

Anti-Fascism and the Carceral State

feat. Lorenzo Ervin and JoNina Abron-Ervin

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin

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Kaif Syed: Welcome to Rustbelt Abolition Radio, my name is Kaif Syed. In this special bonus episode, we present a conversation between True Leap Press and Lorenzo Ervin and JoNina Abron-Ervin, recorded in Chicago earlier last month. Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin is an anarchist writer, organizer, and former political prisoner who came up through the Black Panther Party in the 1960's. Among other works, he is the author of the pamphlet "Anarchism and the Black Revolution", which introduces the principles of class struggle anarchism and discusses its relevance to the black liberation struggle. JoNina Abron-Ervin is a journalist, retired educator, and a former member of the Detroit chapter of the Black Panther Party. As a writer, teacher and organizer, she has helped organize numerous efforts over the course of decades, including the anti-apartheid movement and campaigns against police terror. She is the author of the book "Driven by Movement: Activists of the Black Power Era".

In this timely interview, Lorenzo and JoNina discuss the current anti-fascist movement, its limitations, and how it could evolve to challenge the carceral state, white supremacy, and capitalist exploitation more explicitly.

Interview Transcript

True Leap Press: What is fascism? How is it misunderstood by so many people who call themselves Leftists and radicals today?

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: People respond to fascism in a number of different ways. One is to say fascism is a mass revolutionary anti-democratic movement. That is part. You have these undemocratic forces which are in the streets, many of which are paramilitary. Then there is another type of definition: the creation of a new form of authoritarian governance, directed by corporations, or corporations united with the State. This is the whole idea of "corporate State." The definition that Mussolini himself gave was actually referring to a fascist syndicalism—the idea of uniting the workers with corporations, and under the control of the owners of corporations. But then there is the issue of all power to the State.... and the idea of the leader. "Führer" in Germany, or "Il Duce" in Italy. That's part of it as well. There is not one definition. It actually depends on the country. One is the form of governance that's already in place in a country; the idea that a dictatorial leader can take over a country that had previously been a so-called democratic regime. We are also talking about the economic form of fascism. So...we got a number of different aspects of fascism, which doesn't lend itself to a universal definition. A lot of times people point to aspects of fascism like hyper-nationalism, leadership and party dictatorship, corporatism, or racism. Well, the thing is many countries have these features and they are not fascist regimes. Every authoritarian regime is not a fascist regime. In point of fact, it relates to the form of state and the economic structure. That's why I said we're talking about a new type of authoritarian governance ran by corporations. This is what we need to understand in America. That this is not the same thing we saw in Italy. It's a new form. The fascists have been elected. The fascists and crypto-fascists have been elected. And the government we have now is actually a United Front of different fascist tendencies. The Tea Party, the Christian Right, the various other groups within the Republican Party and outside the Republican Party, along with elements that are on Wallstreet, financing them.

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: So fascism is a complicated, tortured process of definition. But we do know what it is not. It's not just a bunch of street punks alone who have no political

power. And that somehow they are the most dangerous element which produces fascism. That's what's captivated the Left at this point. The whole idea of battling right-wing tendencies in the streets. These "anti-fascists" are confused. But not only are they confused, they are being led by a type of romanticism and infantile Leftism that prevents them from being effective. There are really dangerous types of fascism that the State is capable of. It is the State that we have to fear. Whether its led by Donald Trump or whomever it's led by. The State has been doing things to ensure that whenever the dictator got here, as the final solution, they'd have an easy time getting in, and doing what he or she needs to do. From that standpoint, I think fascism has different types of definitions wrapped into one, but also different kinds of contradictions. That's why it's so elusive. One thing we can say, to be sure, is that it comes from the State and capital, it does not come from street punks. We're talking about a kind of vanguard versus vanguardism here, that has nothing to do with fighting fascism, whatsoever really. Or fighting racism for that matter. They're not trying to end white supremacy. They're trying to present themselves in contrast to certain forces, you know. Those forces are allegedly the evil ones and therefore they are able to project themselves as the "good" white folks, versus the you know "evil," or the dangerous, treacherous white folks. Something like that. You know. It's just um... fanciful... it doesn't do anything about racism. Whatsoever. It doesn't protect peoples of color. Or communities of color. Doesn't do any of that.

