

David Alex Campbell Released From Rikers

ARB Interview

Charlie Hix

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On the evening of January 19th, 2018, while over 200,000 people gathered in New York City for the Women's March, a thousand alt-right supporters converged for a "Night of Freedom" at Hell's Kitchen FREQ NYC nightclub. Outside, a brawl broke out between one of the gala's drunken attendees and David Alex Campbell, a 30-year-old anti-fascist activist. An NYPD officer threw Campbell to the ground, breaking his leg in two places. Later the cop alleged that Campbell had stalked, punched, and strangled a party goer. These allegations, later shown to be false by surveillance footage, were heavily circulated by the event's organizer Mike Cernovich.

Rather than go to trial and possibly end up in an upstate prison with strong white supremacist gangs, Campbell, who works as a translator, took a non-cooperative plea and was sentenced to eighteen months at Rikers Island. In October of 2019, after nearly two years of legal wrangling and international media attention, he began his sentence, serving throughout the height of the coronavirus pandemic and helping to organize a strike demanding protective equipment for prisoners. He was recently released into a world of increased alt-right activity and a second wave of the pandemic. I spoke with Campbell throughout his stint at Rikers and in October 2020 we were able to spend longer than five minutes on an untapped line discussing anarchy, incarceration, and activism.

ARB: What drew you to anarchism?

DAC: I think for me, anarchism's critique of power, analysis of history, and vision for society aligned more than other philosophies. Anti-fascism came up as a pressing need and anarchists were the ones who were answering it. After 2016, I think a lot of people who were interested in anarchism really kicked into gear. This doesn't necessarily mean fighting in the streets, but I [personally] wanted to do more than have an affinity for ideas, I wanted to put action behind them.

I'd been going to The Base [an anarchist political center] on Myrtle Avenue in Bushwick for years. One of the first things we were trying to do was create a rapid response network, an old school, pre-internet phone tree for contacting one another, to get people into the streets in case of early morning ICE raids. I started going to MACC—Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Council. There are general assemblies once a month and I would meet people there—a manager at a restaurant, a dentist, whatever, and they were down with anarchism. I love that people are down to explore and to realize that there's something for the irreconcilable way they're living their lives.

ARB: How did the response network handle your arrest?

DAC: The night I was arrested a bunch of people from MACC and my brother came together to help me out: bail, a cab home, flowers in the hospital. When I realized that I was going to have to knuckle down for my trial, we formed a defense committee.

The man who threw the event, Mike Cernovich, an alt-right provocateur, tweeted about the case the whole time. This is one of the problems with fascism coming to prominence in a democratic society, the center-left, the liberals take the bait when the right wing says, "OMG, look at these people running amuck, someone's gotta do something. This far-left guy thinks it's okay to beat people up in the streets." Because of this the Manhattan DA's office were

going hard [on me]. They're for law and order. That's their line: they want to keep order and prove they have no allegiance to either side.

ARB: And what about the alleged assault?

DAC: Whether that's something you should go out to do is a different question. I think yes, you should sometimes go punch Nazis, but that's not what I went out to do, it's just how it happened. After two years I took a plea for one count of attempted gang assault and one count of assault with an instrument. The instrument was my shoe. I was wearing a lightweight sneaker when I kicked the guy. They could have charged me with assault, but they wanted to bump it up with the instrument charge. Even the correction officers at Rikers were shocked at my sentence. This was something that happens when drunk people leave a bar or sporting event, fights break out every day. But because it was politicized and publicized, it became a huge issue. I served 12 of the 18-month sentence.

ARB: Do you think that if you weren't affiliated with black bloc you wouldn't have faced so much upheaval?

DAC: Definitely, I would have just done community service. It's absolutely because I was part of Black Bloc. There were reporters covering the counter-protest and taking photos of me after the arrest and I was wearing a black hoodie around my neck and the *New York Post* headline labeled me an "Antifa Thug." I was almost released early in March due to COVID, but it didn't pan out because I was labeled "dangerous for society."

And when it came down to my case, it was a big strike against me. I think the idea that a skinny college-educated white guy from a middle class family could, through reasoning it out, come to the conclusion that the logical thing to do would be put on a ski mask and get out in the streets against fascists is something that really scared people. Because it means they might be wrong. They might be doing the wrong thing and letting the fascists sneak up the trellis of the state. I think that scares them. And because [prior to arrest] I had this image of an upstanding citizen, they decided it was the right thing to do to make an example of me.

ARB: Did other inmates know that you were in for political reasons?

DAC: It was widely known. I got a lot of fist bumps for beating up a Trump supporter. On different occasions people came up to me and knew me from the news. I was open about it in there and it helped. No one's repping white supremacy in Rikers; they'd get their ass beat.

ARB: You were incarcerated during the pandemic, what were the conditions like in the jail?

