

Taking a Global View of Repression

The Prison Strike and the Week of Solidarity with Anarchist Prisoners

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In the United States, a practically unprecedented prison strike is underway, setting new precedents for coordination between struggles in prisons and detention centers and for solidarity from those not behind bars. Meanwhile, August 23–30 is also the sixth annual week of global solidarity with anarchist prisoners, when anarchists around the world coordinate solidarity struggles between different countries and continents. We strongly believe that every prisoner is a political prisoner, and that the best way to support anarchist prisoners is to build a movement against the prison-industrial complex itself. At the same time, the week of global solidarity is an excellent opportunity to get context from our comrades in other parts of the world about the different strategies of repression that various governments are employing today and how to counter them.

In the following text, we'll explore contemporary patterns of repression targeting anarchists around the world and some of the ways that movements have responded. Looking at this as a microcosm of the way that repression functions in relation to the broader population can give us a way to understand prisoner solidarity as one part of wider struggles against prisons and towards freedom for all people. As anarchists, we aim to analyze state tactics of repression in order to develop better security practices, build international connections, and become more skilled at supporting and caring for each other.

Waves of Repression, 2017–2018

The first two decades of the 21st century have seen steadily intensifying repression directed towards anarchists and their comrades. Some of the most widely known examples of the past few years include the Tarnac case in France, an investigation of “terrorism” that started in 2008 and concluded this year with the defendants completely exonerated; Operations Pandora, Piñata, and Pandora 2 in Spain, which began in December 2014 and concluded this year; Scripta Manent in Italy, since 2017; Operation Fenix in the Czech Republic, since spring 2015; the raids the police have been carrying out across Europe since the battle of Hamburg in summer 2017; the Warsaw Three arson case in Poland, 2016–2017; and mass repression in the United States resulting from the occupation of Standing Rock and the resistance to Trump’s inauguration, the latter case finally having concluded this past July. We are also witnessing ongoing repression in Belarus dictatorship and Russia, most recently with the “Network” case.

All around the world, states and their police forces choose from the same assortment of tactics to achieve the same ends. The specific choices they make vary according to their context, but the toolbox and the fundamental objectives are the same.

For example, the same computer programs are used in many different countries to carry out online censorship. In some countries, they are only used to shut down a few websites, while elsewhere, they block a vast array of content; but the same principle is at work in both cases, and all it would take for the former situation to become the latter would be for the authorities to check a few more boxes in their repression software. The same goes for other forms of police repression. This shows how the difference between a supposedly permissive liberal democracy and an autocratic dictatorship is quantitative, not qualitative.

When police in one part of the world develop a new strategy or begin to employ a specific tactic more often, that often spreads to other police agencies around the world. For example, we can draw a line between the various entrapment cases in the United States—Eric McDavid, David McKay, Bradley Crowder, Matthew DePalma, the NATO 3, the Cleveland 5—and the subsequent

Operation Fenix case in the Czech Republic, in which agents provocateurs attempted to seduce people into planning an attack on a military train and attacking a police eviction squad with Molotov cocktails. In the beginning, Operation Fenix was framed as a campaign against the Network of Revolutionary Cells, a network that had claimed responsibility for various arsons against police and capitalists; at the end, it concluded as an unsuccessful attempt to stigmatize anarchists and restore the legitimacy of the Czech police in the eyes of the public.

Likewise, we can also understand Operation Fenix in the context of decades of efforts from police in Italy, the US, France, Spain, and elsewhere to set a precedent for fabricating terrorist conspiracy cases with which to discredit and imprison anarchists. Viewed individually, the Marini trial in Italy, the Tarnac 9 case, Operations Pandora and Piñata, and Operation Fenix are nothing more than perplexing examples of prosecutorial overreach. But when we consider them as part of a global pattern in which the repressive forces of the state have been seeking a new method via which to neutralize the networks that connect popular social movements, we can recognize what they all have in common. In this context, it also becomes clear how the Russian tactic of torturing arrestees into signing false confessions could spread to other countries, if we don't take steps immediately to publicize it. This is why it is important to take a global approach to studying state strategies of repression.

Growing International Police Cooperation

Across the globe, police forces are cooperating more than ever before. Continent-wide repression in Europe shows international police collaboration and the extremist and terrorist laws in action.

The recent Aachen bank robbery case in Germany illustrates this: a European arrest warrant, the sharing of intelligence between police forces, and the intensification of cooperation between various legal authorities following two bank expropriations in 2013 and 2014. Spanish and German police cooperated in obtaining the DNA of the alleged expropriators, who were convicted of robbing the Pax Bank, the bank of the Catholic Church.

