

No Compromises: Inside the Minds of Today's Radicals

On conviction, risk, and a generation's mission to resist.

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2024-11-03

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to stand in meaningful solidarity. They're clear-eyed and fearless. Between pulls on a cigarette, Calla relays to me how the police who arrested her all drew their weapons. "All guns drawn. One of them was shaking, they looked so terrified," she tells me, rolling her eyes. She was, of course, totally unarmed.

"A different time I got arrested, they asked me for my *fucking* preferred pronouns." We both laugh.

I think about the risks, the consequences that come with their choices—criminal records, societal ostracism, even imprisonment—and yet, these are risks they embrace as part of their commitment to something larger than themselves. They're willing to be criticized, misunderstood, to lose things they once valued for the sake of a mission they feel must be fulfilled. When they talk about standing in solidarity with Gaza, with the liberation movements of the world, it doesn't feel like a headline or a moral platitude; it feels immediate and alive, pressing down into the space between us.

I think of Calla's intense gaze. I'm left with a question that's no longer hypothetical.

What is to be done?

Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.

— Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*

Love isn't about what we did yesterday; it's about what we do today and tomorrow and the day after.

— Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*

It is nearly eighty degrees in New York in late October. "My god, aren't we fucked?" I think to myself as I find Calla Walsh and Paige Belanger drinking coffee outside a Moroccan café at a small rickety table on the Lower East Side. The pair look like ragged young hipsters you might see at a DIY metal show in a basement. Calla is scrawny, but there is an unmistakable intensity in her eyes. Paige inexplicably carries the duality of someone who would knit you a sweater or throw you out of a helicopter.

The two are heading to Valley Street Jail in New Hampshire on November 14th for a month and a half stint for the action they and two others took in November 2023. The "Merrimack Four," as they are called, were initially hit with a slew of felony charges—conspiracy, criminal mischief, burglary, and more—that threatened a maximum of thirty-seven years in prison. Their protest temporarily halted operations at Elbit Systems, Israel's largest weapons supplier which provides eighty-five percent of its military drone fleet used against Palestinians in Gaza. Luckily, they struck a deal: sixty days in county jail, a small victory in their ongoing fight against the American arms industry's ties to Israeli occupation.

I've wanted to speak to Calla for a while, but just happened to get lucky that her "Co-Dee" (co-defendant), as she says with a smile, is also visiting the city before lock up. The pair were not able to speak for over six months due to a court enforced gag order, a McCarthy-era holdover meant to divide and disrupt militant left-wing actors. I am shocked. "Do people know about that?" I ask. Calla shakes her head.

The group has been at times vilified online by people from across the political spectrum. Sometimes, this has manifested in criticisms of youthful naivety, sometimes as a reaction to their unapologetic stature, both on their action as well as their political outlook. I figure that's a good place to start our conversation.

Alex: "Calla, you were 19 when you participated in the action against

Elbit Systems. What would you say to people who say you're a stupid kid?"

Calla: "The media tends to characterize me as a stupid kid no matter what I do, so I don't really care. I'm a stupid kid when it's convenient, I'm an adult facing seven felonies and thirty-seven years in prison when it's not. I think some people older than me who ridicule my age simply feel threatened by my political clarity and experience, which calls their own *frighteningly* underdeveloped politics and practice into question. If I ever become patronizing or disdainful to young people when I'm older, I hope young people bully and correct me."

Calla reminds me that, for what it's worth, the "Merrimack Four" range from twenty to thirty-three years old.

Calla: "Everyone saw the Twitter conspiracies that we were a gaggle of teenage girls manipulated by a billionaire's cult¹ into firebombing a small local Jewish business. These misogynistic, counterinsurgent narratives attempted to portray the action as illogical or insane to the level of the Manson Family or Patti Hearst, and they attempted to deprive me of my own agency over my righteous actions, actions which I will *never* renounce or regret."

Alex: "What about you, Paige? You and I are a little closer in age. People wouldn't be concerned about you being manipulated or too young. How did you find yourself here?"

Paige: "I feel like doing this was inevitable. I have always felt an acute sense that reality as we know it is not the one in which we are meant to be living. We are all so intensely alienated from nature, from our own humanity, from life itself. I've always imagined a world outside this inescapable alienation, although I wouldn't always have framed it that way. The only time I've ever felt like I fit into this world is when I have been fighting to bring a new one into being.

I could talk about my theoretical evolution...but I think the real answer is less academic. Put simply, it was the only moral thing to do. Palestinian resistance is the unquestionable vanguard of the global revolution. There was no option but to resist alongside them and halt the

¹Calla is here referring to Jim "Fergie" Chambers, a former heir to one of the largest family fortunes in America who sold his stake in Cox Enterprises and initially helped provide monetary support for left-wing activists. He now lives in Tunisia, where he owns a major stake in a soccer team and seems generally less interested in American politics.

and precise strikes against imperial infrastructure. It is far past the time for vague political education and outreach with no specific end, which many of these orgs make a top priority.

