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You Can’t Kill the Spirit of a Revolutionary: Susan Rosenberg on the Lexington Control Unit for Women

Interview by Dylan Brown of The Abolitionist

Editors’ Note: The following article is a transcript of a conversation between Dylan Brown of The Abolitionist Editorial Collective and former anti-imperialist political prisoner, Susan Rosenberg. In 1986, Susan Rosenberg was one of the first women imprisoned in the High Security Unit at FCI Lexington, an experimental total lockdown isolation unit in the basement of a building.

Susan Rosenberg on the Lexington Control Unit for Women

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In all work regarding repressive units it has to be opened its doors to experience and physical examination. Memory loss, impairment, dizziness and weight loss are exacerbated.

Even before it opened, the National Women to Rican Political Prisoners Committee to Defend New Afrikan Fighters declared it a joint demonstration at Marion and Lexington. The Lexington Control Unit was a founding member of the Committee to Defend New Afrikan Fighters, which was one of the parties in the Harris v. Weinberger case. The Committee was founded in the late 1970’s - but not really. During this period revolutionary activity was going on in Texas in the late 1970’s - but not really. During this period revolutionary activity was going on in Texas in the early 1980’s, but really only when the grass roots were building and organizing. CEML opened up conversations and created space, but change can happen only when the vision of the people is clear and the toxic waste is being cleared out ways the grass roots need to be actual and put to be positive realistic action is based.

Susan Rosenberg was one of the first women imprisoned in 1986, in the High Security Unit (HSU) in 1986, and the significance of this unit in the effort to contain and control women involved in revolutionary struggles.
revolutionaries, New African freedom fighter revolutionaries, and anti-imperialist political prisoners. Let’s take in this moment part of revolutionary movements which were caught, tried, and imprisoned—of which I was one.

In the 1970s, the “war on drugs” began as rhetoric that turned into a literal war, again against Black, Puerto Rican, and poor communities, instituting a whole generation of people going to prison in the 1970s and 1980s. The US government was building more repressive apparatuses—high-security prisons—for the current wave of revolutionary political activism against the US and for which, in the future, examples for how people imprisoned under these torture-like conditions utilizing isolation as the mechanism to drive people either insane or to die by suicide. While solitary confinement and torture existed already, it hadn’t existed at this scale, and in such a systematic targeted way.

There were a number of factors that went into creating the conditions for these units. The first lock-down prisons were in the federal prison system—the Marion prison was one of the very early prisons in complete lockdown, which meant everybody in that prison was in solitary confinement and in units that existed for that purpose. Before Marion and Lexington, there was an experimental isolation wing at FPC Alderson where Dr. Benjamin Spock had much more lenient policies. Sally Struthers, Marilyn Buck, Susan Saxe, Safiyah Bukari and Lolita Lebrón were all imprisoned temporally but as part of revolutionary political and literal activity.

Rosenberg: Well, I think Lexington HSU was an experiment by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and the FBI. The point of that unit was to break us, to put us into a political box, to drive us into the margins of society, “to go crazy,” to isolate us, and try to break the movement’s support of us and our relationship to the movement. That was really the intention. And while we won litigation against Lexington HSU and got the unit closed, it was overturned on appeal. Up until Marion and Lexington, you were sentenced to prison, and if people went inside, the BOP could throw anybody in any prison in any location for any length of time without any due process or external accountability around that. This gave them the power to build these units in multiple places, which they did over the rest of the 1980s and the 1990s. It was also the period where the rise in the actual population of people in prison grew exponentially. These numbers remained on the rise—with the war on crime, the war on drugs, and then the war on terror, which came a little later.

While we won something and were able to expose some of the terrible treatment that we [political prisoners] were getting, we always took the position that if they can do it to us, then they can massify it and do it to everybody. The PIC emerged out of the desire to incapacitate large numbers of people and that’s what they did in part by building lockdown prisons like ADX Florence, the super-max—which have two tiers. There are also isolation medical units in the federal prison. More recently, COVID-19 protocol is that everyone will have to be on lockdown, which is what we called an isolation unit or not. The goal to truly incapacitate thousands and thousands of people becomes really central to the mission of the BOP and prisons at the state-level all across the country. From the time that I was one of the first women in the Lexington HSU, the classification of control units has just become enormous. The BOP and the Justice Department at the time were doing everything in their capacity to destroy people, how people imprisoned under these torture-like conditions utilizing isolation as the mechanism to drive people either insane or to die by suicide. While solitary confinement and torture existed already, it hadn’t existed at this scale, and in such a systematic targeted way.

