

June 11th

Eco-Resistance, Prisons and the Making of an International Anarchist Holiday

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2017

June 11 brought activists and revolutionaries from across the country together with former prisoners and family members of prisoners for a weekend gathering in Washington, D.C. for a “Convergence Against Toxic Prisons.”

Around two hundred people participated in two days of networking, strategizing, and listening to black liberation fighters Ramona Africa and Jihad Abdulmumit, and recently-released eco-prisoners Eric McDavid and Daniel McGowan. There was a Monday morning march against the prison system’s legacy of building their warehouses of repression on toxic sites across the country.

The weekend focused on organizing around June 11, an international day of solidarity with long-term anarchist and environmental prisoners, with the intention of developing strategic and action-based opposition to the prison system as a whole.

A spirited march went to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Central Office to oppose plans for a new maximum security federal prison on a coal mine site in Kentucky. Demonstrators chanted, “Burn prisons, not coal” and “Break the locks, no more cops!” About fifty people shut down the intersection in front of the First Street BOP headquarters, blocking entrance to the parking garage. After holding the space for an hour, and hearing from environmental justice activists and family members of prisoners, the march moved on to the Department of Justice and FBI headquarters. Traffic was snarled for another hour at this central intersection.

June 11 this year marked the start of a new direction for organizing around what has become, over the past decade, a prominent date on the anarchist calendar. For several years, internal conflict has erupted, primarily between insurrectionist and eco-anarchist tendencies around the framing of the call to action and the level of involvement by current and former prisoners. This year’s events showed the potential for addressing and overcoming these challenges by broadening June 11 organizing beyond the anarchist counterculture.

The Prison Ecology Project (PEP), initiated by former-prisoner Paul Wright of Prison Legal News, and the Campaign to Fight Toxic Prisons (FTP), an offshoot of Earth First! emerged in 2015.

While much of the June 11 organizing around anarchists and eco-prisoners has centered on support for individuals charged with ecologically-motivated actions, PEP and FTP have created the potential to expand the connections between ecology, environmental justice, and mass incarceration policies. As eco and anarchist prisoners have had the misfortune to witness first hand, prisons are built on or around mines, landfills and toxic military bases, with resulting tainted water and polluted air. They are also on the front lines of climate justice, with prisons facing issues of extreme heat and flooding in recent years due to global warming.

These prison/ecology efforts offer guidance for anarchists involved with environmental issues to take a step towards fighting the prison system that puts our comrades in toxic facilities, along with 2.3 million others.

Activism around June 11 opened the door between prisoners and environmentalists enabling the eco-anti-prison movement to go forward. This is similar to the way civil rights organizers of the 1950s and ’60s began the movement for prisoners’ rights and against prisons, and a broader anti-system analysis, after their civil disobedience led to them being locked up in jails and prisons.

There are numerous examples of anarchist prisoners opening this arena to a broader audience by introducing environmental activists to various struggles around prisoners' rights and mass incarceration.

Efforts like those of former Earth Liberation Front (ELF) prisoner Daniel McGowan's fight for the Good Time Bill, which would allow reduced sentences, and exposing the Communications Management Unit (CMU) he was locked up in alongside entrapped Muslim prisoners. Or, more recently, animal liberationist Kevin Olliff's support for the fight against book bans and exorbitant phone rates for prisoners. These have been amazing moments of building cross movement relationships.

As anarchists, we know that ending mass incarceration is a necessary step of social revolution, just as ending industrialism is a necessary step of ecological liberation. At this time, when questions of mass incarceration and climate change are simultaneously becoming mainstream issues, June 11 can take on a central role in the struggle, etching a new date in the calendar for anarchists to celebrate and our enemies to fear.

Over the past century, anarchists around the world have looked to May First as the primary day when this society is forced to remember the threat we pose to its order. But the context surrounding struggle against state and capital has shifted significantly over recent decades. The power of organized labor has long been dissipated by globalization, with the remnants largely coopted by the Democratic Party. With these changes, in the U.S. the power of May Day has waned as well.

While many of us continue to celebrate that holiday of resistance in our own ways, and occasionally find ourselves amidst mass movements rallying around the date, as happened in the U.S. during the swelling of the immigrant rights movement in 2006 or the tail end of Occupy in 2012, we should also remain open to how we can develop new terrain and opportunities to conspire together.

June 11 activities have helped to inspire prisoner-led mobilizations this year, such as the September strikes on the anniversary of the Attica uprising. This presents a powerful model of what could lie ahead for anarchist movements and projects in the future.

