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Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by Aviva Stahl | November 27, 2013

The following is a partial transcript of an interview with Ray Luc Levasseur, a former political prisoner who spent over fifteen years in solitary confinement, primarily at USP Marion and ADX Florence. Levasseur was raised in Maine, born to a working-class family of Quebecois origin. He became politically radicalized about race and class at a young age, first after serving a term of duty in Vietnam, and again after he spent two years in a Tennessee prison. After his release in 1971, Levasseur worked with Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), as well as a prisoners rights group Statewide Correctional Alliance for Reform (SCAR). In 1975, Levasseur and several others founded the United Freedom Front (UFF), a revolutionary Marxist organization aimed at challenging racism, imperialism and corporate greed, primarily by targeting institutions complicit in South African Apartheid and regime brutality in Central America. Levasseur and his comrades conducted a series of robberies and bombings against military facilities, military contractors and corporations, always forewarning the selected sites in an effort to avoid casualties. UFF members lived underground for nearly a decade before eventually facing arrest.

After his 1986 conviction for the bombing offenses, Levasseur was sent into solitary at the Control Unit at USP Marion. In 1994 he was transferred to the newly built ADX Florence, most likely for refusing to work for the Federal Prison Industries (UNICOR) since it produced military equipment for the Department of Defense. Levasseur was released from prison in 2004 and now lives in Maine. He continues to organize against solitary confinement and support political prisoners on the inside.

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AS: First, Id like to hear a little bit about the work SCAR did, because I found it really fascinating and inspiring. Maybe for people who dont know as much about working from a prisoner abolitionist or a prison justice perspective, could we here a little more about the political perspective you worked from in SCAR?

RL: This was back in the early 1970s, where there was a surge of anti-prison activism in the US at the time, because this was still in the years of the Attica Rebellion, and George Jackson, there was a lot of revolts and rebellions throughout the US prison system, culminating in the massacre of prisoners in Attica. But this set the stage for people being more interested in alternatives to this draconian system of punishment and abuse. And there was more about it in the media there was an opportunity there to do community organizing that had some roots in prison work, jail work, working with former prisoners, and generally criminal justice issues.

And our program with SCAR was based on the early Black Panther Party programs, what they called survival programs. So that instead of just going into a neighbourhood or a community and spouting a bunch of radical rhetoric or rhetoric of any kind it was like we felt we had to have some programs that addressed some needs in the community.

For example there was a problem in poor communities. They have a bail program in the United States, where if you were accused of an offense, there was supposed to be a monetary bail placed on you, so that can be secured and you can be released before your trial. A lot of youngsters were being held in jail because they couldnt afford the bail money. If bail is 50 or 100 dollars and you dont have it, it might as well be 100,000 dollars, so we started a community bail fund, and we would screen people that were arrested and put into country jail to try to get them out trough this bail fund, and then work to see that they had proper legal representation and get them employment if they needed it, or other basic needs, and try to work it from that angle, in terms of keeping them from falling any deeper into the system.

AS: Something that really struck me while I was reading your trial statement from 89, where you talked about being inside and fighting the KKK and the prison administration, and not even being able to tell the difference between the two at times. I wondering if you could speak about how your time in prison shaped you as an anti-racist activist.

RL:. [T]heres a convergence of class and race in the American prison and it was extraordinarily clear to me when I was in this Southern prison that first of all almost everyone thats in there is from a working class background, and second, theres a large disproportionate number of Black prisoners in there. And to see the abuses and the awful conditions under which we were kept Prisons in this country are

like concentration camps for the poor. We are the surplus value of the capitalist system. They dont have any need for us. Were expendable. You spent too much time hanging on street corners, and they think youre potentially a threat to them. They need the prisons, and the prison gulag in this country has exploded in population since the prison experience you were referring to back in 1971.

Concurrently, with this direct experience inside, I was doing a tremendous amount of reading on my own, and talking to other prisoners. So my political ideas were being further formulated, based on that experience. And the reading and studying that I was doing I read Marx, I read Lenin, I read Ho Chi Minh, I read Che Guevara, I read anthologies of labour history, feminist history. And I was trying to come up with an alternative vision of society based on historically what had happened after that point, and this was in the wake of major anti-colonial struggle around the world.

