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'This is injustice': how leftist zines were used to sentence anti-ICE protesters to decades in prison

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20–26 minutes

It's the day after Mother's Day, the first one Elizabeth Soto has spent apart from her three children. Sitting in jail in Wichita Falls, [Texas](#), her face is washed out by the overhead fluorescent lighting, and her dingy jumpsuit blends into the cinder block walls surrounding her.

Speaking through a glass separator, she tells me she celebrated the holiday with her children over the jail's video-call system while they had dinner at their grandmother's. "I've been a full-time mother all of their lives," she said. "I've never been away from them."

Soto's children have not visited her in jail, which lies on Texas's northern border near Oklahoma, hours from their home in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Elizabeth Soto has only seen her husband, Ines Soto, once over the past year, the longest they've spent apart since they first started dating more than 20 years ago. He is being held in a federal prison more than 100 miles away.

On Tuesday, Elizabeth was sentenced to 50 years in federal

prison; Ines's sentencing is set for 1 July. All because, as she put it: "They didn't like my book club." Her laugh doesn't quite reach her eyes.

Last year on the Fourth of July, a small group from Dallas-Fort Worth held a night-time noise demonstration, setting off fireworks outside the Prairieland Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facility south of the cities, in solidarity with the detainees. A few protesters broke away and spray-painted graffiti on employees' cars and a security post, slashed the tires on a government van, and broke a security camera. The facility's guards ordered the protesters to disperse, and most of them did. When a police officer arrived at the scene, drawing his gun, an armed protester shot her rifle, hitting the officer in the shoulder. The officer survived.

After a three-week trial, a jury found eight of nine protesters guilty of "providing material support to terrorists", among other crimes. For the Sotos, this "material support" included owning a "printing press" used to print anarchist zines and being part of a leftist book club, the federal government argued. The couple had already left the scene by the time guns were drawn. All eight of the defendants sentenced so far have received unusually harsh sentences – 30 to 100 years – essentially life in prison.

[Their attorneys announced their intention](#) to appeal, but many supporters are doubtful that anything short of a presidential pardon from a future administration would free them.

The Prairieland case was the first tried and convicted under the Trump Department of Justice's "counter-terrorism" initiatives [targeting "antifa"](#) – short for antifascist – a decentralized

movement the administration has officially categorized as a “domestic terrorist organization”. The federal government argued the Prairieland defendants, what they called a [“North Texas Antifa cell”](#), had planned the demonstration as an assassination attempt against a law enforcement officer. The government alleged this conspiracy even though the defendants were loosely connected, and some who attended the protest did not even know each other.

The conviction of the Prairieland defendants has shocked [legal and civil liberties experts](#), who say the Trump administration is making examples of them and setting a dangerous precedent for what this means for the first amendment right to protest and to create and distribute information.

“It is not only an attempt at chilling speech,” said Chip Gibbons, policy director at the advocacy group Defending Rights and Dissent, “but an indication that the [the [Trump administration](#) is] going to continue going after protests extremely hard.”

In total, 22 people have been charged in connection with the protest: [five others took plea deals](#), another five have state charges pending and three more were indicted last month. What the federal government has described as “antifa extremists” are activists you’d find anywhere in the US: trans people, tattoo artists, vegans and anti-ICE community members who engage in mutual aid. The federal government’s focus on the possession of leftwing literature, including zines, and other basic security measures common in our modern era – like owning Faraday bags, meant to block wireless signals to prevent surveillance; using the encrypted messaging app Signal; or dressing in all-black clothing – is alarming to activists.

“Zines are a foundational first amendment document” going back to the [Federalist papers](#), said Xavier de Janon, the director of mass defense at the National Lawyers Guild and the attorney representing Elizabeth in her state case. “Zines discussing ideas of revolution, mutual aid, ideas of a world after capitalism should not be able to be criminalized in and of themselves ... That’s just dangerous to all of us.”

