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What's Missing Is Solidarity

The Decline of Resistance from the Red Scare to
the War on Terror

Peter Gelderloos

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August 23, 1927. Sacco and Vanzetti, two anarchists accused and convicted of a double murder in the course of an armed robbery, are sent to the electric chair. Ten thousand mourners come to pay their last respects, twenty thousand take to the Boston Common in protest, and many thousands more march in the streets or attack US embassies and banks around the world to honor their passing.

Historian Paul Avrich convincingly argued that the two were innocent of the robbery and murders, and were the victims of a judicial lynching. The evidence was spotty, the media convicted them in advance, and the judge didn't even hide his political vendetta against the two.

On the other hand, Sacco and Vanzetti were probably engaged in other highly illegal activities, as participants in a tense and bloody workers' struggle. And it's beyond dispute that the two of them, from prison, continued to call for revolution against capitalism, and for vengeance against their executioners.

The most remarkable aspect of the whole affair is how much public support they received, not only on the streets, but from internationally renowned political figures and intellectuals. People like John Dos Passos, George Bernard Shaw, Dorothy Parker, H.G. Wells, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Albert Einstein wrote letters and protested in their defense. In today's political climate, no one who cared about their social status would be caught dead speaking out in favor of a political criminal who espoused fiery and radical ideas.

The War on Terror is even more replete with frame-ups and judicial lynchings than the Red Scare, although life imprisonment and solitary confinement, arguably far more cruel than capital punishment, have come to replace the electric chair.

The main targets of this War are Muslims and Middle Eastern or South Asian immigrants, radical environmentalists, and anarchists. In one sense, not so much has changed, as immigrants also bore the brunt of the Red Scare. The resounding difference is the general silence outside the most directly affected communities.

How many people today even know the names of Tarek Mehanna, Marie Mason, and Eric McDavid?

In a massive campaign of racial profiling after September 11th, 2001, the FBI visited and questioned people in every single Muslim and Middle Eastern or South Asian immigrant community in the country. Afraid of groups they saw as not culturally integrated, they pressured thousands of people into becoming informants for them, repeating the COINTELPRO tactic that helped destroy resistance in black communities in the '60s and '70s. An unknown number of Muslims have been disappeared to secret prisons in other countries, separated from their children, and tortured over the course of years. Some are unaccounted for and may have been killed.

Tarek Mehanna is a 27 year old Muslim Egyptian born in the US, with a doctorate from the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy. He is respected both in the local Muslim and interfaith

wards, ignorant of, or even hostile to those who have put themselves on the line and suffered the consequences for following their conscience and not selling out to the various forces that have pacified resistance, from the FBI strong-arming people into becoming snitches to the NGOs persuading people to be pragmatic while paying their pricey rent through the perpetual management of these social problems.

We can break out of this isolation by choosing now to build a spirit of solidarity and a practice of common resistance against the War on Terror. An attack on one of us really is an attack on all of us, and all these judicial frame-ups are nothing but political repression.

Supporting our prisoners means defeating their attempts to terrify us, insisting on the dignity of our causes, and building communities in which we really do take care of one another, no matter what powerful interests we may be contradicting. Under capitalism, all true community is subversive.

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In all of these cases, despite the extremely abusive nature of the prosecution and the way the defendants were treated, and despite the threat these political maneuvers by the FBI represent to all of us, awareness about these cases and support for the defendants has generally remained within their own communities. Few other people know about them, and many of those who do remain silent. The executive board of the IWW, the famed wobblies of American labor history, even denounced Marie Mason after she admitted to participation in the acts of eco-sabotage.

Clearly, radical movements today are much weaker than they were in the days of Sacco and Vanzetti. But at least a part of that is our own choosing. Nowadays politically active people show a much greater sensitivity to the timeless smear campaigns of the media than they did in the past. Once upon a time everyone knew the newspapers belonged to the bosses, and their headlines were just the police truncheon in a new form. These days people are often afraid to be associated with anyone branded as “radical.” Some folks even give credence to the term “terrorist,” or to the accusations of FBI agents, even though the Bureau is composed of the same mix of liars, torturers, racists, homophobes, murderers and snitches as in the days of J. Edgar Hoover.

People continue to donate to NGOs that are already rolling in dough, and that have long since been shown to form a non-profit industrial complex that opts for careers over real change, but they won't have anything to do with the support committees for prisoners like these.

What all this represents, far deeper than a general climate of fear, is an alienation of resistance itself, from a broad and multiform but nonetheless connected movement or struggle into a menagerie of isolated single-issues, each with their resident specialists and careerists. And the sites of struggle themselves have been split to such an extent that someone can “care about the issues” or “be informed” while being entirely apathetic to

communities, which may explain why the FBI was so interested in turning him into a snitch. They began visiting him several years before his first arrest, trying to recruit him as a paid informant, which would involve giving fill-in-the-blank testimony for the feds against other people in his community. As he consistently refused, the FBI became more and more threatening.

