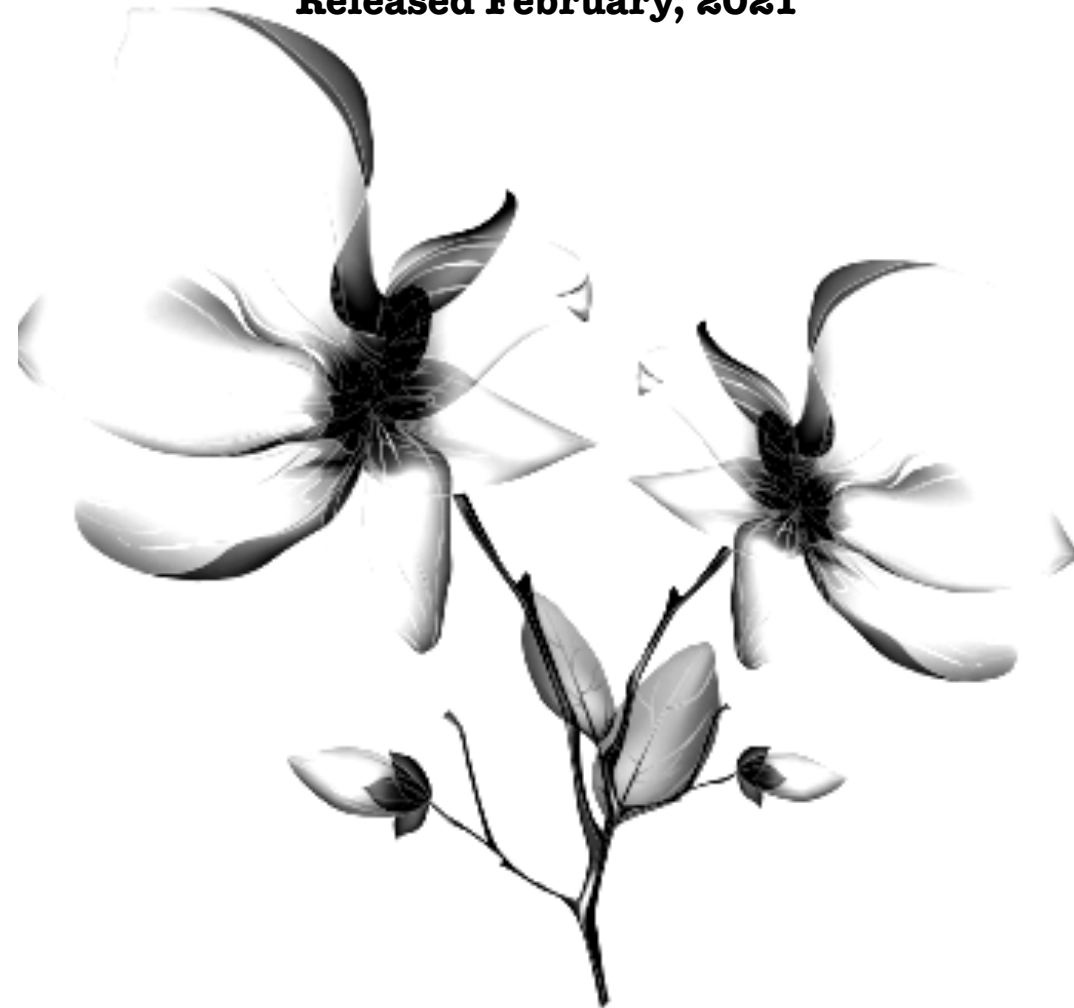


MKE Lit Supply Podcast

Episode 1 – Sean Swain’s The Colonizers Corpse

Released February, 2021



MKE Lit Supply Podcast, Episode 1: The Colonizer’s Corpse (Sean Swain, Author) February, 2021

Our host Tai sits down to discuss Sean Swain’s zine on maintaining mental health while surviving isolation in prison with Ben and Kit.

We were able to record a conversation we had with Sean back in August of 2020, before he was put on an aggressive and draconian communications lockdown.

After speaking with Sean, we hear from his partner Lauren and what their experiences have been since the Sean’s communications have been locked down.

You can write to Sean Swain at:

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THE COLONIZER’S CORPSE

A LIBERATORY APPROACH TO MAINTAINING MENTAL
HEALTH WHILE SUBJECT TO ISOLATION IN PRISON

An update on Sean's situation from his Partner Lauren

All proceeds from our Patreon account directly fund our primary purpose: mailing radical zines and other reading materials for free to prisoners who request them.

We currently mainly serve captives within the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, and as word about our project continues to spread via newsletters from the folks at Black & Pink, Forum For Understanding Prisons and The Community Wisconsin, our reach is spreading more and more into prisons across amerika.

