

Political Prisoners In America

By Stephen Lendman

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Noted journalist HL Menchen described "The most dangerous man to any government (as someone) who is able to think things out for himself, without regard to the prevailing superstitions and taboos. Almost inevitably he comes to the conclusion that the government he lives under is dishonest, insane, and intolerable," yet resisting, he faces recrimination - political imprisonment for his beliefs and activism, officials tolerating no opposition to their authority, no matter how extreme or lawless.

In his book "Race to Incarcerate," Marc Mauer focuses on America's obsession with imprisonment, punishment, and the commodification of prisoners to fill beds - harming society's most vulnerable, targeted for supporting ethnic justice, racial emancipation, and political, economic and social equality across gender and color lines, locked away in the "Land of the Free." In submitting a new report to the UN, National conference of Black Lawyers activist/attorney Stan Willis said:

"The United States is very, very concerned when its citizens begin to raise questions in these international forums, because (America) still prefers to posture itself, including the Obama administration, as the leader of the free world and that they don't have any human rights violations, and they certainly don't have any political prisoners, and we have to dispel that notion in the international community."

American officials don't "want to have these issues reach the world's people. How do you go into Iraq (and) Afghanistan telling people about their democracy when (you've got innocent people) locked down in prison for 30 - 40 years as political prisoners....(activists) against social injustice, colonialism, and/or imperialism, (incarcerated for) their political commitments."

Others are victimized by judicial unfairness, get tough on crime policies, a guilty unless proved innocent mentality, three strikes and you're out, and what the Innocence Project calls "McJustice - the crisis of indigent defense."

Also for being undocumented, violating the racist drug laws, for being Black, Latino or Muslim, to fill prison beds, to satisfy the prison-industrial complex, one of America's fastest growing, including a private gulag, prisons for profit, nearly a score of corporations running dozens of facilities with tens of thousands of prisoners, about 8% of state and federal inmates, expected to increase exponentially in the next decade, the Wall Street Journal saying:

"This multimillion-dollar industry has its own advertising campaigns, architecture companies, construction companies, investment houses on Wall Street, plumbing supply companies, food supply companies, armed security, and padded cells in a large variety of colors."

Over 2.4 million prisoners are held in federal and state facilities, local jails, Indian, juvenile, and military ones, US territories, and numbers held by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), half for nonviolent offenses, many for political activism, the Truth & Justice Foundation (the National Innocence Project) estimating up to 15% wrongfully convicted overall.

Using modern-day slave labor, the Left Business Observer reports that American prisons produce 100% of US military helmets, ammunition belts, bullet-proof vests, ID tags, shirts, pants, tents, bags, and canteens." They also supply 98% of equipment assembly services, 93% of paints and paintbrushes, 92% of stove assemblies, 46% of body armor, 36% of home appliances, 30% of headphones, microphones and speakers, 21% of office furniture, and much more.

Captives in America's gulag, political and other prisoners have languished for decades, under cruel and inhumane conditions. Some die there. Others rot, endure years of solitary confinement, poor medical care, other forms of abuse, and perfunctory parole hearings denying their right to justice.

America's Longstanding Political Repression Agenda

COINTELPRO targeted political activists, J. Edgar Hoover's illegal counterintelligence program to neutralize political dissidents, including communists; anti-war, human and civil rights activists; the American Indian Movement; Black Panther Party; Puerto Rican nationalists; the Chicano Movement; environmentalists, and others challenging state authority - "threats" to "domestic tranquility" for supporting equity and justice, the rule of law, and right over wrong. Today they're called "terrorists."

Yale Law Professor/constitutional scholar Thomas I. Emerson (1908 - 1981) expressed outrage saying:

"The FBI jeopardizes the whole system of free expression which is the cornerstone of our society (raising) the specter of a police state....In essence, the FBI conceives of itself as an instrument to prevent radical social change in America....The Bureau's view of its function leads it beyond data collection into political warfare," protecting privilege from beneficial social change, denying due process and judicial fairness to society's most vulnerable, easy pickings for America's criminal injustice system.

Definitions of Political Prisoners

The Free Dictionary call them people "who have been imprisoned for holding or advocating dissenting political views....for holding, expressing, or acting in accord with particular political beliefs."

In the 1960s, Amnesty International (AI) coined the term "prisoner of conscience," referring to anyone incarcerated for their race, religion, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, beliefs, or lifestyle.

In a London Observer May 28, 1961 article titled, "The Forgotten Prisoners," AI's founder Peter Benenson (1921 - 2005) defined the term as follows:

"Any person who is physically restrained (in prison or otherwise) for expressing any opinion which he honestly holds and which does not advocate or condone personal violence."

"Open your newspaper any day of the week and you will find a report from somewhere in the world of someone being imprisoned, tortured or executed because his opinions or religion are unacceptable to his government." Millions are affected globally - "by no means (all) behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains, and their numbers are growing."