In 2008 they seized the opportunity to arrest him on a technicality, indicting him for making false statements during an earlier interrogation in 2006, concerning the whereabouts of a friend of his.

Mehanna was released, but then rearrested in October, 2009, amid a wave of Terror arrests carried out in the first year of the Obama administration, at a time when the new president needed to demonstrate his toughness. No new evidence was presented for the second arrest, except for the testimony of another member of the Muslim community, who had rolled over and agreed to work for the FBI after being bribed with a reduced prison sentence, doing exactly the kind of dirty work Mehanna refused.

With the second arrest, the media hyped any story the FBI fed them, perfectly comfortable with the Bureau's long track record of manufacturing evidence and using the press to spread disinformation. In no time, Tarek Mehanna was turned from a tolerant Muslim into a “fanatic” who was plotting to go on a shooting rampage in a shopping mall (that most sacred of American temples), to kill US officials, and to join terrorist training camps along with a friend (or rather, “co-conspirator”). For lack of evidence, the FBI story had to concede that the pair did not actually succeed in making contact with any training camps, but this did not at all diminish their concocted image as dangerous terrorists. An article in Time even made a big deal out of repeating the rumour that at his first court appearance, Mehanna wore all black and acted rudely. Oddly enough, none of these accusations of concrete

terror plots actually appear in any of the indictments filed against Mehanna, according to his supporters.

Nonetheless, Tarek is currently being held in solitary confinement and charged with aiding and abetting terrorism, which could come with a prison sentence of life plus 75 years.

Marie Mason is a 46 year old mother of two, a member of Earth First! and the IWW, a gardener, musician, and community organizer who worked as an extended care assistant at a Cincinnati school at the time of her arrest in March, 2008. After it came to light that her former husband was working as an FBI informant, Marie pled guilty to two politically motivated acts of property destruction, against a genetic research laboratory at Michigan State University in December, 1999, and against logging equipment in Mesick, Michigan, in January 2000. Both actions were claimed by the Earth Liberation Front, which the FBI identified as the number one domestic terrorism threat after September 11th, even though no one had ever been harmed in any ELF action.

Marie Mason's arrest came as part of the Green Scare, the targeting of environmental activists that has put over a dozen people in prison for political acts of property destruction. During the Green Scare, the FBI has made frequent use of grand juries to force activists and independent media workers to snitch on their friends or give information on political protests. Those who have refused have been jailed for up to a year.

In 2009, Marie Mason was sentenced to 22 years in prison. Recently, she was transferred to FMC Carswell in Fort Worth, Texas. Carswell is believed to be the location of a third Communication Management Unit (CMU). The CMU is an even more extreme form of isolation, another of the gruesome artefacts developed for the War on Terror. Prisoners held in the CMU are closely monitored and their contact with the outside world is strictly limited. They are only allowed one fifteen minute phone call per week, only four hours of visitation, behind glass, per month, and all correspondence and conversations have to

be in English, which is especially cruel for the majority of CMU inmates who are Muslim immigrants. In fact, one of the few CMU inmates who is not a Muslim is Daniel McGowan, another prisoner of the Green Scare.

Eric McDavid was presented as a dangerous terrorist upon his arrest, but as the details of his case emerged it became increasingly apparent that the bombing plot for which he was convicted was the fabrication of a paid FBI informant who was hired to infiltrate the US anarchist movement. The informant, known as "Anna," went to various anarchist gatherings around the country and found three other young people whom she pressured into forming a group with her. Over the course of a year and a half, Anna was paid \$65,000 to manipulate and bully Eric and the two others into discussing potentially illegal political acts with her. She concocted a plan, fed to her by the FBI, to build a bomb, and used various forms of pressure, including sexual and romantic, to keep the group together. When finally the three had reached a point where they wanted out, the FBI sprang its trap before its entire conspiracy fell apart. They arrested Eric, along with Zachary Jenson and Lauren Weiner, in January 2006. Despite having no criminal record, Eric was denied bail and kept in solitary confinement for nearly two years until trial. In the meantime, Zachary and Lauren, who had very limited experience with political activism and were being threatened with decades in prison, snapped and agreed to testify against Eric in exchange for lighter sentences.

Only Eric refused to lie or snitch, and in 2007 he was convicted in a trial rife with misinformation provided by the FBI. Before jury deliberations the judge gave improper instructions that seriously hampered Eric's entrapment defense. Subsequent to the trial, after they had gotten all the facts two of the jurors even denounced FBI misconduct and stated Eric should get a new trial. The judge sentenced Eric to 20 years in prison.