

Content note: This text talks about the system of imprisonment and every day life experiences in jail. It is also about the Hambach and other forest occupations, as well as the repression against them, including conflicts and physical confrontations with securities and cops. The problem of activist burnout but also solidarity-based precautions against it are mentioned.

Tear down the walls separating us

Prison as a means of repression against the autonomous climate justice movement

"If you think different or if you misbehave, they will lock you up, they will put you in a cage - so lets burn, burn the prisons down," resounds from the meadow occupation at Hambach Forest. Today our friends, the punk band Cistem Failure, are playing for us. It is a moving evening. We dance exuberantly. It feels good to shout out feelings and forget the tension for a while: "I wish I knew you were safe but you just never know in the hands of the state".¹

Why prisons

Repression has an infinite number of faces: that of a strict judge, an aggressive cop, and on another, more subtle level even that of disappointed parents and loved ones you worry about or friends who worry about you. One of them is the face of the locker - who comes into your cell without permission and looks down on you with contempt.

They call it deprivation of liberty, but in reality they take away your whole life, everything that makes it worth living. They take away all decision-making: When you get up, eat or shower, what you wear, where you go and how you spend your day. You cease to exist as a person. You are at the mercy of the lockers, like an object that they can dispose of as they wish. The only thing you have left is boredom, destructive, never-ending boredom. And sometimes, sometimes they even take away your hope of a decent life after prison, of becoming a human being again. With criminal records and debts, they make it as difficult as possible for you to start again. It's almost as if they want to keep you there (text by an anarchist prisoner 2017).

The fairy tale is often told that prison protects society from the "bad" violent offenders and contributes to fewer crimes being committed. This is not true. Prisons in Germany are mostly filled with people who have travelled by train or tram without a ticket or who have committed petty theft. It turns out that those who have little money end up in jail more often. So do people who are affected by racist discrimination. What was introduced in 1965 as the " Foreigners Law" is now called the "Law on Residence" and continues to ensure that the likelihood of ending up in jail in Germany increases considerably if someone does not have a European passport.

Even interpersonal conflicts and acts of violence cannot be solved by locking people up. After all, the disputes do not simply disappear if no one cares to deal with them. Often, prisons even exacerbate conflicts: the harsher and longer the sentence, the more likely it is that someone will reoffend.

But what is the function of prisons then? They are part of the state's disciplinary apparatus and secure the power of the rulers. It needs people who are excluded from society or not allowed in at the borders in the first place. Prisons are like a barometer that good citizens can use as a guide to know what is right and what is wrong. What should not be seen is locked away: Sex workers, migrants, activists,

people living on the street or addicted to illegal drugs. Those who interfere with the unhindered, unrestricted and destructive enjoyment of their own luxury. That is why they are always "political" prisoners, no matter what they are accused of. Prisons are primarily directed against the exploited and the rebellious.

Thus they have always been used to weaken emancipatory movements, as in the case of the long occupation of the Hambach Forest.

Hopeless against RWE and Secus

In the context of the Hambach occupation, individual or groups of activists were repeatedly locked up in jail. In the first years after the occupation in 2012, there was only a small group of people who permanently stayed in the forest and resisted with simple means. Nevertheless, it was difficult for the company to fight the squatters. Staying in the forest could not be considered trespassing, and the punishment for chaining oneself was comparatively small at that time. Small construction site excavators and water pumps often broke down without anyone being held responsible. As a rule, the police had to let activists go after a few hours in the police station.

Conflicts at the time were mainly with the security guards hired by RWE, the so-called Secus. Especially in these confrontations, squatters were arrested by cops after Secus had immobilised them. In these years, people were repeatedly put in jail for a few weeks to several months on charges of assault or attacks. The experience of violence in custody in turn sowed anger and hatred among us squatters. One person who was arrested during this time was Martin:

There is a rattling in the corridor, another day that will resemble the previous one. I shuffle to the door, ignore the greeting of the locksmiths and greet the prison workers, take my food and go back to sleep. I can't sleep any more, but I don't give up my attempt at a tiny piece of self-determination. After a while I get up, turn on the radio and have breakfast. The waiting begins. Waiting for good music on the radio or halfway interesting articles. Waiting for books. Waiting to be outdoors, to be with people and to have a run. Waiting for mail. Waiting for lunch. Waiting for a change of clothes. Waiting for dinner. Waiting for the fucking time to pass.

Waiting. Waiting. Wait. ... I was put in jail because they caught me. Because they wanted me to be broken. I'm afraid of becoming mentally decrepit, of giving up my ideals and becoming more selfish. That my feelings will dull further. That I will let myself be intimidated by this shit, then eventually be free but broken. ... Every contact with the outside world - whether it's a letter or a visit - gives me courage. Every knowledge that our struggles will continue outside. Every little rebellion and rattling of the chains gives strength. Every moment of collectivity with my fellow sufferers gives hope. In the evening, when the cells are closed for the last time for the day, my body and mind can let go of some of the tension. Another day almost behind me - ending in waiting for sleep (Jail Diary Martin).

