

On Darren Thurston's Statement, "Fired Back"

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It is never acceptable to give information about any other person without his or her express consent. It cannot be emphasized enough that informing to the government is always a serious matter, whether it is a question of a high profile defendant snitching on his comrades or an acquaintance of law-abiding activists answering a seemingly harmless question. The primary goal of the government in any political case is not to put any one defendant in prison but to obtain information with which to map radical communities, with the ultimate goal of repressing and controlling those communities. The most minor piece of trivia may serve to jeopardize a person's life, whether or not they have ever broken any law.

On December 21, Operation Backfire cooperating defendant Darren Thurston released a lengthy statement presenting the history of Operation Backfire as he sees it and laying out what he apparently considers to be extenuating circumstances connected to his decision to inform. He insists that he does not condone snitching, but claims that he didn't share any information that was harmful to others; unfortunately, as Thurston has chosen to withhold from the public both his plea agreement and the debrief documents that detail his cooperation with investigators, it's impossible to verify this claim.

In contrast, non-cooperating Operation Backfire defendants have made their plea agreements public in their entirety. Thurston explains that he has not done the same because in his case the materials "were not completely indicative of my cooperation and would be easily misunderstood by the majority of those who would hear about them," but as his cooperation is already a matter of intense controversy, it could hardly make matters worse for him to follow their example.

At the conclusion of his statement, Thurston offers "his closest comrades" a limited apology for his decision to inform, admitting it "set a bad example" but placing responsibility for his choice on others' shoulders: others cooperated first and made the case "unwinnable," the government divided communities by spreading rumors, activists abandoned and vilified the cooperating defendants before they'd even decided whether or not to cooperate, and so on. He also casts aspersions on non-cooperating defendants without ever specifying which ones he means, and on their legal support groups as well. If this is not a matter of passive-aggressive self-justification but of serious concerns about their conduct, he owes it to the activist community to be more explicit.

Thurston states that Operation Backfire defendants were facing “guaranteed life sentences” until they cooperated. In contrast to those who attribute the considerably shorter sentences the non-cooperating defendants received to the vigorous efforts of their defense teams, he credits his partner and fellow informant Chelsea Dawn Gerlach with helping to arrange merciful plea agreements for the non-cooperating defendants—an account that is sure to be controversial. He also mentions uncritically that by the time he and Gerlach were able to communicate after their arrests, she had already informed to the government not only about his involvement in the actions for which he was charged but also about a great deal of other illegal activity he had participated in.

No doubt Thurston experienced a more frightening period of months following his arrest than most of us can possibly imagine. But this alone cannot justify a decision to inform; the fact that other defendants did not do the same shows that other options were possible. In his statement, he talks about “healing our movements and making them stronger,” but that can only occur on the foundation of a commitment to unconditionally and transparently refusing to inform on each other; any supposed solidarity that does not proceed from this premise is a sham that will crumble beneath the first onslaught of government repression. Addressing the question of what constitutes acceptable conduct is not infighting and backstabbing, but an essential element of healing and strengthening our communities. As Thurston points out, we should not take the state at its word as to who is informing—but now that he has signed a sealed agreement to inform, the burden of proof is on him to show the limits of that informing. Those who read Thurston’s statement should not take his analysis—or any analysis, including this one—at face value, since the perspectives of everyone who comments on Operation Backfire are inevitably colored by their own motives; the question is which motives are most likely to facilitate a useful analysis.

Thurston is in a difficult place, but there is still much he can do to facilitate the healing and strengthening of which he speaks. He can start by disclosing the full texts of his plea agreement and cooperation debriefing, and accepting complete personal accountability for his decision to inform. The state can do anything to us—isolate us, threaten us with life sentences, even, in some extremes, turn our loved ones against us. The only thing it cannot take from us, upon which any anti-authoritarian struggle must be founded, is our determination to abide by our principles come what may, thus retaining our freedom and dignity. Individual heroics cannot win a revolutionary struggle—only supportive communities can do that; but we can only form such communities by personally standing by our commitments, regardless of what other individuals do.

We can commend Thurston for the actions he once took in defense of animals and the environment, but the most important round of struggle takes place not in the streets but in the interrogation chamber—it is there, when the commitments and trust that form its backbone are put to the ultimate test, that a struggle lives or dies. The courage of all who refuse to assist the state demonstrates that such a struggle can live—that, in fact, it *does live*.

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