You dont see this a lot today. I find that in a lot of activists theres a lack of vision of whats possible. But back then, a lot more seemed possible to more people

AS: I wanted to talk to you a bit about your time in prison in the 80s and the 90s. First, could you talk a bit about your time in Marion your most vivid memories, or anything else youd like to share?

RL: Well, I was in Marion almost five years, and at the time that I was there, it was the governments most extremely punitive prison that kept you in your cell 22 hour a day, basically solitary confinement. Marion was never designed with that in mind, but thats ultimately what it was used for. The physical structure it was not initially built for extreme isolation.

So after Id been in there for almost five years, they built a new scheme, the federal government. They build a new prison from the ground up that, from the time the first brick was put down, it was physically designed for extreme isolation. That was ADX, thats what theyre using as supermax today. And so when ADX was completed, those of us in Marion were the very first prisoners sent to ADX.

AS: And what were your first impressions of Florence were when you were transferred there, after being at Marion?

RL: Would you like me to read you something I just wrote? Ill just read an excerpt as part of my writing a section on Marion and ADX, and I just finished, this is my second draft.

So the section Im going to read to you starts up from the day I arrived at ADX*[Levasseurs description of life inside ADX Florence has been posted separately as a Voices from Solitary, and is available here.]*

AS: And when you were in Marion or ADX, around all of that, what tactics did you use to stay as safe or as sane as you could?

RL: First of all, solitary confinement does not respect any ideology, or any idealism, religion. It doesnt respect any of that because it doesnt respect a persons basic humanity. Its designed to basically erode a persons sense of worth as a human being. And to be a healthy functioning human being. So whoevers in that situation, there is no immunity. Its going to affect different people in different ways. My position is that nobody should be subjected to long-term solitary confinement its anti-human. But, there are certain people that are more vulnerable than others to its effects.

The first thing [that helped me stay sane] is knowing why I was in prison. I think if I had gone to prison for stealing or slinging drugs, I think it would have had even more of negative impact on me. If I had been in that situation for doing something strictly for my own benefit or profit. But I had come off a commitment and a sacrifice where I was part of a group that was challenging, trying to expose the criminal activity of the United States government, and to bring that to the publics attention, and to try to be part of a larger movement to bring an end to these crimes

I always kept in mind why I was there, I felt like people had questioned my tactics, but they cant question our hearts, that we felt we were on the right side of history, no matter if we lost this battle, we were fighting for the people that mattered most

So, I think that was a big factor right there. When I got to Marion a good friend of mine wrote to me and he said, alright, now you no longer have access to all the militant tools in your political toolkit you have to write. I did a lot of writing when I was on the inside. I stayed as politically engaged as I could.

I think that my political identity and my political life that was a big part. Its a political identity, not a criminal identity. And the more I wrote, the more I got published, mainly essays and some collections, the more those circulated, the more people wrote to me, the more they wrote to me the more correspondence I had, I was dialoguing with activists all over the country, essentially. They couldnt visit me, but at least I could write

AS: When you heard the ECHR [European Court of Human Rights]ruling about Florence [ADX], tell me how you felt about the ruling itself. Whether you were surprised, and also in the judgement, how they talked about the step-down program meaning that isolation wasnt indefinite, or that isolation wasnt complete because prisoners were able to shout through the rafters, all of that.

RL: ADX opened in 1984 and there were people there like me, who arrived at the beginning of it. Those people are still there. Not all of them, no, but I know individuals who have never gotten out of it, from the time it opened up. 94 is 18 years ago. And they did the same thing at Marion. The program in terms of how you can get out of there is so arbitrarily instituted that for any and no reason they can just keep you there

And as far as the ruling goes, was I surprised? I wasnt surprised by the ruling. I mean, its the Europeans. Theyre not noted for their humanity. Obviously the prison policies in a number of European states are much better than in the American prison system, theres no doubt about that. But it didnt surprise me because I think the US, the power of the United States government reaches into every other country on this globe, and extrapolate that into their institutions, their influence is tremendous

What I took away from [the ruling] was essentially that the European Court [the ECHR] took every affidavit submitted by the Federal Bureau of Prisons in this country saying, theres nothing wrong with ADX or the way we implement long-term solitary confinement.