You can find a printable PDF of this and other zines, as well as various writings we've done, notes from prisoners, and all our podcast episodes on our website:

MkeLitSupply.com

LAUREN: Hello, this is Lauren Swain talking about long-term prisoner Sean Swain who is my partner, who is currently being silenced under the guise of Virginia Department of Corrections, more specifically a David Robinson who is the Chief of Corrections. Sean's communication suspension has been going on for eight months, which is contradictory to the VODC's policy on communication suspension which a David Robinson actually wrote. Sean's communication was suspended six months in September, but has now suddenly been extended to April. I'm not sure if America doesn't have a March, or if they vetoed March like NASA vetoed Pluto, I'm not really sure if April is now the sixth month, I'm really curious. So furthermore, as a consequence of Sean's communication suspension, BKCC officials assert that Sean and I can't get married, which is also unconstitutional. On more of a positive note, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights rendered that the case Sean put forth was going to be moved forward about...in terms of the domestic torture that he faced in Ohio. This is the first time in history that the IACHR allowed claims of domestic torture against the United States to proceed past the dismissal stage. So Sean was ideologically targeted by Ohio prison officials in September 2012 and was subject to a year-long torture regimen that he described in a sworn testimony and you can find that at Swain Rocks under the OAS testimony. So, his support team which includes myself is working very hard to get Sean's story out there. We are sending it to media. We are keeping up on social media, you can find Sean on social media to keep up with all the latest updates @swainiac1969 on Instagram. So myself as well as his support team continue to work hard and fight hard as Sean's parole comes back up in August and we are hoping to get him out and into the free world, where he deserves to be.

S: Oh yeah, yeah. This past January, on the final straw, I had an idea that I was gonna read the names of everybody killed by cops for the previous year, you know, for last year. I got the list from I think it was killedbypolice.net, or something, somebody sent it in to me, and I was reading them off, I did a five to seven minute segment every single week. And I didn't get done with the names until like, March.

B: Right, I remember listening to those.

S: When you talk about 9/11, all those people killed in that building, and the trillions of dollars the United States spend as a response to that extermination, and then you look and more people were killed by cops last year, and I'm reading the names for months. And not a penny has been spent to stop the extermination of black people. Not a penny. When you have politicians saying that violence is not the answer...it's not? What is? What is the answer? So, again, and I think this speaks to one of the themes in *Colonizer's Corpse* that kind of run through it like a thread, is that are the people who are giving the orders legitimate? And if they're not, then we have no duty to listen to them. And the violence that they impose upon us is not legitimate. So you come to the rational conclusion that maybe it's time to tip over a cop car.

B: Makes sense, yeah.

S: You know, if a cop car doesn't have the right to be there, then you have to, you know...it's time. And I'm glad that thousands of people have come to that conclusion. And it's a reasonable, rational conclusion given the facts. Given the experience.

TAI: Hello everyone. This is the Milwaukee Lit Supply Podcast edition. My name is Tai and I am the host of the podcast. We're gonna tell you a little bit more about the Milwaukee Lit Supply and what we're doing with this podcast. Here tonight we have...

BEN: Ben.

KIT: Kit.

T: And myself. So, what is the Milwaukee Lit Supply? Ben, can you tell us more about our project?

B: Yeah, so the Milwaukee Lit Supply sends zines and reading materials in to incarcerated people in Wisconsin prisons. We also distribute these same materials to the general public in Milwaukee. Before the pandemic we were going to shows and concerts and events and things like that with a table full of zines and people could pick them up. And that was a way to kind of rally up some donations to help pay for the postage to send the materials in to incarcerated people. With the pandemic we obviously can't do that anymore, and so instead we're relying more heavily on our Patreon, which is patreon.com/mklitsupply. So this podcast is a way to try to, you know, encourage people to go there, donate. Even if you give like five bucks a month that'll send a couple packages of really essential reading materials in to incarcerated people in our state.

T: So tonight, we are discussing the zine titled *The Colonizer's Corpse*. It is written by Sean Swain. Ben, can you give us a little bit more background on the author Sean Swain?

T: Yeah. Sean is incarcerated in Oh well, he's not incarcerated in Ohio. But he is an Ohio prisoner, who has been locked down for probably twenty-some years. He is serving life with the possibility of parole, and he's gonna be up for parole soon. But he's not in Ohio, like I said. He's been transferred out of state, and he's currently in Buckingham Correctional in Virginia because he's caused so much trouble in the Ohio prison system that they don't want him there anymore. He has gone on hunger strikes, he's been in solitary confinement for long stints. I used to be able...I used to live in Ohio, and would visit him. I've talked to him across plexiglass walls, through ad-seg, and really been in the shit and the struggle with him because he is an uncompromising anarchist. He also infuses everything that he does with humor and really incisive wit, and I really appreciate the way that he does the organizing...the way that he embraces the fun side of anarchy without shying away from the challenging and powerful sides of anarchy.

T: Awesome. So we've also got an update from Sean's partner that we'll be adding to the end of this podcast. So do listen all the way through for the end of that...for the end of the show and you will hear that. Kit, do you wanna give us a little bit of a summary of what the zine is really about?

K: Sure. So, when we were talking about this first episode, what we decided would be the first zine that we would do is Sean Swain's *Colonizer's Corpse*, subtitled "A Liberatory Approach to Maintaining Mental Health While Subject to Isolation in Prison." And the reason that we came up with this like basically immediately was because what we do is direct prisoner support and that is essentially what this zine is. Sean was asked, "how do you survive in solitary

keep swinging. And you hope that other people will join in sooner or later. And you hope that even if what you're doing doesn't have the immediate end result that you want, that maybe it stands as an example for someone else. That maybe somebody else will hear about it, that they'll take hope, and they'll respond in a hopeful way and rebel against those forces that are trying to destroy them. And sooner or later, if enough people do that, toppling the state is kind of like cow tipping at that point. If you have enough people pushing on one side, the thing falls over.

B: Which kind of brings us to this summer, everything that's been going on in the last month or so. What is your take on the situation? How much do you know about what's happening outside and what is your feelings about it?

