these changes. In past years, she also wrote form letters for women whose families lived in red districts.

Although she will have her first parole hearing when she is nearly 50, Silvonek is also actively advocating for SB 135 to give others that chance. She is also planning to advocate for children who, like herself, were tried and punished as adults.

Meanwhile, all three hope that the report will bring both more understanding to women's imprisonment for crimes involving violence and more support for bills that allow them (and everyone else) a second chance.

"I hope this report will cause a tsunami among the people," Joynes told *Truthout*. "I want the public servants and the politicians to stop serving with their eyes closed knowing the needs of the uneducated and poor."

22 Apr - The book Eric King co-edited has a release date

In December, a book Eric co-edited will be published by AK Press.

MORE:

Historian Dan Berger calls Rattling the Cages: Oral Histories of North American Political Prisoners “an intimate intergenerational dialog with movement activists representing sixty years of struggle and too many years of incarceration.”

Dispatches from behind bars. Political prisoners speak out. The official story is that the United States has no political prisoners. The reality is that there are hundreds of people rounded up, placed behind bars, and kept there for inordinately long sentences because of their political beliefs and activities. A project of popular educator Josh Davidson and political prisoner Eric King, this book is filled with the experience and wisdom of over thirty current and former North American political prisoners. It provides first-hand details of prison life and the political commitments that continue to lead prisoners into direct confrontation with state authorities and institutions. The people Josh Davidson has interviewed include former radicals and Black liberation militants from the sixties and seventies, current antifascists, nonviolent Catholic peace activists, Animal and Earth Liberation Front activists, and more. Their stories are moving, often tragic, yet deeply inspiring.

Collectively, these people have spent hundreds of years behind bars, and their experiences speak directly to the cruelty and immorality of our prison and so-called criminal justice systems. Although their sentences and the conditions they have endured vary dramatically, this wide range of voices come together to embody what bell hooks called “a legacy of defiance.” It is this legacy--of tirelessly struggling to right today's wrongs and create a better tomorrow--that the prison system tries, yet fails, to extinguish.

22 Apr - Charges Against Stop Cop City Protesters Continue Terror of “Anti-Terrorism”

The U.S. is cynically wielding “anti-terrorism” as a cudgel against the left.

MORE:

by Azeezah Kanji (*Truthout*)

With the mass filing of “domestic terrorism” charges against 42 Stop Cop City protesters, the state compounds the violence of the Cop City project itself: a massive 85-acre police training facility; to be built atop one of the “four lungs” of Atlanta, the forest known by the colonized Muscogee people as the Weelaunee; in a city that already boasts the most concentrated surveillance in the country, as well as “dozens” of backlogged cases of police brutality; including the fatal shooting of Stop Cop City environmental activist Tortuguita while they were sitting with their hands up, judging from an independent autopsy.

The absurdity of the terrorism charges, based on the accused having “mud on their shoes” and a legal aid hotline number on their arms, reflects the absurdity of the U.S.’s “war on terror” as a whole. In this “war,” the criteria generally proffered to define its central term, terrorism, as a legal category — that it involves (1) exceptionally indiscriminate violence, (2) against civilians, (3) committed by ideologically motivated “radicals,” (4) to terrorize the public, therefore (5) necessitating an exceptional response — bear no correspondence to its application in reality.

Violence vs. Non-Violence

Contrary to dominant representations, the primary function of “anti-terrorism” is not the penalization of violence, but of acts with no necessary relationship to violence at all.

Fifty-four percent of U.S. terrorism prosecutions since 2001 have been for purported “material support”: for example, letting an acquaintance store a suitcase of socks and ponchos in one’s apartment (sentence: 15 years); releasing, as a civil rights lawyer, a public statement from a client imprisoned for terrorism (sentence: 10 years); and smuggling cigarettes (sentence: 30 years, reduced on appeal from 155 years).