True Leap Press: What does a community-based anti-fascist movement look like?

JoNina Abron-Ervin: Well if it's gonna be community-based. It has to deal with the impact of State authoritarianism on people's everyday lives. It can't be centered around just going out on a particular day to counter-demonstrate against the neo-Nazi's or the Klan. I'm not saying that that's not important. This is an important thing to do. But that is just sort of an episodic and event-based thing. You have to have an ongoing program to deal with the impact of this kind of authoritarian control over people's lives, and in terms of police terror and State repression. We even have to look at the issues that have to deal with people's every day survival; their ability to have a place to live, their ability to buy food.... what we call the "survival issues." For instance, it had not necessarily begun in any really major way yet, but elements of the neo-fascist Trump regime have already said they want to eliminate social security. Okay, now, many people will say "social security? that doesn't have anything to do with fascism!" Well... if the State prevents people from being able to have income, to support themselves, for their housing, for their food, clothing, and other things, that's definitely a form of State terror. People have to survive on a day-to-day basis. So if you are going to build a community-based movement, you're gonna have to have a movement that deals with bread-and-butter survival issues. Everybody has to have a place to live, food, clothing, and shelter. And if you are not dealing with those issues then it's not going to be community-based. Because for people in the community these are the things they can relate to. It's not so isolated as going out to confront the Klan in a demonstration or a protest. You are talking about the everyday things that people need to survive. The point I'm making is that community based has to deal with people's everyday concrete material needs, and it has to organize around those needs.

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: And we have to understand that fascism is longstanding. It isn't just coming at a certain moment and it's here. There has been a long-term crisis which the fascist regime has brought on. I can mention to you mass imprisonment: millions of people are already in concentration camps. This thing about "well he's gonna build concentration camps..." He doesn't have to! He's already got the biggest prison establishment in the world, created by previous

American administrations. Whether it was the so-called liberal Obama administration or the administration we have now. It's been a longstanding creation. From the "war on drugs," which in itself was a program designed to create police militarism and mass imprisonment. You have that. And police killings. All the police killings. These are as a result of programs that the government created to produce a sense of crisis. It is also chemical warfare. Drugs, as a weapon of chemical warfare, and the ability of the police to come along and supposedly suppress it. Kicking people's doors in in the middle of the night. Shooting people on the street. All these things have been enabled by a fascist regime coming into existence. We have to fight the government. It's the government who is the arch enemy and the purveyor of fascism. If we don't understand that and we think the real enemy is some punks in three-piece suits or polo shirts and so forth.... if we think they are the enemy or the real ones to be feared, we are going in the wrong direction. It's no question they can be used at a later stage by a Trump or whoever the president is. Whoever the head of the so-called Party is will be able to use these forces. But you know, at this stage we need to understand who the real enemy is and we need a way to fight back against the conditions that they are imposing on the people. We need a fight back movement.

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: We need a movement based in ordinary people, not in these people who consider themselves some kind of vanguard element. I reject vanguardism of this sort or any type. And I think it's necessary to build a broader-based antifascist movement, so that this movement can address the needs of the people; a movement of a new type. If anyone is going to be armed, and that time is fast approaching as well, it would be the people at large, as opposed to some kind of vanguard tendency or some hyper-macho tendency that is going out and fist fighting in the street, you know.... anti-Nazi sucker punch or something [laughter]. We need more than that.

True Leap Press: Lorenzo, you use the term "Progressive Plantation" to describe the counter-revolutionary nature of the current, white-dominated progressive movement in North America. Why is it so important to understand how this regime operates? Why is it so important to expose it?