S: Well, ironically, I think this wouldn't have happened without COVID. It was COVID that had everybody trapped in their homes and watching CNN, you know? And watching very disturbing images of somebody's knee on someone else's neck for nine minutes. I don't know if that would've reached people if the baseball season was still going, and if the basketball season was happening, and if people were going back and forth to their jobs and dragging stones up the side of the pyramid for eight to sixteen hours a day. But in the absence of all of that and all the distraction, all we had was the image that confronted us.

B: And an accumulation of those images. You know, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, and like the fact that people couldn't go out and do meaningless, cathartic...well not meaningless, but cathartic pressure-valve-releasing protests for all these other instances and so instead it accumulated up to a breaking point. I think that was entirely about COVID.

B: Right. So I think that brings us to the most challenging part of the zine where there's this idea that rebellion...and you know, George Jackson wrote about this in *Blood in my Eye* right before he was killed for engaging in rebellion, at least apparently an escape attempt. So like, how do you navigate that space of recognizing that you have an enemy, being in resistance to that enemy, but also knowing that that enemy has disproportionate power in the situation and is asking and kind of demanding that you pretend that they're not your enemy?

S: Right, right, yeah. It feels pretty doomed when you're in it. Because that circumstance really sucks. From somebody who experienced it, it's not fun. But for my part, it's...I mean I can only speak for me, in terms of my resistance. And, for me, if you value yourself — which is something this zine talks about — if you value yourself, if you behave in such a way that indicates that you value yourself...I can't let other people walk all over me if I value me. So just as a matter of principle, you have to do something. And sometimes that flies in the face of your immediate comforts and luxuries because if you rebel they're gonna respond to that with a fist to the face and a kick to the groin. You know, that's what they do. The state is sort of like a hammer, it only has one response: it pounds things down. So being in that situation, for me, it was a matter of...and you know, this is kind of like...maybe I'm overthinking it, because I wasn't really thinking in terms of this. But I look back and I see that this was kind of the balancing I was doing. If you need to be motivated by hope or by fear...if fear wins out then you tuck your chin and you do what you're told, and you go along with the program and you try to diminish the harm that's being done to you even though you can't stop the harm. But if you're motivated by hope, then you

confinement?" And he wrote this in response and then the state decided not to share it with other prisoners. But we will share it with them, by god.

T: And so, yeah, it was really your idea to do this one first for our inaugural podcast, right? Thanks for that. Kudos to Sean and kudos to Kit. Well, do we wanna get started with our first questions here? Ok, so, to give some context to the scene, Sean is writing in response to a mass letter from the CIIC, which is an Ohio congressional oversight committee for the prison system, who said, "CIIC is currently working on a resource for inmates in segregation or maximum security. We would very much appreciate hearing from you and other inmates regarding your segregation experience and, in particular, how you stayed emotionally and mentally strong in segregation. Our hope is to provide suggestions to inmates in segregation for how to cope with being locked down for 23 hours a day. What advice would you give to an inmate who is going to segregation?" This letter — the letter which is the zine in its entirety, also came shortly after the US Congress had their first hearing on solitary confinement, where Texas death row prisoner Anthony Graves testified to really horrific things that he witnessed. Why do you think that Sean used this opportunity to write this essay, and how did it shape the essay itself? Kit, you...?

K: Well, I think, you know, this essay is...it's obviously very well written. It's a well-structured discussion about not only how to survive solitary confinement, but also breaking down to brass tacks what solitary confinement is and how the prison system uses it and what it uses it for. But I also think — as Ben mentioned, Sean being an uncompromising anarchist — this is a big "fuck you" to the CIIC. There is no surprise that they decided not to distribute this as a

part of their, you know... I don't even know, their plan to support people in solitary...

T: That was the result, right? They ended up not even including his writing whatsoever.

K: Right, yeah. So they solicited this writing, and then they were like, "well, we'll just not include that one." Anyway, I can't speak too much to the timing of it. I don't know as much of the background as probably Ben does. But just yeah I think that that's my sort of favorite thing about this zine. They asked him to give them the middle finger, and he obliged.

B: Yeah, like, he really is pointing out the irony of liberal hand-waving, hand-wringing nonsense, which is what the CIIC...it's their Correctional Institution Inspection Committee, or something like that. And Wisconsin doesn't even have one of those, so this is one of the ways in which Ohio is at least a little bit better than Wisconsin. They at least do that liberal hand waving. And here, the legislature does not give a fuck about people. In the zine itself, Sean kind of speaks to this. He says, you know, when he's arguing that the people who are running the solitary confinement torture machines don't care about people and are the enemies, their captors. He says, "think about it: why is this resource being written? It's being written because staff at the CIIC recognize that the brutal, harsh conditions of isolation are causing prisoners to become mentally ill. So rather than end the practice of driving prisoners insane, they opt to give you advice from prisoners who have survived a process designed to drive them insane. That speaks loudly. Would kind, caring, concerned, nice people work with every ounce of their beings to shut down a torture machine? Or would they hand to victims a well-produced brochure?" So that, I think, speaks to the

sense. So in a sense what I hoped to do as a service to prisoners who were in solitary, who were in a torture program who were reading this, was provide them essentially a different story to be in. A new way of looking at the situation that confronts them. A more accurate one, given what's actually being done to them. So I thought that deconstruction was just as important as the details of what anybody's actually facing in the physical environment.