Rosenberg: It’s important to make a division between doing “reform” vs abolition because abolition has a completely different meaning. Having won anything. Because really, everybody makes decisions when they’re inside. The question is—are they going to resist that day? Are they going to comply that day? Are you gonna have a fight?”

There is no rehabilitation—there’s only suffering. The stories of people who survived those units are not the majority of people. The majority of people get destroyed by those units. The PIC has gone through major changes over the past several decades. Unfortunately, what we thought then has come to pass—if they could do it to this group of five to six men in a basement in Kentucky—then they’re going to do it everywhere. And that is what happened.

Brown: The Lexington HSU was shut down in 1988, yet control units have continued to spread throughout the US. Numerous lawsuits and political dangers are there in legislative organizing that we need to anticipate as best we can in our struggle against imprisonment? In other words, what advice or lessons would you share with abolitionist organizers today from the fight to close Lexington HSU?

Brown: I appreciate this response because what I’m hearing in your answer is the necessity of having a diversity of tactics and strategies within a given campaign to build power and achieve your goal. At Critical Resistance, we have a three-pronged campaign organizing approach that combines legislative, legal, and direct action strategies: grassroots outreach and mobilization, and disciplined media and communications work to shift our terrain and “chip away” at the PIC’s power, resources, legitimacy, and scale over time. When we’re doing an anti-imprisonment or anti-police-campaign in coalition with other organizations, there will be a legal or legislative strategy, but it’s not the sole strategy being deployed. This is a good reminder of the importance of having a diversity of tactics in our organizing work, while remaining clear on our goal and the ultimate political horizon we are organizing towards.

Brown: SHIFTING TO YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE OF IMPRISONMENT, WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE UPON YOUR RELEASE FROM LEXINGTON HSU AS A FORMER POLITICAL PRISONER WHO EXPERIENCED THE WORST OF THE WORST PRISON CONDITIONS DESIGNED TO SHRINK AND STARVE THE PRISON POPULATION AND COMMITMENT TO REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZING?
Rosenberg: After the BOP closed Lexington, they immediately opened the first maximum security women’s prison, and that’s where I went right after Lexington. They had FCI Alderson, which was considered “max,” but looked like a farm, it was a different prison environment. There were 100 people in total isolation instead of three, so already we were seeing how they were expanding their own strategy even after we left the closure of Lexington at that point. They were committed to building these types of prisons for women. I was there for three years, and then after that I went to general population. What happened at Lexington didn’t ever go away. I remember Lexington very well to this day over 25 years later. The communities that I built and the relationships I had with other women in prison helped me. They became my best friends and helped me through the very worst of the aftermath of those psychological issues that I experienced at Lexington.

When we were at Lexington, people on the outside would say, “Stop the torture! Stop the torture!” And we all said, it’s not torture. For us, this idea about psychological torture was not something that we really understood, even though we knew they were playing terrible mental games with us. For our own kind of self-worth, we didn’t want to admit that we were being tortured—but we were. They were torturing us. And when I got out, I recognized that’s actually what had happened—and was happening in other places in other ways for a long time.

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Once I got out I decided that I would go to a psychological therapy. I went to the NYU Program for Survivors of Torture. I wanted to go to a place where whether they agreed with my self-identity as a political prisoner or not, they would understand the experiences I had as torture. I wouldn’t have to beg a therapist to agree with me that I was a political person or accept that reality. I didn’t need to have a therapist to help me recover. I didn’t come out and not have a support network. I even got a master’s inside when I was in general population. I could not have done that without access to resources outside.

Brown: You’ve been organizing against imperialism and oppression since the last era at least in the US when many people thought revolution was near. You were targeted as part of the counter-insurgency that the PIC emerged to wage against people making demands for change. Considering how you’ve continued to engage in political struggle and organize decades later, how have you seen our movements shift? Are you hopeful for lasting change? What do you think it would take what given you know from our movements past and now, to build a strong enough movement that can truly contend with the PIC and abolish its tools, including particularly vicious ones like control units?