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: I use the term to demystify and delegitimize the white Left, which is really only concerned with its own issues. It's not concerned with killings by the police, of blacks and other peoples of color. They haven't been leading any movement about that and they haven't really been joining any movement around that. We talk about mass imprisonment. The huge numbers of black people and other peoples of color that are going into the prison system. There has yet to be a mass movement against the targeted imprisonment of Black people and other peoples of color. We talk about all kinds of other attacks upon the communities, whether its conscious deprivation of the resources needed for our communities to survive. Poverty in other words. Austerity imposed poverty. These people don't fight that either. They are strictly concerned with the macho attacks on each other. Attacking a Nazi, punching him in the face. Sucker punch [laughter]. This is all they care about. It's infantile. And I even think its ineffective anyway. But it's just a reflection of the weakness and the paucity of an ideological understanding of the enemy. You know, they really are just fixated on physical confrontation. Neither one of us is saying that this is not important, but that it cannot be the totality of your program. You got to be able to relate to oppressed people. Blacks and other peoples of color are oppressed people. At the most, you could say the white working class is exploited peoples. There's a difference. This country was based upon slavery and was based upon genocide and terror that empowered white people to build the United States of America. The land thefts from Indigenous people, and

later the Mexicano people. All of these things went into building this imperial empire. If you are not fixated on anti-imperialist objectives then you clearly are just a passing trend; a white led movement for ego gratification or something.

JoNina Abron-Ervin: Within the white Left, in the United States anyway, there is a certain level of paternalism. Some on the white left—not saying all, but some—do have a paternalistic attitude, like they have to come in and save people of color. For some it's kind of like a missionary type of attitude. And again, I want to be clear I'm not saying it's true for all white radicals. But I have seen this kind of attitude in a fair number of them. As if people of color themselves do not have the strength or the ability and knowledge to be able to organize and fight for themselves. Its always going to be important for oppressed peoples to have autonomy and independence. We work with white radicals or other progressive whites on the left maybe, but peoples of color who are oppressed . . . we have the right to organize ourselves, to control our own struggles and our own liberation. We don't need people to come in and sort of tell us how to do it, and what to do. We know what needs to be done. We may need your help with resources and things. But we are , on whatever level, everyday experiencing these issues. So, there's that part of it: this sort of paternalistic part on behalf of some white radicals. The other problem is that what's really been missing in recent years is that lack of effort and seriousness of most white radicals in terms of dealing with racism and white supremacy within the white working class. Who is gonna organize the white working class? To make them into revolutionaries. Clearly people of color that is not our responsibility. We cannot do it. We're too busy dealing with the stuff in our own communities. It is ultimately the primary responsibility of whites that say they're revolutionary forces to go in and begin transforming the white working class. Yet too many white radicals are unwilling to do this. They only want their work to be centered among peoples of color. And this is a big part of the problem; why we haven't made the type of progress we should be making in this country. Because no one on a serious level, in a really intense way is really trying to revolutionize white working class in American. And unless we do that, we're ultimately going to fail. We're not going to be able to transform this society the way it needs to be transformed.

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: We're talking about a kind of lack of real consciousness not only about racism, but about the foundations in this country and about how this system really works. I've always said and tried to make people understand that this is a white republic that was created from slave labor—the conditions of slavery as a pedestal for the creation of American capitalism. And most so-called white radicals denounce that. Even though that doesn't come from me.... that comes from Marx! [laughter] That comes from Karl Marx himself. It's quite interesting. This kind of thinking, of not understanding how this country was created and how it actually functions means that the movement will always make these kinds of ideological errors. Where they see things from the perspective of a white petty bourgeois perspective. This will always happen until they understand what's really happened. I mean people are being killed in this country. People are being tortured in prison. And all they can tell us is about some Nazi on the street. Nazi's have to be stopped, yes. But we need to understand that the greatest threat of fascism is State power. Fascism is a decayed capitalist system. And if we understand that—understand that these people in the streets aren't linked to that yet, but are creations of that.... that's why Trump was able to use them... use their misery, use their unemployment, use their racism. And if we don't understand this you can't ideologically defeat them. You got to understand we have to combat the government itself. The fascist State.

True Leap Press: What are some of the first steps you would like to see organizers in oppressed Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities take in the process of building a mass anti-fascist movement today? What are some steps we as listeners and learners can make toward achieving the type of movement you are imagining?