B: Yeah, I think that's a really interesting thing about this zine and the argument that you lay out where it is at once kind of an ironic "fuck you" to the CIIC because like, "why are you asking me for advice on how to make the torture do to me less effective?" But it is also an authentic and genuine response to the question of like, how do you best survive this? And how do you help other people best survive it? And having that understanding seems to be an essential part of that.

S: Yeah, yeah. So in one sense and you know, this is somewhat amusing, I think I gave them exactly what they were asking me for, and once they got it, they realized they didn't want it. How is it that you can stay sane when your sanity is under attack by people that have scientifically perfected the method for driving you crazy? Well, the practical answer to that question is you rebel. You recognize that there's an adversarial relationship going on here, that you have an enemy that's trying to destroy you. And so the sanest response to that is self-defense. And you engage in self-defense by fighting back, by whatever means are available to you. So once I laid that out that rebellion is really the only sane response to being under attack and being tortured I sense that in to the Corrections Institution Inspection Committee, who asked me for it, and ironically I didn't hear back.

essentially, to a domestic torture program. And the Corrections Institution Inspection Committee, which answers to the Ohio Senate, sent out these requests for us to respond to so that we could give prisoners advice on how to survive segregation and solitary confinement because in their own admission these conditions were so draconian it was actually driving people crazy. It was causing mental illness. So they were aware that they were subjecting prisoners to conditions that led to mental illness, not to rehabilitation. So that was kind of the background as to my writing of this. This was actually a response to the Corrections Institution Inspection Committee. So given a lot of what I had already read and studied in my own academic pursuits, I knew about how the United States had essentially outlawed only physical torture. You know, anything that led to a physical injury. If it didn't lead to a physical injury then the US courts just don't deal with it. It's not cruel and unusual unless you can show that you've been physically harmed. And the irony is that at the same time, US Intelligence Services were perfecting what is now termed "bloodless torture." So essentially what the US courts were doing was giving a free pass to the most effective forms of torture that had been developed by the CIA, and developed by the American Psychological Association and all kinds of experts in the social sciences who had gotten together in order to find the limits to human tolerance to pain. You know, psychological and emotional pain. So that being the case, what I witnessed in solitary confinement was the perfection of this torture plan. And what I wanted to do when I wrote this was...it seems to me that a lot of what happens to us as humans, we try to rationalize it and make sense out of it. But we look at things through a certain perspective, a certain view, a certain lens. And if we're looking at our own imprisonment, and we're looking at our segregation through a certain lens that good guys are trying to help us become better people, then what confronts us doesn't really make

broader situation. Everybody at the time this was written which was like, 2011, 2012? Everybody in abolitionist and prisoner support circles was excited that there was the first ever congressional hearing on solitary confinement. Since then, I think there was one more congressional hearing on solitary confinement, and no changes on a broad federal level. Like, the First Step Act said that we shouldn't use solitary confinement on juveniles and pregnant women, which is something, but it's surely not enough. And if you go to solitarywatch.org that's kind of the best website for people who are resisting solitary and trying to bring change and policy reforms to this. They've got a timeline of progress, and some states have like Colorado has done a full abolition of solitary confinement. Some other states have done broader things, I think New Jersey recently did something. But for the most part it is juveniles, pregnant women, little bits around the edges of trying to address these things and not addressing the fundamental problem. And in Wisconsin we have seen no movement.

T: Going back to one of the first things that you said, and taking out of the writing itself, yeah, it's just bizarre to me that some institution couldn't even ask the question, like, "can you tell us how we can better help people to cope with being imprisoned in a cell for 23 hours a day, a thing that is not able to be coped with?"

B: Especially when they're part of the machine that's torturing those people.

T: Totally understandable why Sean wrote what he did, and how he took that this angle. Do you have something to add, Kit?

K: Yeah, it just, I dunno. It makes me think of the — like you can extend this problem to so many other things. It makes me think of police. “Oh, we have these people who go around shooting people. Should we take away the guns from the people who are going around and shooting people? Or should we just like, not do that? And instead, give them better training, or ask them to learn how to de-escalate.” We can clearly see what the problem is, the problem is solitary confinement. It’s not that people don’t have the resources to survive solitary confinement.

T: In your example, I think of the city of Milwaukee police department trying to make themselves more palatable by getting an ice cream truck that they serve free ice cream to the people that they oppress on a daily basis. Bring you in and help you to be placated early on to that system, and that’s what all this is, is like, “ok, we want you to know that this system is happening regardless.” And so, sure, yeah, “we’re gonna give you something and we’re gonna try to give you resources of how to work inside this system of oppression, recognizing that it is.”

B: And it’s also just designed to waste people’s time. You know, there are probably people on the correctional institution inspection committee who genuinely care and want to reduce solitary confinement and they’re like, “how do we get this done?” And someone is like, “well, you could start by asking some people questions and making up a brochure.” I mean, the same thing happens with the police here in Milwaukee. You know, organizers who are really dedicated and committed to reducing police violence and saving and protecting people from police end up on task forces, ended up doing all of this kind of

K: Don’t be a person with a key.

T: As an ex-guard, you deserve the same humanity and dignity that anyone else would.

K: Although, I would approach with caution. If someone used to be a cop and they’re like, “hey, I’m an anarchist now...” You need to do some research.

T: Let’s make sure that you quit your job.

K: Talk to me about Bakunin in a month and maybe...