Even being legally deemed “not a terrorist” is no bar to being criminalized as a terrorist. Sabri Benkahla, for instance, was given a 10 year “enhanced” terrorism sentence, despite the judge’s own finding that none of his actions had in fact “directly involved or intended to promote a federal crime of terrorism.” This was following a trial in which even Arabic words such as salaam, meaning “peace,” were classified as terminology “connected to radical Islam.”

Punishment vs. “Prevention”

Due to the pervasiveness of the presumption of guilt, the ambit of criminalization extends easily to punishing people for crimes they haven’t even yet managed to commit. Seventy percent of all U.S. terrorism convictions since 2001 have been “preemptive prosecutions” and another 23 percent partially preemptive, as determined by a comprehensive 2019 analysis by the Coalition for Civil Freedoms and Project SALAM.

For example, Rezwan Ferdaus was ensnared by an entrapment “security” operation while experiencing psychiatric and physical disabilities, including seizures, hallucinations, depression, and loss of bladder control so severe he was required to wear diapers, as Human Rights Watch has documented. He was sentenced to 17 years for an FBI-concocted bomb plot: over three times longer than was Thaddeus Murphy for actually bombing an NAACP office (on his own initiative), while mosque firebomber Cody Seth Crawford received no prison sentence at all.

Individual vs. Collective “Guilt”

Thus continues the use of the criminal law to punish the disenfranchised, the demonized and the dispossessed — not for what they’ve done, but for who they are.

Terrorism trials of Muslims have frequently featured the graphic airing of “inflammatory evidence about [incidents of] terrorism in which defendants played no part,” as Human Rights Watch notes. This is a practice of collective inculcation that U.S. judges have acknowledged would be unacceptably unfair if applied to any other type of offence.

Similarly, activists like Joshua Harper of the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty campaign have been convicted of “animal enterprise terrorism” not for their own actions, but the “illegal” tactics imputed to others. The minor detail that “Harper’s personal conduct [did] not cross the line of illegality,” as the court itself admitted, was no impediment.

Incredibly, it is the Stop Cop City forest defenders with mud on their shoes — not the cops with blood on their hands — who are charged with terrorist guilt by association: a predictable result when the primary source of terror defines, investigates, and prosecutes the crime.

Dangerous Actions vs. Ideologies

And so, under U.S. legal frameworks, animal rights activists freeing minks from mass suffering and slaughter in fur farms are “terrorists”; but white-supremacist vigilantes holding hundreds of migrants hostage at gunpoint are not.

Donating humanitarian aid to besieged Gaza is “terrorism;” while donating to arm Israeli settlers is an act of “charity,” subsidized by the state.

Making a 5-minute-long YouTube video depicting American military atrocities and militating against India’s occupation of Kashmir is “terrorism;” unlike KKK cross burnings and advocacy for lynchings, which are constitutionally protected “free speech.”

Accidentally dropping glitter at an environmental protest is charged as a “terrorism” offence; mowing over anti-racist protesters, though, is not only not “terrorism” but in many states now pardonable or protected by specially passed laws.

Cutting down genetically engineered trees to protest environmentally destructive government experiments is “terrorism;” razing a forest to construct Cop City is not. Going to a music festival to stop Cop City, on the other hand, might be “terrorism;” whereas storming the Capitol with Confederate flags and nooses is not.

The U.S. Department of Justice’s own Inspector General has criticized the FBI for “investigat[ing] acts of nonviolent civil disobedience [by anti-war and environmentalist groups] as Acts of Terrorism” — part of a global pattern wherein 58 percent of prosecutions of human rights defenders around the world are pursued under anti-terrorism measures, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights.

Stop Cop City is the first, and so far, only target of Georgia’s anti-terrorism statute, enacted in the wake of Dylann Roof’s 2015 anti-Black church massacre; while Roof himself and 87 percent of others federally prosecuted for right-wing violence have been spared any terrorism charge.

Harm to Public vs. Corporate Interests

The criminalization of police abolitionists, animal liberationists, and pipeline “arsonists” as terrorists underwrites the ongoing torching and plunder of the planet for private gain. Sheltered under the aegis of “anti-terrorism,” corporate practices of extraction and exploitation continue to inflict indiscriminate casualties in the service of violent ideologies — the very definition, supposedly, of terrorist crime.