The Emma Goldman book club

The Sotos’ crimes largely stem from a “printing press” that the FBI noticed during the initial raid of their home: a standard office printer, a paper cutter and a book binder. During the raid, one of the Sotos’ children told Elizabeth’s attorney that police put a bag over their head and brought them in for an interrogation; another child was interrogated in the home. Elizabeth only found out about their child being taken for interrogation from an article published by the [anarchist collective Crimethinc](#) that was later made into a zine. The justice department did not return the Guardian’s request for comment on the raid of the Sotos’ house, its attacks against the first amendment or its unusual use of counterterrorism law.

The federal prosecution argued the Sotos used [the printing press to produce anti-government zines](#) for a book club they and some of the other defendants were part of, named for the celebrated 20th-century anarchist Emma Goldman, who 99 years ago this month was arrested on [conspiracy charges](#) for organizing against the first world war draft.

At the book club, the group read political zines on subjects like “a journal of materialist feminism” and “a call for the eradication of

artificial intelligence from the face of the earth” – perhaps niche, but [nothing illegal](#), an FBI agent testified in court. Still, the FBI seized these zines, along with the printing press and a collection of poetry about losing a sibling to cancer.

Zines have been an important source of information for leftwing community organizing for decades, in part because they're analog and can be anonymous. They've become even more important during the second Trump administration, amid the rise of the [state surveillance of protesters](#) and [aggressive social media censorship](#). In many local bookstores, libraries and coffee shops across the US, you can find “know your rights” zines explaining how to legally observe ICE agents or how to maintain anonymity at a protest.

“It definitely feels like there's an overarching project to limit the amount of information that people have,” said Dario Sanchez, another Prairieland defendant, who did not attend the protest. Sanchez is facing state charges, not federal, and his trial has yet to be scheduled. He was charged with tampering with evidence after removing two other defendants from a Signal chat after the shooting.

During the trial, federal prosecutors argued that the possession of these zines and other leftist materials, like stickers with the letters “ACAB” (a slogan that stands for “all cops are bastards”) or “Chinga La Migra” (Spanish for “fuck the immigration police”), were evidence of their participation in an “antifa” terror cell. Prosecutors held up several of the zines in front of the jury for dramatic effect.

One zine found in multiple homes during FBI raids was [a 2019 review](#) of the films Hereditary and Midsommar by the [feminist theorist Sophie Lewis](#), titled: “The Satanic Death-Cult Is Real.”

“If you weren’t crying, you would laugh, because it looks as though they didn’t read any further than the title,” Lewis said, “and so it’s almost like a confession – as though the words on the pamphlet are: ‘We worship the devil, signed, antifa’.”

Donald Trump’s targeting of “antifa” began in his first administration and has only intensified since he retook office. Last month, the Trump administration [issued its “counterterrorism strategy”](#), describing “anarchists and anti-fascists” as “violent left-wing extremists” and equating “pro-transgender ideology” to terrorism. This strategy built upon its National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM-7), issued in September shortly after the killing of far-right commentator Charlie Kirk, which the right inaccurately blamed on violent leftwing protesters and trans people. At least three of the nine people convicted and five of the 22 charged Prairieland defendants are trans; many have been incorrectly named in legal filings, despite having legally changed their names.

“There’s a long history in the US of trying to claim that anarchists or communists, or other -isms on the left, are engaged in criminal conspiracies, and then conflating their activism with those so-called conspiracies, casting a wide net to equate speech with violence or critical acts,” said Gibbons of Defending Rights and Dissent. That history goes back to the conspiracy charges against Goldman – J Edgar Hoover’s early attempt at building the Red Scare – to the political imprisonment of [Black Panther](#) and [American Indian Movement](#) members, to police arresting [George Floyd protesters](#) to control crowds.