Political education efforts need to be reoriented towards understanding the legal mechanisms for state repression and the surveillance capabilities of the empire on revolutionaries. I love reading political theory, and it's essential to have revolutionary theory guiding principled political organizations, but **book clubs are not bringing people closer to taking the militant action needed to overthrow the fascist state.**

We also need to **stop** appealing to the morality of the oppressors and seeking to mobilize people towards demanding radical change from some higher authority. **The people have the power, they just need to remember it.**"

Calla: "Above all, we need to believe we can win within our lifetimes. I feel like there is historical amnesia about the George Floyd Rebellion four years ago, when 25 million people were in the streets, 300 cities/towns were on fire, Trump was in a bunker, and the feds were running out of tear gas and rubber bullets. The 2020 uprising was a reminder of the spontaneous, militant, and revolutionary potential of the masses, that can only be organized and channeled into protracted struggle if we defeat the counterinsurgency attempting to neutralize and co-opt us.

I agree with what communist Grace Lee Boggs wrote in her piece 'Organization Means Commitment' about building a revolutionary movement in the imperial core. It's far more effective to begin to consolidate with a few comrades who you're closely aligned with, than it is to organize with 100 people with no shared principles or political lines. **Quality over quantity.** NGOs and pundits position themselves as the movement's leaders because they have the biggest bank accounts and media platforms — I would caution people about joining NGOs and tailing their lines and tactics, which are usually tailing behind the masses and the front liners.

If you want to know what the state is really scared of, who is really threatening their power, then look at who they are repressing the most."

At the end of our conversation, I'm left in a strange space, somewhere between admiration and apprehension. They're unwavering, undeterred in their conviction that the only moral stance left to take is an uncompromising one—where resistance isn't softened by fear of mainstream alienation but is sharpened by a desire

while sabotage is ‘violent.’ **Property damage is not violence, and if it happens for the purpose of shutting down weapons companies, it is, in fact, peaceful.**

The state weaponizes claims of violence against all resistance, at home or abroad. We can see this in the way accusations of terrorism are levied against national liberation movements and those in solidarity with them, as well as the way spray painting a message on a building or even breaking a window is distorted as ‘violent’ protest in the U.S.

Ideally, there would be no distinction between protest and sabotage! ‘Protests’ would not be the peace-policed, permitted parades as they are now, but legitimate moments of upheaval against the power of the state. Probably they would *all* include a little sabotage. We are policing ourselves with the ruling classes’ distorted definitions of what is moral, and internalizing these definitions in the way we critique militant tactics that actually threaten power. If typical protests were actually protests, and not just non-confrontational, toothless rallies, then they would have a genuine role in the diversity of tactics needed to take down the empire from within, and militancy would play a role in them as well. As it stands, sustained direct action has been the only thing forcing material concessions from the empire ... like Cambridge Elbit shutting down for good.”

Alex: So, what can people do? Where do you think people should people direct their energy?

Calla: “Everyone can be escalating, or building capacity for escalation. There are different roles for everyone — organizing the masses, building the underground, making propaganda, going on the front lines, feeding the front liners.

From the RICO and domestic terrorism charges against Stop Cop City activists, to the Uhuru 3’s free speech trial, to Samidoun’s ‘terrorist’ designation, *clearly* we are entering a new phase of counterinsurgency, and it is more important than ever that the movement develops a strong counter-repression strategy. Right now, that means studying up on historical counterinsurgencies like McCarthyism, COINTELPRO, the Green Scare, and persecution of the Holy Land Foundation Five — and also preparing tactically for more repression to come.”

Paige: “Activists need to turn their attention away from mass orgs that counter the threat of state repression and infiltration by toning down their militancy and advocating for ‘peaceful,’ reformist tactics. We need to start seeing smaller groups of trusted peers, carrying out deliberate

supply of the weapons used to mutilate and murder them. Declaring solidarity without material support seemed performative at best, and counter-revolutionary at worst.”

Paige and Calla are very consistent in their views, and Calla often shares similar opinions on social media. Some people find them inflammatory. This is where *some* criticism comes from.

Alex: “Critics often argue that direct actions like vandalism or property damage can alienate potential allies or harm a movement’s credibility. What do you think of those critiques, especially in the context of your recent action?”

Calla: “Anyone alienated by the dismantling of genocidal weapons factories is not someone I want to be in a movement with. Anyone so scared about the liberal mainstream optics of militant resistance, whether in Palestine or here in the U.S., is going to be a friend of counterinsurgency.

We’ve heard this argument against Palestine Action sabotage tactics in favor of organizing Elbit workers or appealing to their conscience...on the assumption that they have any conscience left. Imperialist weapons company workers, regardless of their personal background, are enemies of the global working class and all colonized people, and we do not have time to coddle their morality when they are enabling the slaughter of thousands of Palestinians every day.

