

Ex-SLA member Sara Jane Olson returned to prison

Hiram Lee
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Former Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) member Sara Jane Olson was arrested March 22, just five days after her release from a California prison. Paroled after serving six years of a 12-year prison sentence, Olson's release was met with protests from right-wing media and police groups. Responding to pressures from these groups, authorities in the California Department of Corrections declared there had been an error in the calculation of Olson's sentence, and that the former radical had not yet served enough time to qualify for parole.

Released on March 17, Olson had been at the Los Angeles International Airport on Friday preparing to fly home to Minnesota when she was suddenly informed that her right to travel had been rescinded. She then returned to her mother's home in Palmdale where she was kept under surveillance while authorities reviewed the sentencing process that followed her convictions. With the supposed error revealed, a new arrest warrant was issued and Olson was taken back into custody "without incident." She will spend the next year at the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla, California.

Olson's lawyer, Shawn Chapman Holley, strongly condemned the decision to rearrest and imprison her client, saying authorities "were bowing to political pressure. It's like they make up all new rules when it comes to her. It's like we are in some kind of fascist state." She also criticized suggestions that there had been an undiscovered error in the calculation of sentencing time for her client saying, "We received an order from the state parole board more than a month ago informing us that she would be released on March 17."

Also questioning authorities' claims of a sentencing error was Gerald Uelmen, a law professor at Santa

Clara University who also serves as the executive director of the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice. In a quote carried by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Uelmen reacted to Olson's rearrest saying, "I can't imagine how they could have blown that one, in such a high-profile case."

Sara Jane Olson was initially arrested by the FBI in 1999 when her story was broadcast as part of the "America's Most Wanted" television show. In 2001, she was convicted for taking part in two incidents from 1975 stemming from her involvement with the SLA, the politically disoriented middle-class radical group best known for its 1974 kidnapping of Patty Hearst. The incidents involved in Olson's case included the attempted bombing of two police cars in Los Angeles and the death of a bank customer shot by a fellow SLA member during a robbery. Prior to her arrest and six-year imprisonment, Olson had lived in Minnesota for more than two decades. Described as a "housewife," Olson had married a doctor and raised three daughters.

The active role played by vindictive police and right-wing elements became apparent early on in her several court proceedings. After pleading guilty in 2001, Olson was first sentenced to five years and four months in prison. Unsatisfied with these results, California's Board of Prison Terms quickly reclassified her as a serious offender, resetting her sentence to a period of 13 years. One year was later removed from that sentence in a different court proceeding.

The decision to classify Olson at that time as a serious offender was remarkably harsh and unnecessary. Described in most newspapers as a "Minnesota housewife" and a "soccer mom," Olson's most radical activity at the time of her arrest was performing on stage with a local community theater group. She was clearly a threat to no one.

When she was paroled last week, having served half of the 12-year sentence she received for her convictions, the Los Angeles Police Protective League (LAPPL) took its place at the forefront of the latest vindictive protests against Olson. Reacting to her release and demanding her return to prison, LAPPL president Tim Sands declared, “She needs to serve her full time in prison for these crimes and does not deserve time off for working in prison.” Sands added that “After participating in one killing and attempting two more, she managed to elude authorities and live a guilt-free middle class life for decades. Criminals who attempt to murder police officers should not be able to escape justice simply because they have good lawyers.” Sands continues to refer to Olson as a “terrorist,” a politically loaded word in the present climate.

It was, more than anything, the pressure placed on authorities by the LAPPL that drove the decision to reconsider Olson’s sentencing and recent release. In a press conference following Olson’s arrest and return to prison, Scott Kernan, speaking on behalf of the California Department of Corrections, told reporters there had been an “administrative error” in the calculation of Olson’s sentence. Authorities had failed to properly take into account, he said, the conviction for the bank robbery death at the time of her sentencing. This meant Olson should have received a 14-year sentence rather than a 12-year sentence. As a consequence of the newly calculated sentence, Olson will now not be eligible for parole until March 17, 2009.

The rearrest and imprisonment of Sara Jane Olson represents an unprecedented action by corrections authorities in California. It can only be understood in the context of the generalized assault on democratic rights and civil liberties in the US that has accompanied the so-called “war on terror.” The campaign to have her thrown back into prison was orchestrated not out of the purported concern over acts she was alleged to have committed more than three decades ago, but rather as a means of furthering present-day political intimidation.



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