Climate justice activist Jessica Reznicek, for instance, was sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment as a terrorist for damaging the weapon of mass climate destruction known as the Dakota Access Pipeline. The pipeline itself, meanwhile, poisons stolen Indigenous land, water and air with impunity, having leaked five times in its first six months of operation alone. Nationally, approximately 6,000 “pipeline incidents” reported to the U.S. Department of Transportation have caused 1,085 injuries and 257 fatalities since 2003; globally, research from Harvard, University College London, Birmingham and Leicester universities indicates that fossil fuel pollution is responsible for more than 8 million deaths per year.

In previous colonial eras, too, it was the enslaved and the colonized who were labelled “terrorists” for the offence of resisting their domination, while plantation masters and colonizers were treated as the victims of “terrorism,” i.e. efforts to emancipate stolen lives and land. Then as now, ruthlessly suppressing the “terrorisms” of the marginalized and oppressed permits the large-scale terrors of the powerful to proceed unchecked.

Targeting Civilians vs. Military

Within this inverted reality, even occupying armies become the innocent sufferers of the “terrorism” of the occupied.

Palestinians are sued under U.S. anti-terrorism statutes for nonviolently challenging Israel’s military occupation; while the atrocities intrinsic to the occupation itself are legally shielded in U.S. courts by Israel’s “sovereign immunity.”

The U.S. indicts “terrorist” states and individuals for targeting or even just planning to target U.S. soldiers; yet the U.S.’s own prolific torture and killings of civilians are perpetually written off: pushed under the carpet as “collateral damage,” paid off with paltry “condolence” funds, or pinned on “the terrorists” themselves for leaving all those children and elders in the way of U.S. bombs.

Aafia Siddiqui is currently serving an 86-year terrorism sentence for allegedly attempting to shoot a U.S. soldier in Afghanistan — even though she was the only one who was actually shot. In contrast, Derrick Miller was released after eight years for shooting a captive Afghan civilian in the head and dumping the body in a latrine; he is currently a legislative assistant to Florida Congressperson Matt Gaetz.

Exception vs. Norm

Far from being a temporary and exceptional aberration, the abuses executed in the name of fighting terrorism are in fact institutionalized as the norm.

Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib imported both torturers and torture methods — beatings, forced feedings, forced nudity, sexual humiliation, electrocution, prolonged isolation, exposure to extreme light and temperature conditions, sleep and sensory deprivation, starvation, attack dog brutalization, and various other techniques of “psychic demolition” — from the “normal” U.S. prison system.

U.S. prisons, conversely, have been “Guantanamoized” — for example, with the development of regimes such as Special Administrative Measures (SAMs), in which the imposition of total isolation serves the dual function of tormenting prisoners and simultaneously screening off the abuse from external scrutiny. The torture and its cover-up in one! In the words of a report by Yale Law School and the Centre for Constitutional Rights, SAMs “shrink the entirety of the prisoner’s world to the four corners of his prison cell” while “shielding this extreme use of government power from public view”: in some ways even more repressive than Gitmo 1.0.

War Plus Police

The net effect of all the above is to create populations of people who are subject to virtually unlimited “legalized” violence — whether by police shootings or drone bombings — but are prohibited from using violence or even nonviolence in return.

Instead of repairing the resultingly devastated communities, police and militaries construct their own “mock” versions — like the one planned for Cop City — where they can train in further terrorizing the inhabitants, from Atlantans to Afghans. The U.S. military’s practice “war on terror” on faux-cities like “Braggistan” and “Talatha,” for example, come complete with such “authentic” features as mosques, donkeys, the call to prayer, and household furniture inscribed with the word “jihad” (which literally refers to primarily nonviolent “struggle” — just as menacing as salaam).

