TEN LESSONS FROM THE CRIMINALIZATION OF DISSENT

BY CAMILO VIVEIROS
In the aftermath of the 2000 Republican National Convention, I was charged with multiple felonies and accused of assaulting several police officers, including Philadelphia Police Chief John Timoney. I approached my case with the attitude that the only way to stop the attempts to criminalize me and dissent in general was to organize more effectively than the forces of the state that wanted to shove me into prison. Largely due to successful organizing strategies and community solidarity, I was acquitted after three-and-a-half years. Today, we face similar challenges and must adopt similar strategies in fighting those who wish to put our comrades behind bars and criminalize our visions.

Right now, the state is sending a message to radical environmentalists around the country. It is using its power in an attempt to dismantle our networks and neutralize our militancy. How will we use our power and resources to oppose this force? How are we going to frame our message? What alliances will we build to support our imprisoned comrades? We can’t let intimidation and fear outweigh our commitment to solidarity. We need to challenge the armchair ‘radicals’ who rationalize the conviction of our comrades as an inevitable result of state repression. Our success in achieving social and environmental victories in this situation and all others depends upon the ability of passionate activists to gain the support of ordinary people.

**LESSON ONE**

**DO NOT FOCUS ON GUILT OR INNOCENCE**

It is not legally or politically useful to speculate about or emphasize the innocence of those arrested. Building your support efforts around innocence is like building a house out of a deck of cards. You don’t want support to vanish if convictions are handed down or if those being supported plead guilty.

**LESSON TWO**

**DON’T SPREAD FEAR AND PARANOIDIA**

Our security culture needs to be revamped, but we cannot let fear of repression or witch hunts inhibit underground work. Without much larger numbers of people participating in and supporting radical solutions to environmental and social problems, we will be easily contained and neutralized. Our own paranoia can close doors, and it feeds into the very marginalization that the state is trying to create.

This is not a new concern. Noted activist Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has said, ‘I remember in the 1960s when all the terrible things started to happen, like COINTELPRO, the movement became so shut down. Mistrust grew. People were reluctant to let anyone in. New people didn’t know how to join the movement; they were made to feel unwelcome. We have to build it to be stronger.’

**LESSON THREE**

**YOUR SUPPORT DOES MATTER**

It’s easy to feel that our actions will have no impact on the ultimate outcome of a trial, but this is not the case. The support that I received throughout the five-year period between my arrest and acquittal was essential to my own psychological wellbeing. Support groups can also aid with legal research, grassroots investigation and evidence gathering, which all help to strengthen a defense. Remember that the outreach we do for the defendant is crucial, since political trials are influenced by public sentiment. The judge in my case actually heard radio coverage of an event held by my supporters. The awareness that my supporters created diminished the power of my adversaries.

**LESSON FOUR**

**AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL**

The charges filed against individuals are meant to send a message to the rest of us. These cases are attempts to impede our collective ability to wage struggles against injustice. If we sit by and let repression build, it will weaken our ability to resist future persecution. We must set the course of history and prove that they can’t intimidate us. Together we are powerful. We must ask ourselves: Are we creating a culture of resistance that romanticizes action but shirks solidarity? Those who rejoiced when Vail burned must now defend those charged with that action and...
others like it. Some environmentalists and social justice activists are OK with the feds wanting blood from accused 'terrorists', forgetting that this blood will be used to smear any movement that becomes a threat. The feds will use any convictions they gain to justify increased political repression toward the rest of us.

**LESSON 7: EXPAND OUR BASE OF SUPPORT THROUGH NETWORKS OF SOLIDARITY**

Most people simply aren't interested in 'civil liberties' or 'the right to dissent'; let alone the right to break unjust laws or to challenge the assets of exploitative institutions. This does not mean that we shouldn't work to change the interests of the majority. But we should recognize that we can build broader support if we emphasize our tangible contributions to the community over our particular tactics.

This was the main thrust of the defense around my case. We highlighted the tangible contributions that I had made to the community and my ongoing commitment to organizing. Even if people did not believe that I was innocent, many supported me because they knew that the fight against landlords, as well as environmental and economic injustice, would be weakened by my absence. Because they believed that I was capable of addressing these issues. By illustrating why jail would deprive the community of a valuable and constructive person, we were able to steer the focus away from the legal questions and the terrain of the state. Instead, we showed how the government would waste resources by imprisoning those contributing to the social good.