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: Well, in actual fact, people are organizing now. It's not like they're not. Even though I have some differences of opinion with Black Lives Matters type groups, the fact that it came into existence and have been organizing during this period is important. But they need to take it to another level. We're saying that organizers and activists have to rethink tactically, and understand that community-based organizing where they politically educate the people in their communities is the key. We're telling people who are already doing this work to take a different approach and think about this system in terms of being fascism. Take police killings for instance. Police killings are in fact fascism. Especially when they are systematic police killings, where we've had essentially hundreds of thousands over the last few decades. We've had hundreds of thousands of people killed. And more killed by the United States in military conflict abroad. So we need to understand this as being a question of confronting the State. This rethinking is about that. We're asking organizers to begin to rethink. To understand that it is time to build a broader level of organization. Not just in the streets or a one-off protest. But to reach people on the everyday level and train them, so that they can then go and tell other people, and build organizations on a local level. It may just be block by block. We don't know. We've seen these things happen in the past. But they haven't been seen in this period. Therefore, we have to adopt new tactics. That's one of the things I would say.

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: Other thing is to bring together these movements, these different forces. Bring together the movement against police terrorism with the movement against mass imprisonment. Bring together all kinds of forces, including whatever is happening in particular communities. These fronts will differ from region to region, city to city, but whatever those contradictions are, whatever they're organizing around.... you even got some churches that could be used! You got radical preachers, or whatever.

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: I think that's important to emphasize: the idea of community-based organizing is to reach masses of people, who you can educate and bring into the struggle. If you got in your whole movement 5,000 people, well then the objective is to bring in 50,000. And have those numbers and go out in the community and politically educate them. So that's what we need to do. We need to escalate our level of organizing and understanding as well. And we need to learn. From movements in the past like the Black Panther Party. They practiced and created a whole movement of Black anti-fascism—or black-led anti-fascism. The actual conditions and the poverty of the masses of people requires us to organize a movement for food and housing, movements against imprisonment, and within the communities where so many go into prison create programs to reunite them, to offer transportation, and so forth. These are the kinds of programs we need to think about in this period. But on a broader scale. I even think we need to think about a poor people's survival movement. Or a "survival economy," if you want to call it that. This is something comrade George Jackson talks about in *Blood in My Eye* (1971). He talked about building these kinds of environments within a city that could feed people, and politically educate people, etc. He was of course basing this on the history of the Black Panther Party, and he saw it as a longer-term kind of thing. The creation of a resistance economy and a resistance movement that wasn't just armed self-defense, but about feeding people, housing, clothing you know. Those things that keep people going, as well as their own organizers.

JoNina Abron-Ervin: And one of the things that really has to be done, especially right now, is we have to fight against this whole notion that we can use electoral politics. If we are going to build revolutionary organizers, create the conditions for revolutionary community organizing, we're going to have to reject this whole notion. And that's gonna be a big battle.

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: That's right. [Lorenzo agreeing in background]

JoNina Abron-Ervin: A lot of people are gonna be saying "you have to vote." Well, you don't have to vote if the people who are running for office are not going to change the conditions in your community. Why do you have to vote for them? You do not have to vote for them. You could get your community to have its own community elections, where you choose people within your own community outside of the Democratic or Republican Party to be accountable to the people, to deal with the issues in your community. I see this as being a really key thing. There is too much focus on electoral politics right now. Until we get past it we're not going to be successful.

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: We need to create alternatives. We need to create people's assemblies that are independent and autonomous of all this garbage. And by doing this we can reach people and educate, organize, and put them in opposition to the government, the State. We should be fighting for dual power. We need to build a mass movement to free political prisoners, end mass imprisonment, especially among communities of color. We need to combat State violence from police and vigilantes, fight austerity and poverty imposed by the government. We need to defeat fascists in the streets and in the government and corporate suites. Start survival campaigns that begin to build a new economy to soften the blow of the collapse of this system, which is coming. We also need to build a black partisan/worker's militia. I'm not saying it will be done tomorrow or it should be done tomorrow, but we need to be doing these things if we are gonna go from oppression to liberation. I guess the main thing we can say is that we have to build an ant-fascist movement that is a movement fighting for revolution. For social revolution. If it's not ready to do that then it is just a defensive organization, which will be defeated in due time.

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