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LESSONS FROM COINTELPRO: BUILDING A MOVEMENT IN THE FACE OF OPPRESSION

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Recent crackdowns on the animal rights and environmental justice movements have left many activists feeling that their communities are under siege. From the prosecution of the SHAC 7 to the arrests of thirteen individuals for arsons committed over a ten-year span, a war is being waged against these movements by the U.S. government. While all of this may seem terrifying in its unfamiliarity to younger activists, the tactics being employed by the FBI and Joint Terrorism Task Force are anything but new. Whisperings of 'COINTELPRO' have appeared in various articles about the backlash against eco-activism, but what does this generation really know about the Counter-Intelligence Program aimed at groups such as the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the American Indian Movement (AIM)? Today's activists are heirs to a history of social and political battles from wars that are not yet over. Without seeing today's struggles for animal rights and environmental justice in a broader historical and social context, we run the risk not only of repeating painful lessons of the past, but of isolating ourselves and weakening our movements. Any FBI campaign against a particular group or movement is bound to expose certain weaknesses. After all, this is the intent of such government attacks. We need to build a culture of resistance and concrete support for people targeted by these government attacks, and also look seriously at the challenges revealed by this repression in order to prevent self-annihilation, mass fear, and demobilization. What we can learn from our own weaknesses can strengthen how we move forward and inform the movement we're building. Today, the criminalization of dissent and the labeling of acts of resistance as terrorism compel us to look at how COINTELPRO functioned and continues under the cloak of the Patriot Act.

COINTELPRO

The FBI's secret Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) was initiated in 1956 under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover and "officially" ended in 1971 when details of the program were widely aired in the mainstream press. Its stated purpose was simple: to "neutralize" groups that the FBI deemed a threat to national security. The program targeted groups or individuals that challenged the existing power structure and expressed opinions opposed to the policies (foreign or domestic) of the government of the United States. In his book *The War at Home*, Brian Glick details four main COINTELPRO tactics used against groups like the BPP, the AIM, and the Puerto Rican Independence Movement: infiltration, psychological warfare, legal harassment, and extralegal force, including assassination. Many FBI tactics served multi-layered purposes. Government informants infiltrated groups ranging from non-violent anti-war activists to the Black Panthers. They were used to gather information, disrupt political organizing, and generate an atmosphere of suspicion and fear. Infiltration, in combination with their campaign of psychological warfare, was used to "neutralize" dissent. In addition, the FBI attacked from the outside, like in 1968 when J. Edgar Hoover labeled the Black Panthers "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" in order to demonize them and justify assaults against their members and offices.

prisoner, a once prominent New York BPP leader named Dhoruba bin Wahad (Richard Moore), was finally released after spend-ing 21 years behind bars on a wrongful conviction. "

- WARD CHURCHILL, 1999

"It is my considered opinion, knowing of the car bomb explosion which injured Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney in 1990, and knowing of their speedy subsequent arrest on sensational criminal charges, that the apparent 'frame-up' of the two as supposed bombers is consistent with the history of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. That history, for many years before 1990, and continuing after that, shows that the FBI has repeatedly attempted to harass, injure, even cause the death of individuals in order to disrupt the activities of organizations critical of government and the Establishment. That history indicates that in the pursuit of this disruption, the FBI has again and again violated the constitutional rights of Americans, including their right to freedom of speech and freedom of association. It indicates that the FBI would have been ready, willing and able to pervert the Constitution, and their own law enforcement responsibility under it, in the attempt to discredit and "neutralize" a movement like Earth First! and other allied forces working to preserve and protect the environment. "

- HOWARD ZINN, 2001

We do not exist in a vacuum. Animal rights and environmental justice activists are natural allies in the struggle for a more just and healthy world. We have a responsibility to build connections and networks with groups that have similar goals. We can learn from their struggles, build alliances, and support common objectives while strengthening our movements and theirs. In the long term, building bridges is the only way to realize our vision of a more sustainable, just, and humane society.