T: All right, so, that is our discussion. Hopefully you found this enjoyable or engrossing in some way. If you want to appear on our show, please contact us. You can follow us on Instagram, you can donate to us obviously on our Patreon, patreon.com/mkelitsupply. We are located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Again, this is MKE Lit Supply. We are doing a podcast. We don’t know much about this stuff, so love to have any tips or help that you want to provide as far as how to do a podcast better. This is our first one.

This interview with Sean Swain was recorded in August 2020. After that, we’ll hear from Sean’s partner Lauren with a more pertinent update.

BEN: Do you wanna just tell me a little bit about what you were thinking when you wrote it?

SEAN: Yeah, so, the circumstance that led to this was that I was in segregation and a few others and myself were accused of starting the Army of the 12 Monkeys Rebellion at Mansfield Correctional. And we were being subjected,

individual from this prison because prisons don't rehab people. They break people. And that's what they're designed to do. So the fact that...I think that the way that he breaks it down and the way that he sees it is definitely...you know, I was pretty primed for this when I read it. I think probably all of us were. But I think that it's kind of...I don't wanna say that it's undeniable, because there are people who would be able to deny it somehow. But I think that he makes a very compelling argument, that this is what solitary confinement is. It is torture. It is meant to debilitate, create dread, and...

B: Dependency.

K: Dependency. And he nails it.

T: Yeah, and I think it's like really...right, like, you're right that it's a very compelling argument. This writing that was meant for prisoners can be read and understood and felt in a way by people not in prison. I think that what's important and compelling about it is that not only can you get something out of this and recognize what situation you're in as someone in prison, in solitary confinement, but and the party that he wrote it for, but as just a regular old person. I would like to hear...I think it would be interesting to hear from someone who is more of a pacifist liberal or non-violent liberal their take on this. So maybe that's something we can do in a follow up episode.

B: And they have an out. You know, everyone does not need to be our enemy. Like, this is not...the guard is not inherently an enemy to the prisoner. He's not inherently an evil, terrible person. They are people who can be loved. But they have to stop torturing and hurting people first.

work. And the people who pushed them in that direction, the liberals, Mayor Barrett, or the government in Ohio know what they're doing.

T: Right. Exactly. Sean talks about the designed purpose of solitary, citing the CIA KUBARK manual. Meanwhile, critical penologists like Dan Berger and Toussant Losier talk about the development of solitary units as a way of isolating and controlling leaders, and defenders of solitary confinement will talk about how it effectively reduced instances of violence and riots in prison. So how do those three very different things purposes relate to each other? Ben.

B: Great. So, the KUBARK Manual, just to give a little background, is like the CIA torture manual. And Sean says that what he experiences and sees other people experiencing in solitary confinement aligns perfectly with what the CIA has written about how to torture and interrogate people and break them down. It is about producing debility, dependence and dread. So in addition to being a big "fuck you" to the CIIC, this is also like Kit said a really well-reasoned argument, and he breaks it down and he lays things out really clearly. We zoom out a little bit, and some other theorists and scholars will describe solitary confinement as a means of breaking up prisoner leadership, and isolating the people who are causing trouble or are running things, or resisting you know, whether it's people who are labelled as gang members, or people who are organizing and doing resistance on the inside. Like, in the federal system, the communication management units and stuff like that are kind of the origins of solitary confinement in supermax prisons. And then zooming out even more, and to a more liberal perspective, people have, you know prison authorities say that they need solitary confinement in order to control and keep the prison safe. Back in the 80s and 90s there were frequent prison riots and uprisings that

were very violent with high death counts and stuff like that going on. And so people argue that the invention of supermax prisons and the proliferation of solitary confinement have become necessary to protect the people who are incarcerated from that violence. And the thing is that I think all three of those things are true, and they do sort of interrelate to each other pretty well. Like, running a prison smoothly requires isolating leaders and also requires torturing people. That's why I'm a prison abolitionist. It is against humanity to live in a cage. And people who are subjected to those kinds of living conditions will resort to desperate acts to kind of try to resist social death and entombment, and to survive. And those desperate acts can involve hurting other people, and can involve ruptures that can be really dangerous. And that's why we shouldn't put them in cages in the first place. The solution to that problem is not to bigger and better cages and smaller boxes for people to suffer in. It is to not put people in cages in the first place, and to not approach social problems from a perspective of carcerality and police in the first place.

K: I was just gonna speak to a little bit about that, too. Like, I think that it's interesting tying those things together, bringing up the CIA outlining the sort of torture program, and then you had mentioned the riots and uprisings of the 80s and 90s and the proliferation of supermax and segregating leaders and doing all those things, it's because...well, it just immediately makes me think of, you know, counterinsurgency, and that's what they're doing. They look at the prison population and they say, "what way," you know just like they look at any population, they say, "what way can we shut down any organizing?" So we'll take somebody and just isolate them. Maybe they'll go a little crazy or whatever. You know, whatever happens, happens. But they're not out here organizing. And not

community money for the food that's in my store. That's not feeding the community. Feeding the community is having a garden and setting up a table, or doing whatever thing that you do, right? So their notion of serving the community is just so completely backwards and flawed. It's no different than someone who works as a FedEx driver saying that they serve their community. It's no different, they don't. Maybe the FedEx driver is a bad example, but you know what I'm saying. Like, yes, technically food is available because of you. But only certain people get it because it costs money.

B: And the overarching priority for the person who owns your grocery store is the bottom line and the profit.

K: To make money.

B: It is not about serving anybody.

Kit: And so, to carry this sort of analogy further, being a police officer and quote-unquote serving the community is not what you're doing. What you're doing is enforcing racist policies against mostly black and brown communities in cities. And so the overarching goal is that white supremacy that was referred to earlier, that is upheld systematically through this country.