Book club members and local activists familiar with the Prairieland case say that the literature and other leftist rhetoric were

presented as evidence of criminality to a jury unfamiliar with or even hostile to the cultural and intellectual diversity in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. They say Johnson county, where the Prairieland facility is located and where defendants were initially jailed, antagonized the defendants, putting them into solitary confinement for weeks, subjecting them to repeated strip-searches and denying them dietary restrictions, while characterizing them as violent terrorists from the big city.

Defendants Autumn Hill and Meagan Morris, both trans women, are being held in men's facilities, where they are [vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse](#) – counter to recent [federal rulings that trans women should be held in women's facilities](#) for their safety.

According to Hill's wife, Lydia Koza, Morris was denied access to hormone treatments while in Johnson county, which could have had severe medical consequences. (The Johnson county sheriff's department did not return the Guardian's request for comment on the defendants' treatment in jail.)

Hill and Morris received 50-year sentences for conspiracy to riot and ambush a law enforcement officer, even though they were not present when the shots were fired.

“[The prosecution] just used the fact that this is not ‘normal’ to most people – you don’t recognize this, therefore it’s sinister,” said Koza. “They’re just anti-intellectual, too: ‘Oh, these defendants read, that’s so fucking scary. You shouldn’t trust people who read. They might be writing things that’ll be dangerous to you.’”

When the FBI pulled up in Swat gear and raided Koza and Hill's house – where they lived with several roommates, plus their three dogs and five cats – agents sent flashbangs through a front

window, leaving burn marks across their floor.

Daniel “Des” Sanchez-Estrada, [an artist, tattooer and green card holder](#), was not at the protest, but his wife, Maricela Rueda, was. When she called him from jail after her arrest, she asked him to tow her car and check on her home. The government recorded the conversation. Soon after, Sanchez-Estrada was stopped by police while moving a box of zines from his home. Many of his illustrations, in the form of stickers or tattoo flash sheets, criticizing ICE and police, were entered into the prosecution’s exhibit files. His arrest has led to the rallying cry written in zines, sewn on to patches and posted [online](#): “Zines are not a crime!”

Sanchez-Estrada was convicted of “corruptly concealing a document or record” and “conspiracy to conceal documents” and sentenced to 30 years in federal prison.

“I worked really hard every day in this country, and I believe in human rights and helping others in need. I donate money and art to help animals and other people,” he told the court before sentencing. “I’m a father, a husband and a teacher. But I’m not a terrorist.”

The precedent set

The Department of Justice’s successful conviction over the possession of leftist, anti-Trump or anti-ICE literature may be novel, but it’s part of the Trump administration’s broader crackdown against protesters. It’s a strategy that’s had little success in the courtroom.

A [ProPublica and Frontline](#) investigation earlier this year found that over a third of more than 300 anti-ICE protest cases “crumbled”. In

Chicago, anti-ICE protesters were charged with conspiring to obstruct law enforcement operations; the case was [tossed last month over alleged prosecutorial misconduct](#), and defendants, known as the Broadview Six, are now [pushing for an investigation into the case's handling](#).

But after the Prairieland conviction, federal prosecutors have had at least one other success: in Spokane, Washington, three people were convicted last month of conspiring to impede a federal officer over a protest to [block an ICE vehicle attempting to transport](#) two migrants. And the justice department shows no signs of stopping. Last week, 15 people in Minneapolis, Minnesota, were hit with the same charges of conspiracy to obstruct ICE operations, and were accused of [being a part of "antifa" groups that "violently oppose immigration law enforcement"](#).

What legal experts say differentiates Prairieland from many other federal protest cases that fell apart was that a police officer was shot. According to Shayana Kadidal, senior managing attorney at the Center for Constitutional Rights, the combination of property damage and injuring an officer is what the state built a conspiracy case around.



📷 Clockwise from top left: Daniel Estrada-Sanchez; Champagne Song and Rowan Gibson; Autumn Hill and Lydia Koza; Savanna Batten; Dario Sanchez; Elizabeth and Ines Soto; Meagan Morris and Hill. Composite: Dallas-Fort Worth Support Committee

While the government said protester Benjamin “Champagne” Song fired directly at the officer with the intention to kill, her attorney showed footage from the shooting that suggested Song fired at the ground as a warning shot or an attempt to distract the officer, raising doubt that she intended to shoot him. Defendants’ supporters have hired an investigator to further study the evidence released from the shooting.