We can also see evidence of this trend in the last case connected to the SHAC campaign (Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty), which targeted current animal liberation prisoner, Sven van Has-selt. Six European states collaborated in his arrest.

We are also seeing police in different countries exchanging education and experience on a more organized basis. For example, the College of European Police (CEPOL) held a seminar about terrorism in Greece in July 2012, at which the Italian authorities offered an in-depth overview of the repressive measures they have used against the insurrectionary anarchist movement. The European Police Office (EUROPAL) publishes an annual report, the Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT), in which you can find a chapter dedicated to supposed left-wing and anarchist "terrorism." This kind of collaboration has gained momentum in other venues, such as the European Union Intelligence and Situation Center (SitCen); European Union Member States also cooperate on the legal level through institutions like Eurojust.

Governments in the Global North routinely equip and train states in the Global South to employ their technology and repression strategies. For example, Germany and Israel made a fortune equipping Brazil ahead of the 2014 World Cup. In an extreme example of this Great Britain is now looking to outsource imprisonment to Africa, building a new prison wing in Nigeria. All of these are good reasons to interlink our struggles.

Terrorism Discourse and Legislation

Laws and rhetoric against “extremism” and “terrorism” are some of the most powerful contemporary tools to criminalize and delegitimize social struggles. Many states developed anti-terrorist laws as a result of the previous generation of political movements, such as the Basque independence groups in the Spanish State or the Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany in the 1970s. In a way, this can make the framework of “terrorism” somewhat outdated when it comes to contemporary social movements, which usually lack formal hierarchies like the RAF.

The chief function of the “terrorism” framework is to legitimize the suspension of legal rights, in order to empower police to employ unlimited surveillance, indefinite detention without charges or trial, total isolation in prison, torture—all the tactics that were once used to maintain colonial regimes, monarchies, and dictatorships. Since September 11, 2001 and the declaration of the so-called “war on terror,” anti-terrorist laws have been upgraded all around the world to make these tactics available to repress anyone who might be able to threaten the stability of the reigning order.

This is why the most liberal European democracy can concur with the authorities of a virtual dictatorship like Putin’s Russia that the same legal framework should be used against both anarchists who defend the public against police violence and fundamentalists who carry out attacks on random civilians for the Islamic State. These two cases have nothing in common in terms of tactics or values or goals; the one thing that connects them is that they both contest the centralized power of the prevailing government.

Repression: An International Language with Local Dialects

“Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have the exact measure of the injustice and wrong which will be imposed on them.”

-Frederick Douglass

There are some new developments in the field of state repression. For example, we see an rapid development in repression tactics in Russia with the example of the “Network” case, in which many activists have been kidnapped, threatened, beaten, and tortured via electroshocks, hanging upside down, and other methods. Using these tactics, the officers of the Russian Security Forces (FSB, the successor to the KGB) have forced arrestees to sign false confessions corroborating the existence of an invented group called “the Network” which was allegedly planning to carry out the terrorist attacks during the presidential elections in March 2018 and the FIFA World Cup. These tactics created an atmosphere of fear, isolation and uncertainty in Russia, making it very difficult to mobilize solidarity.

The innovation here is using torture to confirm the existence of a “terrorist network” invented by the state. Torture itself is not a new thing to anarchists and other prisoners in post-Soviet countries; it remains one of the most powerful tools in the context of a penal system that is notoriously corrupt and permissive towards the police, giving them even less legal oversight than police experience in places like the United States. The Russian and Belarusian contexts are distinct in that in both cases, the state is openly authoritarian, not hesitating to crack down violently even on basic forms of expression such as banner drops.

Currently, this strategy seems to be working in Russia and Belarus, but in the long run heavy-handed oppression makes the authorities vulnerable to sudden outbursts of pent-up anger. In Belarus, for example, despite tremendous pressure from the totalitarian government, anarchists were at the forefront of one of the most powerful social movements of 2017.

By contrast, in the “Western” countries, we see more legalistic strategies of repression, such as extreme bail and release conditions that function to isolate and pacify individuals via attrition. This presents subtler forms of repression that are more socially acceptable to those who like to think of themselves as the citizens of a democracy. One police research report described the repression of the SHAC campaign as a process of “leadership decapitation” achieved through lengthy prison sentences and extreme bail and post-prison conditions aimed at absolutely isolating people from their movements.

Police cooperation between different European states does not always take the same form. For example, while Greek, Italian and German conferences take place regarding anarchist “terrorism” and “extremism,” countries that have experienced fewer militant actions and less popular unrest employ different approaches. Many states carry out intelligence gathering in the guise of academic research in “extremism and terrorism studies,” in order to monitor the presence of particular ideas or tactics. This was clear in the Czech Republic, where such studies were used to analyze the local anarchist movement. For example, despite lacking any demonstrable links to the FAI/FRI or Conspiracy of Cells of Fire, recent anarchist actions in Czech Republic from the aforementioned Network of Revolutionary Cells were described and charged mostly via academic and police research that presented them as a manifestation of the former groups.