T: And so do we think that Sean makes this case convincingly? I think we're a little bit biased in our opinion of that.

K: I think Sean makes a compelling argument. I think he breaks it down really...he breaks it down really simply to what it is. And at one point he does this, you know, this is a toaster, you will not get ice cream from this toaster because that's not what a toaster does. So you're not going to get a rehabbed

are, and how honorable their jobs are. And they put on all that pretense because at the core they know that what they're doing is inhumane and goes against basic decency.

T: And there are the naive people who think that they're going into this to change or to improve the system, or to help their community that is imprisoned there, that's BS. They're wrong. Being a part of that only further oppresses you as an individual. We see so many guards and police officers being...their mental state declining because of the violence of this position. They have to. You have to exert violence over the people you view as the criminals.

K: So I was thinking about this sort of comparison. Well, so, for one, talking about the idea of every guard, every prisoner, and what does that mean? And like, they're the enemy, right? So, how do you not be the enemy? Don't do that unethical job. Don't do that job that requires violence. I remember one time, my dad worked at a food warehouse, like when I was much younger. I remember him telling me, explaining ethics to me when I was like, I dunno, thirteen or so, and saying, "well if my boss told me to change the date on a box of cheese I wouldn't do it, and I would quit." And it's like, that's good, right? The expiration date is something that probably should be respected. So are human lives. There's a reason why the person who that feels that way about expiration dates is not a prison guard, and it's the same reason most of the people listening aren't fucking prison guards. So the other thing I was thinking about is...also grocery store related, I don't remember what it was. Oh, ok, so the cop or the guard who's doing good for society, they're like, they just wanna help. They just wanna do good things. Ok, well, like, I work at a grocery store. I didn't get the job at the grocery store because I want to feed the community. I charge the

only that, everybody else has seen that's what's happened to them." So it's a way of diminishing the morale of potential movement builders.

T: And we see that, like yeah, you're right. In and out of prisons, that's the tried and true method of silencing organizational leaders or movement leaders.

B: And Sean will often talk about this. He often compares prisoners to the canary in the coalmine. Where the government will test out a repression program on incarcerated people, and once it's successful and it works there they'll bring it out to the streets and use it on protesters, or other people who are social deviants.

T: Just like the tear gas that they used on protesters this summer during the George Floyd protests and all the uprisings, it was tested in Palestine on that community before it came here.

K: Yeah and just thinking about that, you know, I'm just reminded of that bit of speech from our new Vice President, Kamala Harris, about having a stick and using truancy laws to put parents in prison. And it's like, well what's the stick? Right? The stick, for people who already are stuck in cages is, like you said, a smaller cage with less human contact, and we are obviously social beings. That's why all these people have been losing their minds about quarantine, because it sucks. We are social beings. And we could probably go on for hours with this one specific question as it relates to covid and such.

T: In the zine, Sean describes two responses to the conditions. The first is to adjust to those conditions. The second being to change conditions. So how does this response...those two responses, compare or contrast with the abolitionist

idea of non-reformist reforms. Ben, can you explain to us what non-reformist reforms are?

B: Sure. So, a lot of abolitionists kind of respond to the question of, “well, you can’t abolish prisons like tomorrow, that’s crazy, what would happen? Blah blah blah.” And they say, “well, we’re working on...” and also just the challenge of

T: “What would we do with all the people that we release tomorrow?”

B: Right. But also the challenge of how do we pursue abolition given the current state of affairs? And so there’s this long history of every time that you try to reform the prison system, it just becomes a better, stronger prison system. Like, reform is what formed the current state of carcerality. Michel Foucault talks about that, he rips off George Jackson talking about that. And so, the approach that a lot of abolitionists have adopted is this non-reformist reform idea, where you pursue policy changes, but you are careful to choose policy changes that are going to disempower, defund and reduce the power of the prison system, instead of policy changes that are leaving open back doors and are actually gonna make a stronger prison system.

T: So it’s like pulling out the reins by taking away the money, not by creating more rules or more oversight or anything else in that system. Or for that system.

K: I would say that oversight is good. But like, so I think a lot about police, that that’s where my real understanding of this non-reformist reforms comes in. There was the 8 Can’t Wait campaign coming out over the summer, and very quickly people pointed out that, no, like, most of those things are actually

T: Right, ‘cuz a lot of people and just to respond to that the liberal thing. A lot of people who are pacifists, or like on our side, leftists and whatever, will shy away from things like that. Like, “oh my god, that’s terrible, human life should not be hurt in that way.” And it’s like, how can you say it’s ok for the things that are done systematically every day to a prisoner, to be ok, and yet this one thing that happens to a guard is not ok. That’s just what we’re talking about here, I think. And I would say that it’s also a difficult path to walk in prison. When you view every single guard around you as that enemy, and you treat them as such, you don’t get anything. You’re not gonna get...those guards aren’t gonna make sure you get the letter that was sent to you that somebody needs. They’re not gonna make sure you get your kosher or halal or vegetarian meal every week. They’re not gonna make sure that you get pulled out of your cell to take your shower even. They will choose whatever ways that they can in the rules that deprive you of that humanity because you are a thorn in their side, because you recognize them for what they are. And so that’s a really difficult choice to make. But it’s also kind of fun. It’s fun to get to treat them that way. They’re paid literally by...they’re paid their wages to exist by the fact that you’re being imprisoned there. So that’s, you know, a thing that you can wave. I don’t know. That was the tactic that I chose when I was in jail, was like, “yeah, you know what, fuck you, like, I pay your job, so you do what I say. And I’m not gonna treat you nice and I’m not gonna be your friend. This is your job. You have to do these things, so I don’t care if it hurts your feelings. I don’t care if you grew up in my county, and you are now imprisoning me, this is the...we are now not the same.” Got a little derailed there.