During the trial, the judge refused to let the defendants enter a self-defense plea. Song, a former US marine, was the only one convicted of attempted murder of a government employee and discharging a weapon.

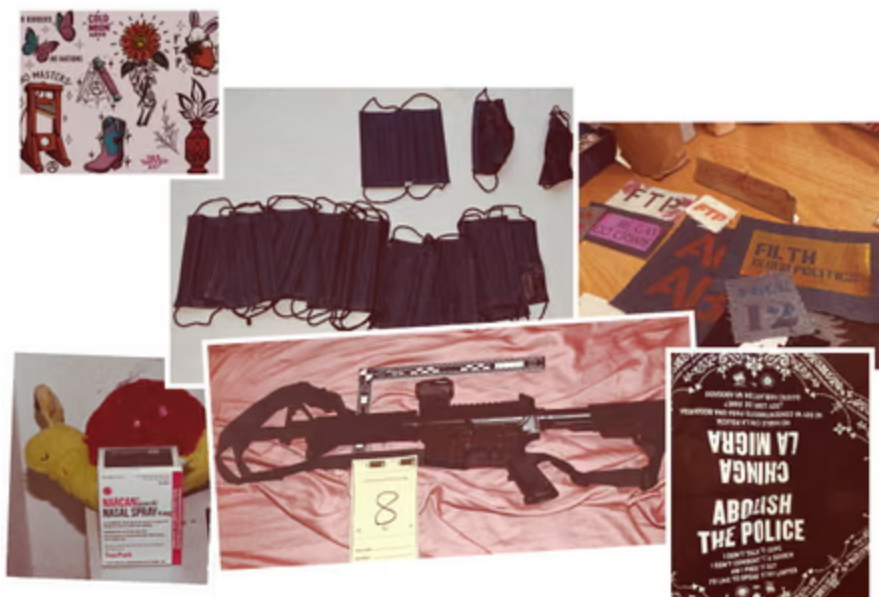
In a statement issued after she received 100 years in federal prison, Song wrote that she brought her weapon out of fear that law enforcement would hurt or kill protesters, as in the cases of Renee Good and Alex Pretti, protesters who were shot and killed by immigration enforcement officers in Minnesota earlier this year.

“This is wrong,” she said of the charges against the 21 others.

“This is mass punishment. This is collective punishment. This is guilt by association. This is injustice.”

Some of the defendants, including Song, were part of the Socialist Rifle Association and legally owned guns, which the federal government presented as evidence of intended violence. Many [marginalized communities](#), especially [trans people](#), have opted to engage in the second amendment in recent years [amid rising hate](#)

[crimes](#). Homemade first-aid kits carried by Prairieland demonstrators were also presented as evidence that they planned for violence.



📷 Photos entered as evidence during the Prairieland's trial showing various items, such as guns, Narcan, protective masks and decals, among other items. Composite: Department of Justice via KERA

Sanchez said making those first-aid kits was “something we were incredibly proud of”. Sanchez is a teacher and started bringing the first-aid kit with him in case he needed to make a tourniquet for a student during a school shooting.

“Is it normal to charge a terrorism offense in this context?” said Kadidal. “It strikes me as excessive, and I think it would strike an ordinary American listening to this conversation as excessive.”

Savanna Batten, another member of the Emma Goldman book club, has been sentenced to 50 years in federal prison. (The eighth defendant convicted, Zachary Evetts, was also sentenced to 50 years.) When I visited her in the Wichita Falls jail in May, her spirits were bright despite her circumstances. I wanted to ask her about what she’s been reading, but wondered if she was scared to

answer.