The terms commonly used to describe these exercises in enforcing the ruling hierarchy — “war” for what happens outside the borders, “policing” for within — are euphemisms that work to obscure, partition and sanitize the reality. For “police,” in theory, lethal force is meant to be a last resort against civilians, who may not legitimately use force themselves. In “war,” combatant targets may legally be killed, but are entitled to fire back. Here, however, the logics of war and police are selectively combined, to achieve maximum application of unilateral brutality with minimum restraints and accountability. As in the colonial killing fields and torture chambers of previous decades, colonial powers’ claimed “right” to dominate, expropriate and annihilate has always been a one-way street.

With Cop City, the problem is yet again laid bare, but so too is the solution: an abolitionist struggle that is as interconnected as the forms of state-corporate terror we confront — the colonial-carceral-counterterrorism-military-industrial complex.

If this struggle is now called “terrorism,” then let us all be “terrorists” too.

26 Apr - The Glaring Hole In Biden's Praise Of Harry Belafonte's Life Of Activism

The president hailed Belafonte's "legacy of outspoken advocacy," which included his fight to free Leonard Peltier. Biden could make it happen, but hasn't.

MORE:

by Jennifer Bendery (*HuffPost*)

President Joe Biden on Tuesday hailed the life of Harry Belafonte, the music legend and civil rights activist who died at the age of 96.

“He used his fame and fortune for the public good throughout his extraordinary career,” Biden said in a lengthy statement. “He became a powerful ally of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other giants of the Civil Rights Movement. He raised money and donated resources to post bail for activists jailed for acts of civil disobedience.”

“Harry Belafonte’s accomplishments are legendary and his legacy of outspoken advocacy, compassion, and respect for human dignity will endure,” he continued. “He will be remembered as a great American.”

But for all his praise of Belafonte’s fight for justice and human rights, Biden didn’t mention that Belafonte was a strong, decadeslong advocate for releasing the long-imprisoned Native American activist Leonard Peltier — something Biden could unilaterally do today if he wanted to, but hasn’t.

Belafonte spent years urging former President Barack Obama to grant clemency to Peltier, who the U.S. government put in prison nearly 50 years ago after a trial riddled with misconduct and lies — and who definitely doesn’t belong there anymore.

The FBI and U.S. Attorney’s Office made a fall guy out of Peltier, now 78, when they convicted him for the murder of two FBI agents during a 1975 shootout on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Their conviction fell apart when they got caught hiding exculpatory evidence, so they changed their charge to aiding and abetting whoever did murder the agents, on the grounds that Peltier was among the dozens of people present near the shootings. The FBI never did figure out who shot the agents.

During the trial, the FBI threatened and coerced witnesses into lying. Federal officials glossed over that all of Peltier’s co-defendants had already been acquitted on grounds of self-defense. A juror admitted on day two that she was racist against Native Americans. She was kept on the jury anyway.

Some of the same people who helped put Peltier in prison all those years ago have since urged his release, saying they never had proof that he committed any crimes. Beyond that, Peltier’s prolonged parole process has been so problematic that United Nations legal experts last year made the unusual decision to revisit his case. Over the summer, they called on Biden to release him immediately.

Throughout all of this, Peltier has maintained his innocence, a detail that has almost certainly prevented him from being paroled. He remains in a Florida penitentiary. He uses a walker now. He is blind in one eye from a partial stroke. He survived a scary bout with COVID-19 last year, and he’s wrestled with serious health concerns related to diabetes and an aortic aneurysm.

Belafonte saw an ally in Obama to release Peltier from prison once and for all. In December 2012, he headlined a New York City benefit concert for Peltier, sharing the stage with folk singer Pete Seeger, rappers Common and Mos Def, and filmmaker Michael Moore. He was 85 years old at the time, gripping a cane as he addressed the crowd.

“I spoke with Leonard just before the show,” Belafonte said. “[Leonard] said, ‘Harry, I know how hard it’s been to organize these concerts. ... I hope this evening is not about raising funds, but let it be about raising consciousness. Consciousness about injustice is what we have to do.’”

Four years later, in December 2016, Belafonte spoke at a Democracy Now! event in New York City and again pressed Obama to release Peltier before leaving office. He was now 89, and hunched over the podium as he spoke.

