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Interview with Mark Barnsley

Direkte Aktion

October 2003

You've been to prison two times. Both seem strange at first sight. How come a 19 year old anarchist is caught with plastic explosives? How did you get 8 years of prison for defending yourself, your friend and child against a mob of drunken highly aggressive students?

I was involved with the struggle from my earliest years. The 1960's and 1970's were very different times, the working class were far more powerful than they are today, the struggle was at a more intense level with people more willing to fight for a better world, and certainly in Britain there was talk of a right-wing backlash and even of a military coup. The politics of active armed struggle are now only advocated by a minority within the European Left and Anarchist movement, but in the 1970's things were different. If you got involved in the movement then you would come into contact with these ideas very quickly. I was involved in some very militant anti-fascist activity, and in many respects taking up the gun was a logical progression from that. Of course, with the hindsight of more than 25 years it's not hard to see our failings, but some comrades are, even

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now, still paying the price for the courage they showed then. I was never a vanguardist, I have always believed in the mass action of the organised working class, but there was a time when I was involved in the armed struggle.

Revolutionary solidarity should never be a stranger within our movement, today people risk their lives in Palestine by facing tanks and Israeli bullets as part of the ISM, in the 1970's we did things slightly differently. In 1978 I was 17, the Lebanese civil war was still raging, and the Israelis invaded the country that year. Together with other Anarchist comrades I decided to travel to Lebanon to show solidarity with the Palestinian and Lebanese anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggle. Two years later, a few weeks before my 19th birthday, I was arrested at Dover in England in possession of a small amount of plastic explosives, and as a result got my first prison sentence.

In the 1980's I was sent to prison twice again, though only for a few days, for refusing to pay fines in relation to minor political offences — in one case what I was sent to prison for was putting up a poster against busfare increases! And by coincidence the man who ordered this prosecution was David Blunkett, then leader of Sheffield City Council, and now British home secretary, a right-wing scumbag who still has an unquenchable thirst for locking-up working-class people.

What happened in 1994 was a little bit different to what had happened to me in the past. When I had been involved in the armed struggle, when I had been on picket lines and demonstrations, I'd viewed arrest as an occupational hazard, but when I went out on the afternoon of June 8th 1994, pushing my baby daughter in her pram, I never expected that it would lead to me going to prison for 8 years. I think the German revolutionary Bommi Baumann once said, "Illegality is like treading in dogshit, it can happen to anyone at any time." He was right. The British cops hated my guts, they'd been harassing me in Sheffield for years, and they were about to get an opportunity, however unlikely, to take me out of circulation for a long time.

You give the impression of an optimistic and powerful person. How did you manage to survive prison?

With a smile and a twinkle in my eye!

Seriously, while it's true I'm a survivor, I am often left in awe by the tales of fortitude of other people. Even in the face of the darkest repression, where brutality is at it's worst, and hope seems at a low point, people fight on with integrity and courage. It is this indomitable spirit of humanity, that I have seen on so many occasions first-hand, which I sincerely believe will eventually bring down this rotten system that makes prisoners of us all. It is this that keeps me optimistic.

What do you do now? How did you get along during your first year of "freedom"?

I organise as I have always done, I am as politically active as ever, in prisoner support work, as an anti-fascist, in environmental politics, in squatting, and in every area of struggle it is possible for me to be involved in. Despite what happened to me in 1994, and despite the police harassment I have suffered since my release, and continue to suffer, I will not for a moment turn away from the revolutionary path I embarked on as a child. Things have not been easy for me, far from it, day to day life has been a struggle, even with the help I've received from comrades, but if struggle was easy they wouldn't call it that would they? We're fighting for a whole world, our enemies aren't going to give it up easily, and they will fight dirty, we have to expect that, we have to remain strong. I think it was Alexander Berkman who once said, 'As Anarchists we do not look forward to a revolution in the future, but to a revolution from the moment we become Anarchists.' My revolution has thus far endured for nearly 30 years, and despite the worst efforts of the State to crush my resistance it only gets stronger. Continuing to take the fight to the Enemy, to struggle for a better world every day, is not just something I have always done, and will always do, but it is an act of vengeance against the State which stole 10 years of my life.