“It’s crazy that we live in a world where it’s not safe to ask what books you’re reading,” she said. Batten, a vegan who has often had to go hungry in prison, said her life outside revolved around nature and her “companion pets”: a cat named Garfielda, whom she brought on a leash on hikes, and six rescued hermit crabs, the first two of which she found in a dumpster. In jail, she is reading a book about the natural history of crabs, and she tells me that hermit crabs can live for 40 years when not in captivity.

“The irony is not lost ... ” Batten trailed off, hearing herself describe the humanity of hermit crabs inside a jail where the only place she can see the sky is under bars. “I understand that living in captivity is inherently awful.”

What’s next

Legal experts say the precedent set by the Prairieland convictions will have myriad consequences for organizing and protest, including the platforms organizers rely on to safely do that work, like the secure messaging app Signal. After the justice department used the app to gather evidence against the Prairieland defendants, Apple has since responded by patching [a security bug that had allowed the government](#) to view previously deleted messages.

A local chapter of 50501, one of the groups behind the No Kings protests, was also implicated in the Prairieland trial. A witness for the government who claimed to be part of the decentralized movement testified for the prosecution about working with law enforcement during a protest at the same location earlier on the

Fourth of July. However, Hunter Dunn, a national press coordinator for 50501, said he has been unable to reach that individual, and that she doesn't speak on behalf of the group. "The average 50501 group does not have a relationship with law enforcement," said Dunn.

Another local 50501 affiliate was named in the recent Minneapolis protest indictment. Dunn, citing [the Brennan Center for Justice](#), said the FBI is using the Trump administration's NSPM-7 memo to categorize any leftist protest as "domestic terrorism". In doing so, they're "using that meaningless, vacuous description to justify going after protesters that make them personally uncomfortable, or that they fear may lead to the eventual end of their administration by nonviolent means".

Dunn believes that the federal assault on protest rights will have a chilling effect, but it will also do the opposite – invite others to join in.

While Sanchez awaits his state trial, he has been going to weekly potlucks at a Unitarian Universalist church in Fort Worth. Hosted by church members and a support committee for Prairieland defendants, volunteers write character letters to support the defendants while they eat. At a May potluck, organizers laid out zines – about the defendants, with bright illustrations of their faces – on the table with the community dinner. On the day of sentencing, they rallied outside the Fort Worth courthouse, and planned potlucks for the following nights.

With the formation of the support committee, the community around the case has only grown stronger. More people joined, like Amber Lowrey, a school board activist and Batten's sister. Before

the charges, Lowrey didn't understand who anarchists were and didn't know any trans people. She says joining the support committee changed her whole outlook on the world. Now, she has started making social media videos about the case. In a statement alongside the Dallas-Fort Worth Support Committee, Lowrey pledged to fight to overturn the convictions, saying: "We will not rest until they are free!"

The defendants and supporters interviewed by the Guardian said the case casts leftists, trans people or anyone who condemns the Trump administration as threats to Texas society: people the state had already been attacking for years. Koza and Hill moved to the state in 2023, at the height of anti-trans bills across the country, in defiance of that narrative – they had loved ones in Texas, and people who loved them back.

Solidarity for the Prairieland defendants was on display at a local bookstore, which gave away zines describing their case and sold screen-printed patches reading "Song did nothing wrong" and "Zines are not a crime" to cover their bail fees. The support committee is encouraging anyone following the case to launch their own Emma Goldman book clubs. Others have traveled to the area to join the group in mutual aid, protesting outside the courthouse and supporting the defendants. A zine distributor is [selling a packet of zines](#) included in the government's exhibit files to fundraise for the defendants, titled: "The Government Doesn't Want You to Read These Zines."

The defendants and their supporters knew most would get the harshest possible punishment. What keeps them going is the knowledge that nothing lasts forever.

Some of Song's poems, written this winter in solitary confinement, have already been compiled in a zine. The last one is titled "all at once":

Time is a circle

Not a straight line

Our warmest embrace

Happening yesterday

Still happening today

Will go on tomorrow