They took every one of those affidavits and credited them, completely, without question Which is what you see the courts in this country do. And [the ECHR] discredited, basically, anything that came from a prisoner or a critic or a human rights organization about the policies and practices at ADX.

AS: You were transferred out of ADX into the general population in a prison in Georgia. What was it like to go into general population?

RL: It was challenging for a couple of reasons. One that was when I got there, to Atlanta Georgia, which is a maximum security prison, but its what you call open population, people have jobs, recreation yard, some educational activities, you go to a mess hall to eat, but its still maximum security.

The first was that they wouldnt let me into [general] population, they kept me in solitary, what you call the hole, sometimes theyre called special management units segregation units, essentially.[But] after months of pressuring and lobbying from people outside, they finally relented and let me into the regular part of the prison.

And it was clear, right away, even from the other prisoners, one look at me and they know that I came from ADX, because I was totally wired. I was hard wired for I wasnt used to being around all these other men. I wasnt used to being around everybody moving at one time to go to the mess hall, and Id get into the mess hall and the noise level in a place like ADX your senses start to constrict, because thats the purpose of a boxcar cell and the whole isolation regime, is to reduce your senses to the absolute lowest common denominator, and between the pressure of isolation and your own withdrawing senses then you get into a regular prison, and all those things sight, smell, sound, movement it all grates at you. Youre not prepared for it. Its like, my head was on a swivel

AS: And did that just take time to adjust to?

RL: Yeah, that takes time. All youre doing is adjusting to a maximum security prison! But when I got out, mind you later, I had to make significantly more adjustments, because behind of that I had years of being in Marion and ADX and various segregation units. The residue of that never completely leaves you, it never does, and it never will.

I would defy anybody who spent years in supermax cell to say that it had absolutely no effect on them. Everyone comes out scarred or burned to some degree its a question of degrees and how that meshes with the individual, and how that individual carries it to the outside world.

AS: My last question I read in Becky Thompsons book that the first time you got out of prison, you really saw the importance of having prisoners be key leaders in social movements, and the importance of engaging in solidarity with prisoners. I was hoping you could just talk a little bit about your experiences of solidarity your perspective as someone whos engaged in work both from the outside and from the inside.

RL: When I first got out of prison in was in the early 1970s, and it was a much different political climate then. Im a believer in self-determination that communities of people that are oppressed, that are being exploited, the leadership and direction for that [these political struggles] change should come from those people.

..And thats why I think with Muslim prisoners its necessary that people from the Muslim community get more directly involved in supporting these prisoners and around issues related to the whole spectre of federal agents and others saturating Muslim communities and infiltrating and spying and all of this. Like I said the leadership and direction has to come out of those communities.

As far as supporting people on the inside, theres a lot of things to do One of the ways I survived was all that people that wrote to me sent me cards, sent me books, sent me photographs, stayed in consistent contact with me through letters. And I did a speaking gig in some college in Boston about a month ago and I mentioned that when I was at ADX, I had received a letter out of nowhere from a Vietnam vet I didnt know. He was in Canada at the time and he had put a maple leaf that was changing colour into the letter. Now they dont allow things like that at ADX, they dont allow you dont see a blade of grass in ADX. I got a letter with a leaf in there, theyll call it a nuisance item, theyll remove it as contraband but somehow, some way the mail room missed this leaf, and I got it in my cell and it was red and orange and yellow, it was changing colours. And the fact that I can talk about it twenty years later thats something that no matter how lonely I got, I know that Im not alone. Because theres people like that that remember you. They found that in a cell search a few days later, they found that leaf I couldnt hide it well enough, and they took it. But that was an important strand in the web of humanity that reached out to me and that I reached out to, that enabled me to get through those days and weeks and months and years in there.

So I dont think anything should be thought of as too trivial or too small. That kind of human contact is essential to get yourself through a dehumanizing situation. Not just to survive it, but to survive it with your own humanity intact

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September 29, 2022

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Hey ray,its billy Rosario. I was at Marion and adx with you. I was completely elated to see that you were paroled. It would be nice to hear from you. God bless you and your family

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