The words of eco-prisoner Jeff Luers' letter to a crowd gathered in Eugene, Oregon in 2004 for the first June 11 event still ring true today:

Look around you. The people you see are your hope. They are your community, they are your allies and they are your source of strength.... You want to be free from the control of multinational corporations that only care about profit? You want to be free from a police force that protects the corrupt? Do you want an alternative to a society and civilization that is destroying its own world? Then take the initiative and create it, build it, and fight for it.... If you want change, then take it street by street, community by community until power has been reclaimed.

Background on June 11th

If you have been following anarchist news and analysis over the past dozen years, you've likely encountered some piece of the June 11 story, but it's worth a quick review to highlight some of the timeline in the context of related happenings.

After several years of upswing in environmental direct action during the 80s and 90s, eco-anarchists developed public long-term blockade sites and less-public underground networks of sabotage. Earth First!, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and other assorted anarchistic action-based entities made national and international headlines regularly: tearing up roads; cutting power lines; sinking whaling ships; liberating lab animals; burning ski resorts, logging equipment, SUVs, genetic engineering sites, etc; and instigating riots at global trade summits.

On June 11 2001, a young anarchist and environmental activist, Jeff Luers, was sentenced to nearly 23 years in prison for a relatively small amount of damage to several SUVs in a car dealership lot. The explicit intention of the sentence was to send a chilling message to the environmental and anarchist movement, which had all but shut down the WTO meetings in Seattle two years earlier, and the G8 meetings in London the year before that.

In 2004, an international call for solidarity with Luers went out. At least 23 events occurred, including cities and small towns all across the US and as far away as Norway, Australia and Russia.

There were some other unique and important components to the first June 11th event. For one, people from diverse struggles attended and spoke at the main event, in Eugene, Oregon (where Jeff was living before arrest), making connections between the repression of Black and Indigenous communities and the rise of repression against environmentally-motivated action that Jeff's case represented. In addition, the event included a position on the broader issue of mass incarceration and specifically opposition to Oregon's "Measure 11" mandatory-minimum sentencing guidelines. For participants who knew of Jeff's case from his local environmental involvement, this discussion of prison policy was likely new territory. But environmental activists in that region were headed for a crash course on the politics of repression and incarceration.

In 2005 the Green Scare hit the headlines. The FBI's Operation Backfire resulted in the arrests of dozens of environmental activists, accused of domestic terrorism for what amounted essentially to high-dollar vandalism, with no physical injuries to people even alleged.

Regardless of how one felt about the particular actions that individuals were charged with in Green Scare cases, the punishment for environmentally-motivated actions was disproportionate to that for comparable non-political, non-environmental acts. Through solidarity with Luers, anarchist organizers opened up space among environmental activist groups and the public at large to look critically at the prison system.

In 2009, Jeff was released in a re-sentencing hearing. Upon his release, he lent his support to the continuation of June 11 as a day of solidarity with other eco-prisoners. There have been some significant disagreements on how June 11 should be presented, largely related to differences in semantics, with the new organizing group choosing to focus on the anarchist identity of prisoners and the duration of their sentence over the environmental-motivations that were primarily highlighted in Jeff's case.

Regardless of this, momentum around this day has been maintained. For the past 6 years, there have consistently been more than 30 reported events and actions in a dozen different countries honoring June 11, specifically highlighting the cases of anarchist environmentalists Marius Mason, currently serving 22 years for arsons against logging and genetic engineering, and Eric McDavid, who was entrapped by an FBI agent and sentenced to 19 years, and released in 2015 after 9 years inside.

The crew that took on coordinating June 11 in 2010, following Jeff's release, has succeeded in further developing international relationships. They explain on the June11.org website, "As our conversations grew, we also became concerned that many people around the world expressed solidarity for Marius and Eric readily and vigorously, but we in the US rarely returned support for international long-term anarchist prisoners."

This year a focus of the June 11 call to action was on the growth of maximum security prisons and isolation units abroad, which invited support and interest from countries like Greece, Spain and Belgium where anarchists have engaged in efforts against these facilities and in support of political and rebellious prisoners held in them.

While the debate around June 11 has become heated on a few occasions over recent years, the desire to compete over how various groups describe the date seems to have faded. It's clear that the June11.org crew has succeeded in getting recognition from anarchists internationally for their approach. The Earth First!-based eco-prisoner support contingent has also honed in on its ability to engage June 11 with the environmental focus front-and-center.

With some determination and follow-through, the June 11 Convergence in D.C., organized under the slogan "Against Toxic Prisons, In Support of Eco-Prisoners," could mark a new departure for expanding participation in the June 11 anarchist holiday.

Panagiotis is an organizer with the Campaign to Fight Toxic Prisons, co-founder of the Prison Ecology Project and former editorial collective member of the Earth First! Journal. He has experienced the criminal justice system first-hand in over a dozen county jails around the country.

This is a longer version of the article which appeared in the print edition, and includes a history of J11.

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