B: The existence of a prison guard is pathetic and miserable and a cop as well. And that’s why they put such a high emphasis on how endangered they

radicalization was recognizing that we live in a white supremacist society that is based on the extermination of non-white people. And you can't participate in the extermination of non-white people without being their enemy. And you can't be an ally of non-white people without being an enemy of white supremacists. And so these are very real terms of what we are experiencing, and I think Sean does make a very strong case for...that people in prison have an enemy. Like Kit was saying earlier, the person who's locking the door on you...I don't give a shit why you're in prison, I don't give a shit...anything, anything. Like, a person is locking a door on another person and putting them in a cage, that person who has those keys is that person's enemy. There's no question about it. They are destroying that person mentally, and emotionally, and physically, and they are against that person's survival. And so I think there's a complexity to what Sean is prescribing here, which we talked about a little bit in the last question, where that resistance to reformism, or that resistance to gradualism can veer into an accelerationism that puts you personally at risk. And again, like Kit was saying, their friend who ended up punching a guard took a lot of risks by doing that. And so, the question of

K: I wanna give them some real credit, they hospitalized a guard.

T: Whoop whoop!

B: And so we can celebrate that. We can celebrate that one of our enemies was debilitated by resistance. But at the same time, there's consequences for us in that, and there's risks to advocating that, and there's an understanding of the limits of what we are capable of. And to some degree, if we don't win, then we lose everything.

already rules in many places. Those eight rules don't matter. What we need is the right to abolish. So we don't need more training. Training doesn't work. You dress like a storm trooper and carry a gun. I'm citing Srsly Wrong for that joke. But, you know, to take away that funding. Not spending all this money on equipment, or body cams or any of these other things. That's just giving the police more money. We need to make sure whatever it is we're doing is taking money and taking power.

T: Right. That's kinda what I thought. Like, oversight to me is like, "oh well we have body cams now, so we're protected and you can see what happens, or whatever, so the public knows what's going on." Well that, again, doesn't make it better. That doesn't end in less people dead, or less people being oppressed by the system.

B: And to bring it back to Sean, I think he does a really interesting, slightly skewed perspective on it, where he's like, the things that you can do to adapt to conditions are ways that you can change yourself and the way that you interface or you experience solitary confinement, versus the things that you do to try to change conditions. And I really like the way that he gets very practical in the zine, and he's like, "you are cold all the time, you put socks on your hands and you exercise more often. That way you're not cold." So that's the way to adjust to conditions. The way to change conditions is you start blocking your cell window, or you flush the toilet non-stop, or you organize mainly with other people on your block and do something that disrupts the torture machine so that you have an avenue through which to actually make demands and get them to turn up the fucking heat.

K: Create leverage where there otherwise wouldn't be. If you can break the pipes once a month, they're gonna get tired of fixing the pipes. But you're also probably gonna get your ass kicked. The guards are definitely gonna fuck you up.

T: Right and you're gonna be without water as well. There's always consequences to that, but it's what you're willing to give up. And Ben, you mentioned turning up the heat. That's something that Sean specifically says in the zine. We go to page seven, he's asking the question, "what can you do to make the torture machine turn up the heat? At the same time, within that question is another question: what can you do to stand up for your dignity, and affirm your human value, and combat the forces that work toward your destruction? And still another question: what can you do to take a healthy and affirmative approach to exercise your own personal power in order to change the world for the better and give yourself something to feel a sense of accomplishment?" So why do we think he put all three of these questions together and really stated it in terms of within this question is yet another question?

B: I think it really speaks to Sean's values and anarchist values in general. We're not just looking for minimum demands. We're not just looking for, how do we get the heat turned up? How do we get this small, practical concession to be made? But rather how do we have integrity, and how do we assert ourselves and our humanity throughout that process? And for him, those things are intrinsically bound up in each other. And I think that for many liberals they're not. And I think that's a really fundamental problem with a lot of reform efforts that we're seeing where people are...take this position of whining and begging

T: I think about some of the stuff we do to push back against that. We've seen a whole lot of things have been outside the prisons this year, car parades and things, it's just like, yeah we're not gonna go and find an attorney and try to go through the criminal justice system that we know favors the government, favors the people that are paid by the state. We need to shine a light on this in other ways. I think that some of the ways that for outsiders that we could...we can work around, or work outside of those general grievance processes. In the real world, I think of like COs are equal to cops, and so the outside grievance process for something going wrong in your life is to like call the cops. So being an abolitionist, why would we go through the system that is there to oppress further? To further imprison people and to further punish people for something going wrong. There's such a thing as restorative justice, and going through and finding ways to resolve your problems with people that don't involve the cops. So not going through the system itself to file those complaints, but instead choosing to have a hunger strike, or like band your people together and call a general boycott of commissary and things like that. That's what we're talking about, working outside of that traditional grievance process.

T: So, to wrap it all up here, Sean's argument hinges on the conclusion he reaches at the top of page five: "you have an enemy." This conclusion is probably the most difficult for a certain group of stubborn liberals to accept. Does Sean make the case convincingly, and do his conclusions follow accurately from that assertion? Ben?

