

Back on the streets, *Fifth Estate* writer reflects on prison experience

...starts book tour but doesn't forget those still incarcerated

Kelly Pflug-Back

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I was released from state custody in February after serving seven and a half months in the Vanier Center for Women, a provincial jail in southern Ontario, for charges stemming from the G20 summit protests in Toronto during the summer of 2010. While the judge sentenced me to 15 months, I was given four months credit for the one month of jail time and two years of house arrest I served while awaiting sentencing.

Like most events which one spends a substantial and prolonged amount of time anticipating, the morning of my release felt oddly anti-climactic.

I shared sad embraces with the women on my cell-block, was escorted by two guards through the halls to the admissions and departures wing, changed out of my prison uniform, and walked out the gate into the waiting arms of my partner and a close friend of mine.

In following weeks, my relief at being back home with the people I love has been edged with a feeling of conflict: I am torn, half of my heart rejoicing while the other half aches in sympathy with the pain and suffering still being endured by the women who became like a second family to me during the months I spent inside.

While many of the people I grew to know and love will be released soon enough, the thought of their freedom is shadowed to me by the knowledge that each cell left empty will simply be filled again as the cycles of racial profiling, the criminalization of poverty and sex work, the war on drugs, and the neo-colonial abuses of Indigenous peoples continue.

About a week after becoming reacquainted with the outside world, I set off on a tour doing speaking events about women in the prison system and promoting my first book, *These Burning Streets*, which was published by Combustion Books while I was in jail.

The tour was organized by the Women's Coordinating Committee for a Free Wallmapu (WCC), a group whose mandate is to link the movement for indigenous sovereignty of Mapuche Peoples in the semi-autonomous region of what is known as southern Chile with that of other Indigenous, anticapitalist, and anarchist struggles across Turtle Island.

One reason why the WCC specifically align themselves with anarchist struggles is that state structures, regardless of whether they claim to be liberal-democratic, communist, or socialist, most often share the common trait of denying the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and their territories.

While taking the time to set up my tour while I was in jail, the WCC has also been supporting a number of Mapuche prisoners criminalized by the Chilean State for their involvement in the struggle for independence and sovereignty.

In an interview transcribed by the WCC, Silvana Lamilla, one of three Mapuche women recently imprisoned after a police raid in Temuco, Chile, offered a description of many prisoners' attitudes towards incarcerated activists which I could hugely relate to. She said, "I find myself at ease, the rest of the female prisoners have given us a warm

welcome in solidarity...despite the circumstances we continue to dream; even despite the many months and years of this eternal enclosure, they continue to be beautiful, free and crazy!"

As I sit in Greyhound buses and the passenger seats of friends' cars on my way to and from different cities, I often find myself distracted by thoughts of what my former compatriots are doing, feeling, and thinking.

I scrawl quick hellos, well wishes, and inside jokes on postcards and scraps of note paper, posting letters to my jailed comrades at every stop, letting them know that the words, wisdom and experiences they shared with me are what give me the strength and inspiration to do this tour.

So far my travels have taken me from Toronto to a number of Canadian cities. I have had the privilege of participating in panel discussions not only with members of the WCC, but also with anti-fascist activists from Greece, grassroots anti-poverty and anti-border activists, and a beautiful selection of political poets and musicians.

These collaborations have been fertile ground for discussion of intersectional approaches to activism, bringing together a wide spectrum of issues surrounding government austerity, borders, colonialism, racism in society and in the legal system, and the criminalization of poverty, addiction, and mental health issues.

While striving to keep my contribution open-ended during the question and answer periods that take up much of the time at these events, I try to relate the issues which arise back to a common theme—practical ways in which we can expand our prisoner solidarity efforts past the rudimentary template of noise demonstrations, letter-writing evenings and awareness raising, in order to develop a model for meaningful, long term support for people behind bars.

Leaving these discussions open-ended and interactive rather than having pre-written lectures has meant that each event is different, depending on the interests of the audience and the direction which our conversations take. This structure has also allowed me to do as much listening as talking, if not more. At each event so far, people have shared new points, ideas, criticisms and personal experiences which have expanded not only my personal understanding, but also the variety of potential frameworks and strategies I can bring to future organizing.

Templates I offer for what these forms of prisoner support look like come largely from the experiences I have had, both in jail and since being released, around bottom-up, prisoner-centered prison justice organizing.

In collaboration with other ex prisoners and the Prisoner AIDS Support Action Network (PASAN), an abolitionist, anti-stigma prisoner justice organization based in Toronto, I have been working on setting up a new publication for women prisoners, where they can submit art and writing and also get connected with resources which are specifically needed in the female prisoner population.

These issues, often glossed over by generalized prison analysis, include child custody supports, advocacy for maternal health care, HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C treatment, resources for coping with trauma, and accessing legal help for immigration and citizenship matters.

Cell Count, the newsletter which PASAN already distributes to the general prison population, also has a long history of featuring poetry and creative writing by prisoners, and in the coming year we will be publishing an anthology of poetry selected from the past ten years of Cell Count issues.

At the Montreal Anarchist Bookfair in May, I planned to co-facilitate a workshop called Strategies for Solidarity With Women Prisoners with one of the organizers from PASAN as well as an activist I met in jail. My interview with her appears on page 17.

Unfortunately, resources for women prisoners in Canada, both institutional and community based, are sorely lacking, and many of the things which are most critically needed are currently beyond our means. This is one reason why we recognize the importance of networking with other activists, and reaching out to groups in the US, such as Birthing Behind Bars, which have successfully established the type of framework of support for women prisoners which we aspire to build.

One of the more productive things which I've gained from having served jail time is the ability to communicate to others the suffering and injustice which I witnessed, and to hopefully pass on some of the inspiration and renewed sense of urgency which these things have lent to my organizing efforts.

One person, who approached me after an event at an anarchist social space in Montreal, La Belle Epoque, said that they enjoyed my talk precisely because my analysis of prison was centred around personal, specific examples of what institutional violence looks like rather than general criticisms of the prison system.

This is what I seek to do during this tour: give an idea of the big picture by holding up a magnifying glass to some of its most poignant aspects rather than offering a blurry, summary approximation of the entire thing.

It is only through this personal connection with prison issues, and with prisoners themselves, that we can balance our anger towards the oppression which prisons embody with an equal, if not greater, amount of compassion for those who are most brutally affected by it.

Kelly Pflug-Back's book, *These Burning Streets*, is available from Combustion Books at **combustionbooks.org**.

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