BEHIND THE LIES:

"COINTELPRO targeted American citizens for opposing the Vietnam War, for advocating changes in Central American policies such as supporting brutal dictators, for supporting Civil Rights, Black Liberation, Women's Rights, or socialism. [The FBI] spied on law-abiding Americans, broke into homes, ripped open and read mail, tapped phones, harassed, isolated, threatened, and destroyed the lives of thousands of Americans, who merely opposed the U.S. government's policies. "

- MUMIA ABU JAMAL

"In 1980, former FBI Director L. Patrick Grey and Edward S. Miller, one-time head of Squad 47, the domestic counterintelligence unit in the FBI's New York Field Office, were convicted of having "conspired to injure and oppress the citizens of the United States." The context of their crimes was COINTELPRO, a secret, nationwide campaign conducted by the Bureau from 1956-1971 for purposes of destroying "politically objectionable" organizations and individuals through any \and every means available to it. In 1975, an investigating committee headed by Senator Frank Church found that the operation had, from start to finish, be "fraught with illegality."

Neither Grey nor Miller ever spent a day in jail as a result of their convictions. In April 1981, President Ronald Reagan interrupted their appeals to announce that he was bestowing pardons on both men. The reason stated was that their misdeeds had occurred during an especially turbulent and divisive period in American history. It was time to "put all this behind us," Reagan said, and "to forgive those who engaged in excesses" during the political conflicts of the era. At the time, it was pointed out that if this were to be Reagan's policy, it would be at least as appropriate for him to pardon the numerous victims of COINTELPRO as to forgive its perpetrators. We noted how the Church Committee had discovered that a COINTELPRO technique had been to use the courts to "neutralize" selected activists by obtaining false convictions against them, that the FBI typically involved local police in such endeavors, and that of all the groups targeted in this manner, the Black Panther Party (BPP) had been hit hardest and most extensively.

No action was taken by the Reagan administration in this connection, however, and former Panthers continued to serve time, many of them in cases showing clear signs of COINTELPRO manipulation. It would be another decade before the first such

THE FATE OF ONE GENERATION

Legal attacks and extralegal force were used extensively during COINTELPRO. At least 27 Black Panthers were killed, including Mark Clark and Fred Hampton in Chicago, Bunchy Carter and John Huggins in LA, and Bobby Hutton in Oakland. The FBI and other government agencies also targeted Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. In the 1970s, 60 AIM activists were killed on the Pine Ridge reservation alone. Angel Cristobal, a Puerto Rican Independista and Vieques activist, was murdered in a Florida prison, and the FBI and police agencies tortured captured activists. Many social justice organizations were disrupted or destroyed completely by these government attacks, and the groups were forced to divert their resources to defending activists who were arrested, harassed, and called before grand juries. Over 100 political prisoners, victims of COINTELPRO attacks and frame-ups, remain behind bars, many now in their second and third decades of imprisonment.

ECO-DEFENDERS AS TERRORISTS?

The similarities between COINTELPRO and present government repression are remarkable. Much like Hoover's comment about the threat of the Panthers, John E. Lewis, Deputy Assistant FBI Director, stated in 2004 that "investigating and preventing animal rights extremism and eco-terrorism is one of the FBI's highest domestic terrorism priorities." What better way to discredit a movement in the post-9/11 climate than to label its proponents terrorists?

The federal government, corporations, and the media have redefined the word "terrorist." Last year, animal liberationist Peter Young was indicted on "Animal Enterprise Terrorism" charges for liberating mink, marking the Orwellian nature of the current public discourse on terrorism. By including property destruction and any interference with business as usual under the ever-increasing umbrella of terrorism, the government has one more tool in their public relations campaign against eco-justice.

The FBI remains skilled in psychological warfare. Recently, the FBI disrupted a demonstration in support of grand jury resisters in San Francisco. They announced the increased reward for a fugitive subject of the grand jury. An agent that had been harassing activists in their homes attempted to distribute "wanted" posters among the crowd, a tactic that succeeded in drawing some of the media attention away from the political witch-hunt, catching the activists off guard, and diluting their message.

The grand jury itself remains one of the government's favorite tools of harassment. In the last year alone, federal grand juries convened to investigate animal rights and environmental justice activists in Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Sacramento, San Diego, New Jersey, and Colorado. The FBI's desperation to solve 'cold cases' means they have rounded up many suspects with little or no evidence. Desperate for information, they're coercing activists into talking before the statute of limitations can expire.

Since grand juries are secret proceedings, activists are often unaware of them until someone in their community is subpoenaed. Grand juries try to push activists who resist FBI and police visits to risk imprisonment for maintaining their non-cooperation. This coercion can keep activists occupied with court battles that divert them and their movements from their main political work. The shroud of secrecy and the fear of imprisonment succeed when people cooperate and implicate more activists or furnish information that reinforces the government's offensive.