I *certainly* have my own critiques of our action and the early phase of Palestine Action US — I think the intentional/symbolic arrest tactic should be abandoned, a clear degree of separation between “aboveground” and “underground” organizing needs to be made, and the movement must develop stronger digital and operational security to effectively go on the offensive. But none of my critiques of Palestine Action US have to do with regretting our thrust towards militancy, escalation, and attacking the Zionist supply chain. Our action was to show solidarity with the people of Gaza in a material, not abstract, way — not to appeal to weapons factory workers or to the New Hampshire masses.”

Paige: “I think we need to worry less about alienating the movement and more about escalating resistance to fascism and imperialism here at home. The ideological split in the movement about tactics, in my view, is more about the aims of those on either side of the divide and less about the tactics *per se*. What really differentiates these two conflicting tendencies is that one seeks to realize socialism in the imperial core,

and rallies primarily about the injustices of capitalism and their effect on the *American* proletariat, and the other represents a staunch anti-imperialist position and seeks to open up a front of resistance against imperialism at home, in order to stand in actual solidarity with the national liberation struggles around the world that are casting off the yoke of the US empire and bringing about a global revolution that frees everyone from capitalism, imperialism, and fascism.

People need to come to terms with the fact that fascism *is*, in fact, our material reality, and that any meaningful resistance to it will be met with *significant* political repression. The only way to dismantle a system like that is through militant resistance. Any potential ally not willing to face that reality, and would instead critique tactics as alienating or harming one's credibility, is not a real ally to the revolution. I understand that there is hesitance to engage in escalatory action in the face of state repression, but **to be reduced to posturing about the morality or respectability of these tactics in general is only doing the state's counterinsurgency for them.**"

As we talk, I am thinking about what this last year looked like in American politics and organization. How hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people took to the streets, were arrested, and participated in all kinds of actions and material support for the people of Palestine. How *much* of that work fell *alarmingly* flat.

I am thinking about the "Uncommitted National Movement," a grassroots pro-Palestinian group, which intensified efforts to influence the Democratic Party's stance on the supporting Israel by doing things like convincing over 100,000 voters in Michigan – approximately 13% of the electorate – to cast ballots for "uncommitted" in the Democratic presidential primary. When delegates from this movement, who had secured positions at the Democratic National Convention, demanded a Palestinian speaker at the convention to address their concerns, their request was denied. Ultimately, they endorsed Kamala Harris, whose policy towards Israel, at least as of the publishing of this piece, has not materially changed.

Alex: "So what role do you think a typical protest versus something like sabotage should play in these movements? Do you see one as more effective than the other?"

Calla: "In any liberation struggle there is a time and place for mass rallies, for economic boycotts, for political education, for petty vandalism, for sabotage, for urban guerrilla warfare, for all of the above. A diversity of tactics only works, though, if we are building our capacity to inflict material blows on our enemy and win the ultimate victory.

Fanon said that colonialism 'will only yield when confronted with greater violence.' Fanon's statement is confirmed by the international

failure of a year of mass rallies fetishizing 'non-violence' and cooperation with police. Around-the-clock rallies and days of action with no escalation have become a demobilizing force: they serve as a pressure release for people's pent-up anger and energy, and then people go home, usually only having yelled at an empty building and listened to speeches saying what everyone there already knows and agrees with.

I see a defeatist tendency coming from some people in the imperial core who think that we are exempt from taking part in the resistance, that people in the Global South should be doing all the dying, that the only thing we can do is passively voice our outrage and appeal to the non-existent morality of the oppressors. We cannot afford to be defeatist, but we should look at what has worked and what hasn't, be honest about our errors, and strategize how to correct these errors and escalate."

Alex: "So, what works?"

Calla: "Direct action, community organizing, confrontation with the police, and secondary/tertiary targeting successfully shut down the first Elbit facility in the US in my hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Two of us are still facing charges there, but everyone else's charges have been dropped.

Through sabotage and property damage tactics, Palestine Action UK has permanently shut down several Elbit facilities and forced investors – most recently Barclays – to divest. In Atlanta, the united front against fascist state repression, the mass orgs' general non-disavowal of militants, the deepening of clandestine tendencies, and militants' continued attacks on police and surveillance infrastructure appear to have kept organization from disintegrating there in the face of extreme counterinsurgency.

And even *if* Cop City is built, the slogan of the movement there is, '*If you build it, we will burn it.*' The struggle went far beyond the initial goal of shutting down a brick-and-mortar facility - Stop Cop City can be understood as a framework for people's war against the police state. Similarly, even if the university encampments did not win divestment, they *did* radicalize tens of thousands of people and give them front-line experience. Each of these experiences have created new layers of militants and led to qualitative leaps in our long-term strategy."

Paige: "The fact that there is a distinction at all between protest and sabotage is based on arbitrary conceptions of what is 'violent' and 'non-violent.' Typical protests are upheld as 'non-violent' and 'peaceful,'