Rosenberg: It feels like COINTELPRO again to me. It feels like that period of change. Conditions are really different. I do believe that we are seeing more and more war-like activity by the right wing. This is compelling us to think about what we can do to respond—and that is a huge challenge that we’re all facing and are going to face more and more.

I don’t want to live in a world where this is what the norm is. I think many people don’t want to live in a world like that. It’s incumbent on us who have a view of what kind of a world we wish we could have—need to have—to keep doing the work. That’s part of why I’m a teacher, it’s a platform and a mechanism by which I can put ideas in the world to people who live the experience of all of this repression, but might not and don’t necessarily have the analytic tool to make sense of it. It doesn’t make it acceptable, but once you have those tools you can make a decision about what to do or not to do about it. The summer of 2020 were the largest demonstrations ever in American history against white supremacy and the police. The state recognized this, and that’s part of what we are seeing now with this incredible right-wing, white supremacist, pro-imperialist, capitalist response by Democrats and Republicans and what they’re pushing for our society.

I’m not as optimistic as I was when I thought we were going to have a revolution in 10 years, but I do believe that there is a thread—a red thread—a group underneath that’s always going to keep fighting. I hope I’m going to be part of that group until I’m not around anymore. There are thousands of people who will be, as well. If we want to make the kind of changes that abolition articulates so brilliantly, we’re going to have to keep fighting. Keep fighting, struggling, organizing, and all of those things. Has the movement changed? Yeah, and for the better in some ways even though it’s not as globally connected as we once were and anti-imperialism has somewhat of a different meaning now. I think the intersectionality that has evolved over the last 20 years around Black women’s leadership in particular and issues of misogyny, white supremacy, and the real clear linking of those in our understanding and how to deal with those things has a huge advance. I don’t think it can be undervalued how important that is. So that makes me very optimistic.

Author Bio: Susan Rosenberg is a human rights and prisoners’ rights advocate, adjunct lecturer, award-winning writer, speaker, abolitionist, and a former US political prisoner. Currently she is an adjunct lecturer at Hunter College.

FEATURES

Liberxy tuttex: The struggle to abolish the carcere duro regime in Italy

By the Rome Assembly Against Prison and Repression

“We are at the end of the 41-bis, and the 41-bis is the regime of life imprisonment. So, an anarchist, communist and revolutionaries around the world are saying—” – Alfredo Cospito

Alfredo Cospito, a 55-year-old imprisoned anarchist in Italy, has been fighting for decades against the “41-bis regime,” a system of punishment in Italian prisons that he describes as “hard core” or “terrorist” concentration camps.

The system of “41-bis” was introduced in Italy in the 1970s in response to a series of terrorist attacks by political activists. The system was designed to hold prisoners who were considered to be “terrorists” or “political criminals” on long-term isolation and solitary confinement, with little access to the outside world.

Cospito, who was first imprisoned in the 1970s, has been a vocal critic of the system and has been involved in protests and hunger strikes against it. In 1981, he went on a 107-day hunger strike to protest the inhumane conditions of life in prison under the 41-bis regime.

The system has been widely criticized for its inhumane conditions and for the way it has been used to hold prisoners who are not considered to be political activists. In recent years, there has been growing opposition to the system, and there have been some efforts to reform it.

“Today I am ready to die to understand what 41-bis really is. It is that my death will be an obsta...” – Alfredo Cospito

Only certain prisoners are subject to the 41-bis regime, and those prisoners are typically those who are considered to be “political criminals.” The system is widely seen as a form of political persecution and as a way to silence political activists.

Cospito has been involved in protests and hunger strikes against the 41-bis regime for decades, and he has been a vocal critic of the system. He has been imprisoned multiple times under the 41-bis regime, and he has been on several hunger strikes to protest the inhumane conditions of life in prison.

The system is widely seen as a form of political persecution and as a way to silence political activists. In recent years, there has been growing opposition to the system, and there have been some efforts to reform it.

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Inmates in confrontation—without differentiation in Italy—often suffer from psychological illnesses. The condition of prisoners into “good,” “bad” and “ugly” categories is a system that has its origins in the 1970s in Italy. For example, in the 1970s, the Ministry of Justice or the Minister of Justice would suspend certain prisoners in total isolation upon a hunger strike brought about by the suspension of life imprisonment and solitary confinement of the 41-bis regime under pull.