“I’ll take this opportunity to publicly, once again — for the last few months, a passionate appeal has been made to President Barack Obama to use the power of the executive office to free my friend and our leader, Leonard Peltier,” Belafonte said to applause.

“With the understanding that if he fails before now and the end of the year to step to the plate and do the right thing, it will be a long time before we get a chance to think about Leonard being freed,” he continued. “But I think we have to just keep on, keepin’ on.”

Obama never did release Peltier. It’s not clear why.

Worse, it’s increasingly clear that the only reason that Peltier is still in prison is because the FBI simply doesn’t want him to get out, ever, even as its stated argument for keeping him there is wildly outdated, misleading and flat-out wrong.

Belafonte’s death comes a week after Amnesty International USA launched a new campaign aimed at pressuring Biden to release Peltier on humanitarian grounds. The group, which is typically focused on international human rights violations, has long advocated for Peltier’s release and timed its new campaign with the anniversary of his conviction on April 18, 1977.

“President Biden’s promises to do better on Indigenous peoples’ rights and criminal justice reform ring more and more hollow every day that Leonard Peltier remains in prison,” said Zeke Johnson, the national director of Campaigns & Crisis Response for Amnesty International USA.

“President Biden should read Peltier’s petition for clemency and grant it before Peltier dies in custody,” said Johnson. “No one should be imprisoned, let alone for nearly 50 years, when there are serious concerns about the fairness of their trial.”

HuffPost routinely asks the White House about Peltier but does not get any comment. The last time *HuffPost* remembers getting a response was in February 2022, with this statement from a Biden spokesman: “We are aware of Mr. Peltier’s request for a pardon and the outreach in support of his request. As many of you know, President Biden has a process for considering all requests for pardon or commutation, which is run through our White House Counsel’s Office. I don’t have more to share on Mr. Peltier’s request at this time.”

House Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) also hailed Belafonte’s legacy on Tuesday, celebrating his “relentless advocacy for human rights.”

“Whether standing alongside Dr. King at the March on Washington, fighting against Apartheid or mobilizing for famine relief for Africa, he answered great moral crises of his time with his fiery, passionate activism,” Pelosi said in a statement.

Her spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment on whether Pelosi backs Peltier’s release, an issue at the heart of Belafonte’s fiery, passionate activism.

28 Apr - Statement from Marius Mason for June 11th day of Solidarity

Statement from Marius Mason on June 11th, a day of solidarity with long-time anarchist prisoners.

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Thank you for the work you are doing to make the change we need to make into the world for our collective survival. Your dedication, support and love are a constant source of inspiration and motivation for me; and I am betting for other prisoners, as well.

This has been as eventful year and a half here at FCI Danbury. My transfer to a male facility had been viewed with great trepidation both by those supportive of trans people and by those who are adamantly opposed to our existence. I've had many memorable experiences; some humiliating, some merely annoying and awkward. But, also several that have been rewarding and deeply affirming.

There has definitely been a sense of working things out as we go—the way strip searches have been conducted has been all over the board. Sometimes they have been done by one male staff person, sometimes by one female staff person and several times by several male staff people. Strip searches occur before and after visits, before and after medical trips out, and also when going into the SHU (I had to go there before a medical procedure to fast).

I missed one that was conducted down at the Rec when a fight between inmates was suspected. For the most part, as embarrassing as strip searches can be (they definitely trigger my dysphoria), most staff have been professional about them. There have been some unprofessional remarks made on occasion, though, that have been dehumanizing and dispiriting, but actually have happened a lot less often than I was expecting. A nice surprise.

Mostly, I have been able to navigate what negativity and attempted exploitation there has been, taking it as the cost of admission to this new circus. I am determined to make progress on my transition, and have appreciated the opportunity to keep growing in my social transition and to make all the benchmarks necessary for satisfying the requirements that the BOP has set. For the most part, I keep it moving and accent the positive and eliminate the negative.