Detention and solidarity with a growing movement

The Ende Gelände actions, blockades of open-cast mines or other coal infrastructure with hundreds of people, were a media spectacle. The fact that many people could not be brought to trial afterwards because their personal details remained unknown was obviously a thorn in the side of our "law enforcers". At the same time, the large crowds and the press attention provided protection for the individual activists. However, during actions in the forest, from 2017 onwards, many people were taken into custody for refusing to give their personal details, even with ridiculously minor criminal charges. This new wave of repression was also made possible by changes to paragraphs 113 and 114 of the

penal code. Originally, these served to protect people who showed resistance during a police arrest. In doing so, the person caught was granted the right to react carelessly and reflexively in such a situation. The new law, on the other hand, imposes heavy penalties for any "resistance" to cops, and is of course determined in its interpretation by their arbitrariness.

In January 2018, eleven people were arrested in Hambi. It was a routine eviction of barricades on forest roads, carried out by RWE and a helpful hundred cops. Nine of the prisoners refused to give their names to the judge the next day and were then locked up in the prisons in Cologne and Aachen. All of them were charged with §113 "resistance against law enforcement officers", even those who had been chained with both hands. Robin was already released from jail after her first detention review after two weeks because of "disproportionality", Mesq, on the other hand, waited two months for the court trial. The probation sentence imposed there, however, still had to be given to the "Unknown Person 2" (UP2) for lack of a name.

It all still seems like a cruel dream to me, and yet at the same time every day here in prison seems to contain more reality than anything I have experienced in my life so far. What an absurd world we live in! I feel anger through the stories of my fellow inmates, but also fear: fear of the click of the keys when the guards once again come into my cell without asking - fear when I realise that I am basically completely at their mercy - fear of not being able to hold out here... Every sign that comes in from outside is like a ray of sunshine that gives me courage and strength again.

This evening I visited the cell of a fellow prisoner during the "Umschluss". She has already been here for two years and still has one more to go. Her suspended sentence from ten years ago was commuted to a prison sentence because she was caught without ticket three times in the tram. She has settled in well in her cell. Even carries some hash out of a stash and rolls a spliff for us to have with our coffee. She says the weed helps her a lot not to go completely crazy in this place.

All of a sudden she listens and then opens the window. From far away, the noise of a demonstration reaches us. I know that these are my comrades and friends, that haven't forgotten me. A feeling of excitement and confidence spreads through me.

Then silence - alone again. I try to distract myself. I succeed better and better (Robin's prison diary).

I wake up. It's about six in the morning, I guess. They still haven't given me back my wristwatch. I don't usually wake up this early, but it's breakfast time, so I hear noises coming closer and getting louder: Boom, boom, electronic beeping. It's my cell door "Frustuck". I don't speak German, but have learned what that means. My guard delivers a tray of food while I ask for my watch and explain that I want it back. They answer something in German that I don't understand and then close my door.

A bit of morning yoga and stretching, then breakfast, a bit of reading and answering letters. Next we all go out into the courtyard. I find out from another prisoner, who actually has a watch, that it's half past nine. He encourages me to write a "Antrag" (a paper that you write to ask for something or complain about something). From now on, I write one a day and hand it in. I also ask for my watch in person, every time I get the chance. I don't think it does any good, but it annoys them quite a bit, and that's fun and encourages me. I spend the afternoon in the hobby room, playing cards and table tennis, sharing tobacco and stories about why we are here.

Back in my cell, I write an open letter to the people I love who might be concerned about my situation. I explain that I am playing table tennis and getting better at it, that the food is good enough, I have enough time to read and do daily exercise to keep my mind and body healthy. I hope they are well too and ask them not to worry too much about me. Then I write another 'Antrag': 'I want the black wristwatch you stole from me back. And hurry up, I'm a busy person!' There are not many things I can do here, but I can try to take care of myself and the people I love. And to get on the nerves of the people that I hate so much (Jail Diary Mesq).

Imprisonment to frighten others

The imprisonment of "Hambi 9" triggered a broad wave of expressions of solidarity, not only from other occupations or anarchist groups, this time local groups of major NGOs and parties also spoke out publicly against the arrests. These reactions showed us that by now we could also count on support from bourgeois circles.

While Mesq was still in jail, three more Hambi prisoners, unknown for the time being, were added in March 2018. They were also arrested during a barricade eviction, but on even more serious charges. They were accused of committing grievous bodily harm with a firecracker that had actually missed, and of encouraging others to commit crimes by drumming. UP III (this time Roman numerals were used to avoid confusion) stayed in jail for five months. The judge said at the trial that the heavy sentence was meant to act as a preventive deterrent to other activists who might resist in the coming cutting season. The obvious injustice of this verdict shocked many Hambi sympathisers who still believed in the legal system.