B: So, I mean, I don't know about answering the actual question. But maybe the framework of...people are hesitant to think in terms of oppression and resistance. Everybody wants to love everyone and believe that we all have the same good intentions. And I think, for me, it was a very...an essential part of my

how does Sean's perspective challenge your role in that work? Kit, putting you on the spot.

K: Ok, so the thing with our position is people outside and how to answer these questions, or how to advise people other than the standard complaint process, is difficult because we can't advocate for them. You can't use the word "strike" or "organize" or any of these things. It's gonna get censored, it's gonna get thrown away. Even from the Lit Supply we've had things tossed by the mailroom. And then they turn around and deny that they tossed it, which is absurd. But these processes, the way that we us in this room fight against that, is by sending shit like this zine in, and encouraging people to challenge themselves and think about their options. Because all of our communication with them is monitored. We can't do anything for them. Or we can't encourage them in any way that's going to lead to...even if a message does manage to get through, I wouldn't wanna tell somebody to do something that's going to potentially get them retaliated against or put in solitary confinement or any of these other things. But, you know, if somebody is refusing to use the grievance process or...I mean, one of my now, I would say good friends, I only got in touch with him because he beat up a guard. And that's something that happens when you are a person who locks the key to someone's cage, sometimes people beat you up. And there's an easy way to avoid that: don't be a person with a key. So how do we support people? This person, I came to learn, didn't have much of a support network, and we developed a relationship and we talk regularly, write letters, et cetera. And now I'm helping this person get through where they're at, because of the decision they made that was outside of that legitimate quote-unquote process.

for things instead of asserting yourself as a person with dignity who has a right to expect decent human treatment, and if you're not getting that decent human treatment, a right to defend yourself, and get it for yourself.

T: And this is something that we as anarchists always try to...like, that triple question thing is something that we always try to thread the needle between or whatever. That we're always considering when we do work, and I think that's one of the reasons why we have the Lit Supply. We wanna turn up the heat in a way. We also wanna provide good content to people to help them. And so we're willing to call out things, and we want to create a bit of a problem, while at the same time getting something that's totally innocuous in as well. You know, finding that humanity in those people. And even though we don't like, necessarily communicate with the people we're giving this literature to on a personal level, we know what they're going through, and we can understand especially by the reading material that they request what kind of conditions they may or may not be facing. And just to have an ally in that I think is really important, or meaningful.

K: I just wanna take it back to that sort of three-layered question. I think the structure of that paragraph is interesting. Because it starts with the external world, and then it comes...like, if you think about how we experience life, right? There's the external world, which affects us, and then we affect it. And so Sean's kind of starting with this thing that is without us, the machine without heat, and then what can you do to turn up the heat? And then it's...the last part was like, to have an accomplishment in the world. So there's this thing that exists without your control, and then there's yourself, and then the end result would be like, the thing existing after you've exerted yourself. So I just think that's

kind of...like if you answer these three questions, you kind of end up with your impact on the world, and I think that's really cool and interesting.

T: I think if you also answer those three questions and not to drag this out a bunch but I think if you also answer those three questions you get to like, we have no prisons? Like, there's no way to answer those three questions without saying this should not exist for me or for anyone.

B: Yeah I think it gets...like Sean can get really, I mean, he's really gonzo in some of his writing, but he also can get really super existential and deep. And like, these ideas are and some ideas from other prison rebels, trying to work out this like, understanding of rebellion as a way of asserting yourself and asserting personhood, and a theory of being, to get existential with it.

K: And I don't know Sean as well as you do, but it just seems so intuitive. Like, he just...it just feels so natural, the way that he expresses himself. I mean, other...if anybody's not familiar, you can listen to *The Final Straw* and he's on there regularly, or used to be at least.

B: He's still on there.

K: And then, yeah, just reading his writing...

T: I mean, you mentioned gonzo style, like, Sean Swain for President 2020. That was like, a hundred percent...

B: I helped Sean record a, like, "I refuse to concede the governorship from solitary confinement at the supermax. He's demanding a recount."

T: It's amazing. And like yeah, but that's like, that goes back to these questions, like, one hundred percent. He is answering that question for us in terms of his personal stance on those things.

B: And it comes easy and intuitive to him like that because he has spent decades working on, reading about, thinking about, like really developing this stuff for himself. And he has gone through a whole trajectory to get where he's at.

T: And so it sucks, like, because what he's saying in this publication is like, one hundred percent from his heart to another prisoner, to other prisoners. To help them. He did what they asked to do in the writing of "Fuck You." He was giving them something to...some kind of a map and a guidebook to make it through this effed up machine. So yeah, Sean himself follows up those questions in the zine with a great dismissal of the grievance process. He states: "there exists a prison grievance process, but this is an open joke among prisoners and staff alike. The grievance process serves to misdirect prisoners from engaging in any effective response to wrongs, and serves as a kind of gauntlet where prison officials can identify future possible lawsuits, and employ a harassment campaign to coerce potential prisoner litigates to give up. At its best, the grievance process represents an effort to get a career prisoncrat to declare that other career prisoncrats wronged a convicted felon no one cares about. Being able to see the grievance process as a tool of your enemy's program liberates you to think of other ways to exercise your personal power to change conditions. What else can you do?" As advocates for people who have countless legitimate grievances against the Wisconsin prison system who use this process,