Learning from Successful Support Campaigns

“We learn a thousand times more from defeat than we do from a victory”

-Ed Mead, member of George Jackson Brigade and Men against Sexism, long-term prisoner and gay liberationist

It’s not easy to measure the effectiveness of repression. A campaign of repression could be said to succeed if the targets receive prison sentences—or if the movement they are associated with is effectively divided, pacified, or destroyed—or if the social struggle that the movement is engaged in becomes co-opted.

So, for example, you could say that Operation Fenix was unsuccessful because the legal charges that were pressed did not succeed. However, Czech police were able to collect an enormous amount of data on the anarchist movement in the Czech Republic—and despite failing to win the case against the defendants, they succeeded in implanting anti-terrorist rhetoric and “anti-extremism” sentiment in the public discourse. Yet, despite this, Czech anarchists gained a lot of support from all around the world, which was very important for the people who were behind bars, isolated and charged with extremism.

One the most inspiring recent support campaigns was the defense of the J20 arrestees in the US, a case that ended in almost complete defeat for the state. We can see another inspiring example under much less favorable conditions in the campaign against the ongoing “Network” terrorist case in Russia, where defendants’ parents have created a “Parents’ Network” supporting their children and opposing the totalitarian regime.

Undertaking Movement Defense

Repression often imposes isolation and other hardships. Everyone is unique, but in general, those on the receiving end of repression need some of the same things: financial support, emotional support, support for the family and friends of defendants, secure or at least reliable channels of communication, publicity about the case, and—most importantly—continuing the struggle.

Different groups can play different roles in the fight against repression. There are groups that form in order to react when repression hits, such as the campaign to support the J20 defendants, or Solidarat Rebel, which spreads information about the Aachen bank robbing case, or the Antifenix initiative, which promotes analysis and resistance against Operation Fenix in the Czech Republic. These projects are very important in that they respond to an immediate and urgent need for support. There are also groups that maintain consistent long-term anti-repression organizing, such as the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC). The Anarchist Black Cross is an international network of anarchist groups engaged in practical solidarity with prisoners that is now a century old.

We can work to counter repression on several levels. We can raise awareness about the usefulness of security culture and the different tactics of repression so as to prepare for the inevitable response of the state to our efforts to create a better world. We can also build up material resources—raising money to pay legal fees and related expenses such as travel costs and to support prisoners during their sentences and when they are released. This can involve organizing fundraising events or seeking donations in other ways. Most importantly, we have to provide care and emotional support to the targets of oppression and to others who support them.

Finally, we can spread information about legal cases and prisoners and how to do support work through various media channels including websites, pamphlets, podcasts, books, speaking tours, and social networks both virtual and real. For example, this zine composed by various ABC groups around Europe introduces the basics of Anarchist Black Cross organizing.

We have to understand our efforts to support specific prisoners as part of a much broader struggle against prisons themselves. If we are already organizing in solidarity with prisoners in general, anarchist prisoners will be in a much better position. That means supporting prisoner organizing, sending reading material and resources to prisoners, acting in solidarity outside the prisons when prisoners revolt, and spreading a popular discourse that identifies what everyone stands to gain from dismantling the prison-industrial complex.

From a Week of Solidarity to Prison Abolition

Anarchists are fighting on the front lines of the struggle against prison society alongside other poor people, people of color, indigenous people, and everyone else who is targeted by the prison system worldwide.

The sixth annual week of solidarity with anarchist prisoners is one of many opportunities to connect all these different struggles, seeking to set an example of what long-term coordinated anti-repression work might look like. The date of the beginning of the week is the anniversary of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian-American anarchists, in 1927. They were convicted with very little evidence, punished above all for their anarchist views.

Anarchists are not always the chief targets of the state, which often prioritizes attacks on people of African heritage, migrants, Muslims, and other ethnic groups on the receiving end of colonial violence. Nevertheless, we are almost always somewhere on the list of targets because our values and our actions threaten the hegemony of the state. Prison is the glue that holds capitalism, patriarchy, and racism together. As we strive for a society based on cooperation, mutual aid, freedom, and equality, we inevitably come into conflict with the police and the prison system. Let's build a broad movement against them.

So long as there are prisons, the most courageous, sensitive, and beautiful among us will end up inside them, and the most courageous, sensitive, and beautiful parts of the rest of us will be inaccessible to us. Every one of us can become a prisoner. No one is truly free until all of us are free.

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