Basically, what happened is that myself and the friend who was with me, Jane Leathborough, decided to stop to have a drink outside a pub. Unfortunately though, we had picked the same pub as a gang of drunken middle-class louts, who first verbally abused us and then physically attacked me. I was hit over the head with a bottle or heavy glass, had my nose broken, my teeth knocked out, my ribs broken, I was kicked and punched by a large gang over a distance of several hundred metres, and was lucky to escape with my life. Several weapons were used by my attackers, and in the early stages of the assault one of them produced a knife and I was cut on the hand. To stop myself being killed I succeeded in gaining possession of the knife, and continued to try and get away, but because of the way they continued to throw themselves onto me, to kick and punch me, and knock me to the floor, it is certainly the case that some of the students were cut with the knife as well as possibly being injured with the other weapons they were carrying themselves. These louts were so drunk they didn't even realise they'd been injured until after they'd finally finished beating me up.

There were plenty of witnesses to the incident, even some of my assailants admitted attacking me, but nonetheless the only person arrested was me. I was taken to Woodseats police station in Sheffield, against which I'd previously brought civil proceedings for wrongful arrest and malicious prosecution. But the biggest surprise was yet to come, the man now in charge of this Sheffield police station was none other than the very same man who'd arrested me in Dover, on the Southern coast of England, in 1980 for possession of explosives, when he was then a Detective Inspector in the British Special Branch (Britain's political police.) I knew I could expect no favours.

After more than a year locked up in prison I came to trial charged with injuring 5 of the middle-class thugs who'd attacked me. The trial was a farce, the prosecution withheld huge amounts of evidence, my attackers and the cops lied through their teeth, the judge used every dirty trick he could think of. I

was convicted on 2 of the charges, and strangely of 3 lesser offences with which I wasn't even charged. Ordinarily, upon conviction you might expect probation or a relatively short prison sentence, with my political history I got 12 years.

You've been moved about 20 times during your 8 years penalty. Sound's like a lot of trouble and fights. What were the general points of conflict and what was the hardest one?

Prison states always try to isolate prisoners. In Britain we call it 'ghosting', the sudden transfer of a prisoner via the segregation unit. I was moved 22 times, from seg unit to seg unit, all around the country, to try and isolate me from my supporters, those outside prison and those within the prison system. It never worked, no matter where I was sent I still had support, comrades would visit me and organise protests where necessary, other prisoners would help me in whatever way that they could. Even from in solitary, I was able to organise actions and protests. Why did this happen? Prison systems are not run like liberal democracies they are run like fascist police states, they aim to crush any resistance or defiance swiftly and brutally, not just to punish the person who stands up to them, but to send a message to others: "Stand against us, and this is what will happen." That is why I thought it so important to continue to fight back, to subvert that message, and send in return a message to other prisoners that resistance will always endure, and that while solidarity exists no prisoner is ever alone. None of the time I spent in solitary was easy, often the conditions were absolutely brutal, and certainly challenging, but in the segregation unit I always felt very strong, because I knew that the Enemy could never stop me resisting, and that even if they beat me to death I would remain defiant to the end. Once you have seen the worst they can do to you, once you have endured that without breaking, you have triumphed, and they know that.

How did the British jail system change between 1994 and 2002 from your day-by-day perspective?

In 1994 there was an escape by IRA prisoners from the 'Special Secure Unit' of Whitemoor maximum security prison, and 6 months later another escape from Parkhurst maximum security prison on the Isle of Wight. The circumstances of these escapes, the ease with which they had happened, were a great embarrassment for the prison system, and this was the signal for a wave of repression to be unleashed. The changes implemented over the next few years were far-reaching and numerous, but among the most significant were the introduction of Mandatory Drug Testing and the so-called Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme. From late 1995 prisoners were forced to give urine samples for drug analysis, in this way a culture of cannabis use (which was largely tolerated or even encouraged) was replaced by greater heroin use, because cannabis stays in the body for up to 45 days whereas heroin can be flushed out in one or two. The 'Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme' is a 'divide and rule' system, a State-defined class system, which splits prisoners into one of 3 groups, according to their perceived "behaviour and overall compliance", and determines the "privileges" (visits, phonecalls, pay, time out of cell, conditions, etc) they are entitled to. Both of these schemes were an attempt to undermine inter-prisoner solidarity and replace it with a culture of selfishness. Other changes have included deliberately eroding the quality and quantity of visits, and harassing visitors, to undermine prisoner-family contact, reducing the statutory exercise period to only half an hour per day, savage cuts in education budgets, and greater exploitation of prison labour. Since 1994 the State have managed to reclaim almost all the concessions to humanity prisoners fought so hard to achieve in the previous 25 years, they have taken back control of the high security prisons where solidarity and prisoner autonomy was greatest, and having subjugated the mainstream prison population, they are now busy exploiting it as never before.