Eventually grand juries result in indictments. The Eugene indictments of several people on conspiracy charges alleging their connections to the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) illustrate this point. With these indictments, we are also learning there are informants in our midst. Though most activists are aware of the theoretical existence of infiltrators, it is a different matter to learn of an actual act of betrayal and to witness the subsequent fallout.

Though we have yet to see the FBI or other government agents using the fourth main tactic of COINTELPRO in their "Green Scare" extralegal force and violence it is not from moral aversion. The government understands that the general public would not support such tactics against the environmental justice or animal rights movements at this time. Yet they do feel unrestrained in terrorizing the Arab, Palestinian, and Islamic populations, and imprisoning innocent people of color without charges. They justify the torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo but they realize that such tactics used against largely white, middle-class activists would be bad PR.

BUILDING THE MOVEMENT

So what do we do about the challenges ahead? What does a community do when the fear of imprisonment is a stronger motivating factor than commitment to principles? Now we have an opportunity to learn from history. For many the instinct is to withdraw and avoid talking about issues of substance, strategy, and increased resistance. Some people may even avoid talking to certain activists for fear of being seen by the government as guilty by association. Yet now, more than ever, is when we must fight those urges and do the exact opposite: communicate, find common ground, and come together.

We are facing a crisis in the eco-justice and animal rights movements. How we handle it will determine if we succeed or fail as a movement. One example of strength in the face of daunting obstacles is the case of the SHAC 7. Their fight with the government didn't begin last year when they were arrested for Animal Enterprise Terrorism. The feds had been trying to find a way to shut down Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty since the day they started making a difference in the struggle to close the notorious animal-testing lab Huntingdon Life Sciences. They even tried indicting some SHAC activists under the Hobbes (extortion) Act, a law designed to target organized crime. Though they faced constant harassment and the threat of imprisonment for exercising their rights to free speech, the SHAC 7 neither wavered

in their political commitment nor attempted to save themselves by implicating others.

Part of our strength lies in the support of our fellow activists in prison. In a recent statement, Jeff "Free" Luers, who was sentenced to an astounding 22+ years for a \$40,000 SUV arson in Eugene, demands "recognition of political status for our prisoners. All incarcerated and accused members of the Earth Liberation Front and other Earth Liberation prisoners are political prisoners. Our actions that brought us to prison are political in nature. Our trials are about our politics. Our sentences are increased because of our political motives." We agree, and also see that there have been campaigns to recognize and free U.S. political prisoners for decades. Many political prisoners remain locked up despite national and international demands for their release and recognition as victims of government repression and frame-ups.

Some campaigns have succeeded in winning the release of framed former Panthers like Geronimo Gi Jaga and Dhoruba Bin Wahad, both of whom were imprisoned for over 20 years. A massive campaign in Puerto Rico and in the U.S. succeeded in freeing Puerto Rican Nationalist prisoners held in 1979 after over 25 years of captivity. Eleven other Independistas were incarcerated in 1999. None of the people that continued to stand up for their principles, though the whole system was mobilized against them, could have maintained such strength without a strong movement behind them.

LEARNING FROM OUR ALLIES, MOVING FORWARD

Last year, a state grand jury was convened in San Francisco to investigate a 34-year-old case that involved the death of a police officer. Several former members of the Black Panther Party were subpoenaed to testify. Some of these men hadn't spoken to one another for at least two decades, yet when they received their subpoenas they all chose to resist. Men in their sixties and seventies were jailed for refusing to cooperate with the grand jury. Two of them had been recently harassed at their homes by the same San Francisco cops that participated in their 1973 torture in a New Orleans jail. Some had serious health issues, but they remained silent. The end result? The grand jury expired and to date no indictments have been issued. Victory was realized because these men understand that the movement is more important than any one individual.

A strong movement means embracing and living the ideals we espouse not just paying lip service to the fight for a just world. Although some may not want to admit it, this means leaving the "American" value of individualism behind. In order to succeed and remain a strong movement, the community must come before the individual. The right question to ask when faced with government pressure is not, "How can I make this easiest on myself?" but, "What will be best for my community, the movement we are trying to build, and the fight for social justice?" From that perspective, the choices are clearer, and do not include cooperating with government agencies, betraying friends, and compromising our vision and future.