DAC: We didn't have any PPE, there were no masks, cleaning supplies had always been hard to come by, even something as simple as hand soap. People were wearing extra t-shirts around their faces. People were very skittish when it first broke. Strangely, as coronavirus was getting really bad the Department of Corrections was continuing to randomly move people around. When March rolled around people were starting to be let go a day or two before their release date, which was strange. It was clear that they were trying to empty the jails out, but it didn't work. Then people started getting sick. You started seeing COs escorting inmates who were coughing—they were both wearing surgical masks—out of the building. And rumors started to spread. "I heard someone in this dorm or cell block got sick," "I heard one of the COs got it."

Captains, who are the middle managers of the Corrections Department, would say 'sleep head to toe' like that's the solution. The Corrections Department called inmate councils, where you send a delegate from each housing unit, supposedly to talk about your grievances with the higher levels of management. It gives [inmates] a feeling of control, of democracy, it looks good on paper, but it does nothing. Deputy wardens, the highest-ranking DOC officials you might have the chance to speak with, had ideas like, "squeeze an orange into a glass of water." But you can't keep oranges. They're contraband. They were saying things like drink green tea, just wash your hands. We wanted masks. We wanted them to do temperature checks for all the COs coming into the building.

So, about a week before we went on strike it got bad; they filled our dorm up. We had been at half capacity. It's a 48-bed dorm, about 50 beds. With 20, 25 people, it had been fine. But, they packed us in so tightly that there was not a free bed left in the dorm, then they put up posters telling us to stay six feet apart.

Cases started to explode, and we had a strike because we wanted to be released, and it did happen, a lot of people got released. I don't know if it's entirely attributable to the strike. We can't take credit for everyone who was released early, but I do think that we helped bring issues to the forefront and brought the conditions of incarcerated folks in Rikers to the media's attention. There's a tendency for people to want to believe that it can't be that bad and of course the DOC, the mayor's office, the DAs, the police commissioner are all telling you "these people all deserve to be there, and it's not that bad, they have human rights." We took it on ourselves to contradict that narrative.

ARB: Was there any evolution of treatment of incarcerated folks based on the evolution of knowledge about coronavirus?

DAC: Once it became very clear that wearing a mask was a smart choice, and that if they didn't at least pay lip service to the idea, people were going to be hounding them to release prisoners, we could just go tap on the glass of the bubble and get a mask, almost anytime. I don't know how much it really matters, living in a dorm with forty other guys where we sleep two feet apart. If there's a second wave, will there be enough masks for everyone on Riker's Island? I really doubt it. You can't accuse them of doing nothing, but they're of course, not doing nearly enough given that the inherent condition of jail is conducive to infectious diseases.

You can file a grievance with the DOC, but that's an internal piece of paperwork and they can just crumple it up and throw it away—they don't care. But if you call 311 and file a complaint, then they care because it's an outside agency and they're being held accountable. So people would call 311 and complain about things like overcrowding, no hand soap, no PPE, COs not wearing masks. When I left, the doorknobs, the railings in the stairwells, the gates—all those things were not being sanitized at all, I mean—never.

ARB: At least on the outside you can have some control. Like the six feet, wearing the mask.

DAC Right. It's a fatalist, deterministic situation [in jail]. It's kinda sad, kinda funny, but out here, I notice that people apologize for not wearing a mask in the bodega. And I think, "that's so kind of you, I didn't even notice that you're not wearing a mask." I also see that there's hand sanitizer everywhere. People are trying to keep six feet of space in line between each other. There's a lot that's different. And sometimes I forget these things.

ARB: Were you and the ones remaining, were they considered political prisoners?

DAC: No, I was the only political prisoner I met. At a certain point my lawyer said, 'look [the Manhattan DA] knows your case, they remember your case, and it's one they want to pat themselves on the back about.' A reporter contacted them asking for comment on why I hadn't been released; because I had no priors, I had no record, I had low risk of reoffending, I'd already served over half of my time. And when they realized that someone was going to write an article about that, the DA sent an email saying that they had agreed to my release, but it was in the hands of the Mayor's office. And that's where it died.

ARB: What will you be doing now that you've been released?

DAC: I can't walk away from the movement. The movement held me up for over a year. They got me a defense committee. I got letters, donations, birthday cards, from all over the world telling me to keep my head up. It would be impossible for me to walk away from something that took care of me. That said, I can't get arrested at a protest again because I now have a violent felony on my record from a protest that got crazy. I can stay away from actions and still support them. I'm going to do court and jail support for arrested comrades. I'm going to help them with making calls, getting a slice of pizza, getting a cab, putting them in the network of support that helped me. I'm in the movement for life.

Charlie Hix is a Virginian writer based in Chicago.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/408-winter-2021/david-alex-campbell-released-from-rikers>
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