"That is why we have started Appeal for Amnesty (AI), 1961. The campaign, which opens today, is the result of an initiative by a group of lawyers, writers and publishers in London, who share the underlying conviction expressed by Voltaire: 'I detest your views, but am prepared to die for your right to express them.' "

Howard Zinn called dissent "the highest form of patriotism. In fact, if patriotism means being true to the principles for which your country is supposed to stand, then certainly the right to dissent is one of those principles. And if we're exercising that right to dissent, it's a patriotic act....One of the great mistakes (about) patriotism....is to think (it) means support for your government....(ignoring America's Declaration of Independence principle that) when governments have become destructive (of life, liberty and equality) it is the right of the people....to alter or abolish" it.

Incarceration as an Instrument of Social Control

In her 1999 article titled, "Prisons, Social Control and Political Prisoners," former political prisoner Marilyn Buck called prisons warehouses to "disappear the unacceptable....to deprive their captives of their liberties, their human agency, and to punish....(to) stigmatize prisoners through moralistic denunciations and indictment based on bad genes - skin color (ethnicity, or other characteristics) as a crime."

Millions of prisoners aren't incarcerated "because they are 'criminal,' but because they've been accused of breaking (a law) designed to exert tighter social control and State repression," scapegoating, demonizing, and criminalizing them for their beliefs and activism.

America's militarized police state brutalizes them, locking them in cages for advocating peace, not war, for their courage to resist injustice, defend freedom, equality, and human rights, and believe another world isn't just possible but struggling for it nonviolently is noble and needed.

In a 1986 *Quinn v. Robinson* ruling, the US Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit differentiated between political and other crimes, saying:

"It is the fact that the insurgents are seeking to change their governments that makes the political offense exception applicable, not the reasons for wishing to do so or the nature of the acts by which they hope to accomplish that goal."

In other words, advocating beneficial social or political change is criminal, turning justice on its head, the same kind that imprisons lawyers for defending unpopular clients to intimidate others not to try.

In the Vol. 18, 2002 *Harvard BlackLetter Law Journal*, J. Soffiyah Elijah headlined, "The Reality of Political Prisoners in the United States: What September 11 Taught Us About Defending Them," saying:

In a post-9/11 climate, they "and their lawyers have been targeted for renewed abuse," constitutional protections not shielding against spurious charges, corrupt prosecutors, hanging judges, and long imprisonments, many under extremely harsh conditions, including long-term isolation, over time producing severe anxiety, panic attacks, irrational anger, social withdrawal, and a profound sense of hopelessness and despair, for many a totally dysfunctional state and inability ever to live normally outside of confinement.

Always unfair, American justice is now worse than ever, unjustly affecting undocumented immigrants, Blacks and Latinos, anyone of color, Muslims for their faith, ethnicity, activism and prominence, and those challenging state authority, its imperial marauding, and sweeping homeland repression, turning America into a police state.

Activists were always targeted, noted civil liberties writer Stephen Kohn documenting nearly 1,000 cases in his 1994 book titled, "American Political Prisoners: Prosecutions Under the

Espionage and Sedition Acts." Today, it's under the 1996 Effective Death Penalty and Anti-Terrorism Act, and post-9/11 ones, including:

-- the 2001 USA Patriot Act, eroding Fifth and Fourteenth Amendment due process rights; First Amendment free expression and association ones; and Fourth Amendment freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures, enabling vast extralegal surveillance powers to destroy the right of privacy;

-- the 2001 Military Order Number 1, letting the president usurp authority to capture, kidnap, arrest and torture accused terrorists, holding them indefinitely without charge; trying them in Military Commissions with no right of appeal; denying them due process and judicial fairness;

-- the 2002 Homeland Security Act, a sweeping anti-terrorism bill creating a national Gestapo, centralizing unprecedented military and law enforcement power in the executive branch, enhanced by US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), established in 2002 to militarize the homeland, Canada, Mexico, Gulf of Mexico, Straits of Florida, and, for the first time, let troops deploy on US streets to protect "national security," and

-- other repressive laws, Executive Orders, National and Homeland Security Presidential Directives, and other measures targeting anyone threatening state authority by any means, including those advocating nonviolent political or social change.

Using previously unavailable FBI, Bureau of Prisons and other DOJ divisions files, Kohn covered earlier cases, including activists for "blowing the whistle" on WW I participation, unionists fighting for worker rights, pacifists, socialists, and others for having unpopular political or religious beliefs.

In three parts, he chronicled the history and use of the law to imprison anyone for their political or religious views, described prison life in their own words, and covered hundreds of people affected, discussing their beliefs, length of imprisonment, and treatment.

Earlier through today, they've been targeted, hunted down, rounded up, held in detention, kept in isolation, denied bail, restricted in their right to counsel, provided the "McJustice" kind, tried

on secret evidence, convicted on spurious charges, given long sentences, then incarcerated and abused in America's gulag, its hell, for Dante its entrance inscription saying "Abandon hope all ye who enter here," the fate of many locked away in the "land of the free."

A Final Note

On July 15, political prisoner Marilyn Buck was released from the federal prison medical center in Carswell, TX and paroled to New York. Three weeks later on August 3, she died.

She served 25 years of an 80 year sentence for opposing racial injustice and US imperialism. Late last year, she was diagnosed with uterine sarcoma, a rare aggressive cancer that took her life. To the end, she heroically maintained her beliefs.

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