There has been a lot of positive movement in my transition to a predominantly cis-male-identified prison. While there are about six transwomen here that I have met, and one gender fluid person, I have yet to meet anyone else who identifies as a trans man at this prison. I did know about eight transmen at Carswell, where I was placed in Texas. Being in this population, there has been a lot of opportunity to discuss trans issues with people. They ask a lot of questions, some related to trans policy and some personal to my situation. Other questions make me laugh as they are blunt and impertinent, but honest curiosity is important to helping with trans visibility and acceptance, so I try not to be offended by some of the more off-putting questions I get asked many times (Will your penis work? Do you like men or women? Why don't they just trade parts with a trans woman?). I try to keep a sense of humor about it all, and focus on science and acceptance.

My responsibilities as a peer counselor in my unit, which is a mental health unit, keeps me busy and on call 24/7. I'm glad that such a community exists, as it is a necessary support and safe environment for people who might otherwise be persecuted and exploited because of their mental and physical disabilities. This idea is actually to create a small community based on mutual aid, which is intriguing especially as I know from experience with other radical communities in the free world how very, very challenging this kind of social network is to build. But despite the additional hurdles that people in my unit face, we often are able to be the help we need to be for each other. To me, this is proof of the concept of an egalitarian society. If we can do it under these conditions, even if only sometimes, then it is possible.

In addition to my mentoring job, I have also completed my HVAC diploma from Lincoln Tech, as well as finishing my paralegal degree from Blackstone. I'm hoping to get a chance to use these skills to help others when I get to work in the free world someday. In the meantime, I will be starting a new paralegal course, specializing in either criminal or immigration law in the next few months.

I am still doing yardwork and gardening on the compound, trying to create gardens that are both nice to look at but also important food sources for pollinators and birds. They really love zinnias and sunflowers! I am also practicing guitar and Hebrew. Both studies give me a lot of peace.

Though I have been redesignated since January 27, I am still waiting to be transferred to FMC Ft. Worth to receive my medical/surgical treatments to complete my physical transition. Waiting is making me anxious, as I am feeling my age these days. I try to stay focused on how I can help people here, helping folks write letters home or navigate the bureaucracy of prison life, though I am deeply troubled by the way the world suffers right now.

This country continues to slide towards a civil war, as irreconcilable visions of the social structure of our society contend for ascendancy. We face an imminent decline into fascism and only the concerted efforts of a principled movement will avert it. These same forces in conflict here are also in play internationally. It's hard to be very well informed from where I sit, so I don't feel very qualified to comment much on things outside the cage where I live now. But it is only because of my great faith in you, my free community of resistance, that I hold a candle of hope for our collective future. I know you are out there for us. And, please know that we are in here for you.

Together, we are strong.

30 Apr - Solidarity Campaign With 'Florida 4' Underway

Report on solidarity outreach and actions with the 'Florida 4,' a group of pro-choice activists facing trumped up charges.

MORE:

This week in Broward County, anarchists and allies of autonomous movements have begun to campaign in solidarity with the Florida 4, a group of pro-choice activists facing up to 12 years in prison for allegedly tagging graffiti on anti-choice offices and buildings. Such repression comes from a mangled interpretation of the FACE Act, which was originally devised to combat anti-choice terrorism against abortion clinics but is now being weaponized against pro-choice currents.

Graffiti and stickers were put up in support of these political prisoners, and leaflets were distributed across West Broward. Such actions diffusing knowledge of the encroachment of fascist repression against the pro-choice current are critical, and anyone reading this would do well to join us in a campaign of solidarity and support for the Florida 4.

Though our state is evidently more advanced in its tactics of repression and fascist development, weaponizing current laws against social movements in such a manner is likely only a precedent to be employed in other parts of the country when the social war becomes laid bare as the vestiges of liberal diplomacy fade away in our politics. We call on all allies of the anarchist and pro-choice currents to join us in acting in solidarity with the Florida 4, as well as the South Florida Anti-Repression Committee working to support these political prisoners, as only wider social pressure can shift the momentum of these cases.