Many community organizations are descended from historical movements that, at one point, were marginalized and criminalized by authorities. The suffrage movement, the slavery abolitionists, the labor movement, ethnic and immigrant struggles for justice, and even those seeking religious freedom all these movements have gone through times when they were painted as villains and violent troublemakers. We need to reach out to members of various organizations, and we must fight against political amnesia by reminding them of their past.

Our support work should also include a recognition of the repression faced by immigrants and people of color. We should build upon our common interest in eradicating and preventing the growth of the prison industrial complex. We should learn from the ways that restorative justice advocates have utilized economic issues as a way to reduce the popularity of expenditures for criminal injustice. We should highlight how more funding would be available for housing, health care and other services if the state were not squandering taxpayers' money to persecute and punish activists.

One more way to bridge this gap is to emphasize the ways that repression maintains systems of oppression and injustice. Our challenge is to foster principled alliances with others who share a common enemy, so that when we are under attack, others will come to our aid. Many marginalized seniors and tenants, who never would have gone to a political prisoner event, showed support for me because they related to the way I was criminalized by the police. I learned that we gain a much larger base of support when we highlight the role of repression in maintaining common systems of oppression.

But these alliances are strongest when they are well established. The day-to-day solidarity and organizing work that we engage in is a social insurance that can be harvested when under attack.

**LESSON 8: RACISM AND RESOURCES**

If we do not cite the ways that class and color affect our ability to get justice, then we perpetuate the myth that speakers 'truth to power' is enough. In reality, access to resources improves one's chances of countering the significant resources of the state.

We cannot expect to receive solidarity from oppressed communities if we don't acknowledge and ally ourselves with their historic and ongoing struggle against forces of criminalization. Ignoring or denying privilege and racism will only isolate us further and play into the state's caricature of the radical environmental movement as out of touch with the working class and communities of color.

In my case, I made it a point to acknowledge that the support and the resources that I received were helping me to fight injustice in a way that many could not. I spoke about the systemic injustice of the prison industrial complex: Many languish behind bars without support, lacking the resources to build their case, find witnesses and gather evidence. We should use our work against the repression of eco-activists to highlight these dynamics rather than obscure them.

**LESSON 9: STRATEGIC THINKING**

What does being strategic really mean? It means making a plan on how to achieve goals and monitoring your success along the way. It means learning from mistakes and thinking carefully about how to outwit and out-organize your enemy. Just as the forces of repression try to isolate us from our support, we need to isolate them from their own base. In my case, we discovered that John Timoney the cop who was changing me had worked with the British Army's efforts against the Irish Republican Army. We publicized this to the Irish Republican segments of the New York community including the police to divide Timoney from one of his bases of support. Through a combination of lobbying and disruptive tactics, we made Timoney unwelcome at police accountability conferences. By mobilizing community groups from multiple cities, we were even able to cost him his job as security consultant for the 2004 Democratic National Convention.

**LESSON 10: STOPPING NIGHTMARES AND FULFILLING VISIONS**

In Uruguay, organizations like the Plenario for Memory and Justice confront and expose torturers active in the CIA-backed dirty war. When these organizations talk about justice, they do not just mean figuring out what happened to their disappeared comrades. They are also working to fulfill their fallen comrades' visions of freedom and justice for everyone. We need to stay focused and continue the work of those who are under attack by the state.

Success in achieving justice for our comrades and realizing our radical visions is dependent not only on our willingness to put our booted on the line in direct action, but also on our ability to acknowledge that we can be crushed easily by the state unless we are constantly building and expanding our base of power.

Today's nightmare for our locked-up comrades should be our wake-up call to re-evaluate and reinvest in our strategies for bringing our visions to fruition. By building networks of solidarity, talking about the community work done by our comrades, making connections with the struggles of immigrants and people of color against the prison industrial complex, and organizing the unorganized, we will be better able to counter state repression and create the world we are striving toward. If we do not, the future for our comrades, ourselves and the Earth is bleak.