"Fear of Flight" - by UPIII 12th September 2018

Like the caged bird who sings
the only freedom I have
is that of my voice

blind with hope
I send letters into the void
maybe, just maybe
someone might hear a noise.

My wings are clipped
calloused hand tied
but I'm still dreaming of a place
where I can see the endless sky
without a single bar
in my line of sight.

It exists, it must!
outside these heavy walls
I can feel the breeze on my face
warm sunlight caress my skin
hear an unknown bird call
their voice pulling me out of the in

Where you are
is not the world
mountains are still here to climb
but at their peaks
I'm sure you'll find
the view is much better
from up high
a whisper through branches
soft murmur of leaves
you're home now
it's going to be okay
we've got you
you don't need to be afraid

you're home now
it's going to be okay
we've got you

you don't need to be afraid

So climb to your tops
and look towards the sky
spread your wings little bird
it's time again
to fly.

So hold on dear friend
you're not running out of time
we're here waiting
nine months isn't life
and defending the earth
is not and will never be a crime

Sometimes I glimpse the singer and think
if only I could borrow their wings
even just for a minute or two
then maybe I could see
what it truly means
to be free.

But in this cage I sit
fold my withering wings in
they are no use now
and sometimes I feel
they may never be again.

My heart aches
for the shelter of trees
to feel their blanket of safety
embrace me

JVA Cologne

(Poem from prison by UP III)

UP III was still in jail when suddenly the whole world seemed to be interested in Hambach. In September 2018, the longest eviction operation by German cops up to that time began. It culminated in the renewed and final ban on forest clearance at the beginning of October. Several thousand people came to occupy the tree houses, to make sit-in blockades, to participate in forest walks or demonstrations. Countless people "unknown" to the cops were put through the identification process at the police station in Aachen this month, and the vast majority were released. After the eviction, only a few people were in prison, but some of them for months.

Imprisonment as a means of repression outside Hambach Forest

Not only in Hambacher Forst, but all over the world activists in the struggle for climate justice end up in prison. Particularly strong, even life-threatening repression is experienced by people who have been fighting against climate-damaging corporations and the continuation of neo-colonial exploitation in MAPA countries for many decades.

The following lines "only" deal with the German-speaking countries in the context of the last few years. In Lusatia, for example, several people were imprisoned for weeks after anchoring actions that took place in parallel to the 2016 end-of-terrain action. There, in contrast to the Rhineland, detention was ordered for refusal to give personal details, even in the case of digger occupations, although the criminal charge of "trespassing" is to be assessed as comparatively harmless. The occupation of Lausitz23 at the beginning of 2019 received a lot of attention because of the absurdly harsh repression. Another group then started the next occupation right away under the defiant motto: "Better prison than coal power".

In the dispute over the clearance of the Dannenröder Forest for the construction of a motorway, a relatively large number of people ended up in prison for a short time, some of them because they had blocked motorways by abseiling. The punishability of this intensively practised form of action had not yet been fully clarified. This was one of the reasons why, after more than a month in detention, they all decided to give their personal details. In the course of clearing the occupation and the resulting confrontations with the cops, there were again the usual criminal charges.

Ella and Björn were held in custody for longer. Both were sentenced to over two years in prison for a supposed "physical attack" on police officers.

Ella's case, unlike Björn's, received a lot of attention. The accusations against her are too obviously far-fetched. Her support group also mainly uses the "innocence argument" for their campaign. Björn, although he was also arrested in the course of the eviction, receives much less solidarity and publicity.

People have also ended up in jail for refusing to give their personal details in other confrontations, such as that of a local forest occupation in Bavaria in Kasten Forst or in actions by Extinction Rebellion in Berlin. Especially when there is no permanent residence or a residence is abroad, imprisonment is imposed because from the point of view of the courts, leftists are well networked and can go underground anywhere.

Prison as a means of repression is of course not limited to the climate justice movement. Activists of the Kurdish movement have been criminalised for decades in Germany because of their political commitment. In addition, more and more anti-fascists have ended up in German jails in recent years.

Like pollen in the wind

It is impossible to say for sure how many people are no longer part of our movement, circles of friends or communities because of repression. What is certain, however, is that being surrounded by heavily armed cops, indifferent prison guards or prison walls does not leave anyone cold. It is important that we find answers to this repression together, talk about our fears, support each other in prison and, as far as possible, protect ourselves from self-doubt and resignation.

In my opinion, it can nevertheless be said in conclusion that they have not succeeded in suppressing the movement for climate justice. In recent years, more and more people have come to believe that capitalism must be overcome and new ways of living must be practised. Hambi continues to be a place of resistance and collective dreaming. Like a plant whose seeds have been scattered by the wind in all directions, more and more forest squatters have been appearing in recent years - I wonder where they learned to build tree houses?

Whatever happens, you can't keep us down - our passion for freedom is stronger than your prisons!