

Mother of teen jailed for Facebook post speaks to WSWS

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Justin River Carter was arrested on February 14 of this year in Austin, Texas and charged as a “terrorist” for a post he made on Facebook. He faces up to ten years in prison.

The prosecution of Justin Carter as a “terrorist” is one of dozens of similar prosecutions around the country, mainly involving teenagers and online posts on sites such as Facebook. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously reported, the purpose of these prosecutions is to undermine the First Amendment guarantee of free speech and pave the way for the criminalization of political dissent. (See “The criminalization of political dissent in America”.)

In one of the more prominent of these cases, Massachusetts high school student Cameron D’Ambrosio was arrested in May on “terror” charges for posting rap lyrics making reference to the Boston bombings on his Facebook page. He faced up to 20 years in prison. D’Ambrosio was subsequently released when a grand jury refused to indict him, but not before he spent a month in prison.

Justin Carter’s purportedly “terrorist” post was made in the context of an argument on Facebook related to an online game. Justin was accused of being “crazy.” His response, which his mother contends was just her son’s sarcastic sense of humor, was, “I’m f---ed in the head alright. I think I’m a shoot up a kindergarten and watch the blood of the innocent rain down and eat the beating heart of one of them.” Then Justin wrote, “j/k” (which means “just kidding”).

Police appeared at Justin Carter’s workplace the following day to arrest him. A police SWAT team later raided his apartment. He was charged with making a “terroristic threat” to “impair public/government service.”

Media reports (such as this one) described a terrorist on the loose (Justin Carter had already been arrested by this time), and even identified a particular kindergarten as the supposed target.

The string of Facebook “terror” prosecutions nationwide is significant in that these cases target mere speech alone, i.e., free speech traditionally protected under the First Amendment. In Justin Carter’s case, as in Cameron D’Ambrosio’s, there was no weapon or bomb, no plans to acquire one, no specific target, no conspiracy, and no plans or attempt to carry out an attack. There were no real or intended victims. There was no alleged connection to Al Qaeda or any other group.

These Facebook “terror” prosecutions are the wedge that is being used to open the way for the full spectrum of “anti-terror” laws and powers that were enacted or asserted in the “war on terror” to be brought to bear against the American public. It is the Obama administration’s position that someone who is a “terrorist” can be denied all basic rights, imprisoned without trial, tortured, and even assassinated.

Justin Carter recently turned 19 in jail. The prosecutor has offered him 8 years in prison in return for an admission of guilt. As of this writing, he has not accepted the offer. Justin Carter’s employer, an audio/visual company, believes in his innocence and is holding his job open for him. A petition for Justin Carter’s release has gathered more than a thousand signatures on Change.org. His trial is expected to begin July 1.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Justin Carter’s mother, Jennifer Carter:

Tom Carter: What was it like for you, from your point of view, to learn that your son would be charged as a terrorist? How did you find out? What was your first reaction?

Jennifer Carter: Well, my ex-husband sent me an email on Valentine’s Day and told me that Justin was in jail. I called my ex-husband, and he told me that police had arrested him at his job for a post he had written on Facebook. My response was, “What kind of post was it?” He said it was on the news, and sent me a link.

I saw the news, and it said they were charging him with making a terroristic threat. My first feeling about it was that this was ridiculous. I thought as soon as the police talk to him, they will see it was a joke and let him go. If anything, it would be a misdemeanor. I thought if they talked to him, they would realize it was just his sarcastic sense of humor.

The next day, they went in front of the judge to set the bond, and the bond was set at \$250,000. It was later increased to \$500,000. That’s when I realized it was serious. And it was devastating. I never thought that my son would go to jail, and I certainly never thought he would go to jail for being a terrorist.

“Terrorist”—that is a word now in America that’s associated with someone who is going to blow something up or shoot a bunch of people. We’ve always been an anti-gun kind of a family. We’ve never owned guns. Justin was afraid of guns. He was scared when one time his roommate showed him a gun.

It was devastating. I cried for days. Then I got really angry, and I started trying to do something about it. My brother in law sent out letters to the ACLU and the EFF [Electronic Frontier Foundation].

TC: What kind of person is your son? Did he pose a threat to anyone?

JC: My son is sarcastic, and has a dark sense of humor for sure. But he’s a pussycat. He can’t fight. He has a younger brother, and when they would fight, he would always lose.

When we would have family parties, he was always the one playing with the kids, and teaching them how to play video games. He would be the one rolling around on the floor with them, playing hide and seek.

The idea that he would do anything to hurt kids—it's not who he is at all.

TC: In your son's case, I understand the prosecutor is offering a sentence of eight years in return for a guilty plea, but is threatening to seek more if the case goes to trial. What is it like to have to make that choice?

JC: It's hard to put into words the kind of emotions you have with this kind of thing. Every time we get bad news about the DA [District Attorney], and hear what they are trying to push for, whether it is 8 years or 10 years—all I can think of is my son when he was a little boy, and what a good person he is.

The idea that he would be locked away for 8 years or 10 years—he is not a criminal. He's not cut out for jail. My first thought when I found out was that someone would kill him in jail.

It's hard. He's almost broken when I talk to him on the phone. He's lost all hope. He doesn't think he's ever going to get out. He told me that if he gets out, "I'll never take sunshine or grass for granted. I'll never play video games again. If only I can be free again."

It's so frustrating that I can't fix this, and I can't do anything to help him. (crying) Sometimes I feel like I can be cold and methodical and get things done. At other times I just start crying and can't stop.

TC: What conditions does he face inside the prison system?

JC: He's already been transferred four different times after being beaten up by other inmates. They have classified him as a "baby killer." They steal his food. They spit on him.

He went from being a happy kid, with a good job, in an apartment on his own doing well—now he says he has no chance of surviving. He thinks someone is going to kill him, or that one of these beatings is going to permanently scar him or injure him.

TC: What do you think about other teenagers around the country being charged as terrorists for online posts? What are the implications for democratic rights and free speech?

JC: I used to believe that we had free speech in this country. I don't believe it anymore.

Now, whenever I see anyone posting anything online, I tell them to take it off immediately, before someone sees it or reports them. I'm scared to post my political views. I just don't think we have free speech in this country if they can charge children for saying stupid things online. Teenagers say stupid things all the time. It doesn't mean they are going to do anything, or that they are dangerous. If someone says something stupid, you talk to them. If there isn't any danger, they shouldn't be put in jail.

It's like they are running out of people to put in jail, and now they are turning to teenagers.

TC: If it were up to you, and you were the city official who could decide who was prosecuted and for what, how would you have handled your son's Facebook post?

JC: I would have sent someone to come talk to him at his home. Any sane policeman after talking to him would have seen. Justin was completely honest about it. He didn't try to lie. He admitted that he posted it. In the world I thought we lived in, they would have said, "Don't post anything stupid like that online again." And that would have been it.

Most of my friends and family can't even believe that this is happening, that this is real. I can't tell you how many times I've said, "Yes, that's it." They think there must have been something more to it. There's nothing more to it. That's it. That post, that statement alone is enough for 10 years in jail? It's ridiculous.

TC: What did you think of the official media coverage of your son's

case? Has that changed the way you watch the news?

JC: I don't believe the news anymore. I had a healthy skepticism before that, because I guess I'm a liberal or whatever. But when I saw the news—they reported that he was "on the loose" and the police were looking for him. But he had already been in custody for hours at that point.

I felt bad for the people at the school that they said he was threatening. I felt bad for the parents. I wanted to call the school and say—the news is wrong. Don't scare the kids. Nobody is out on the loose. I felt bad for the parents.

TC: Why is your son's case important? Why should people care about this issue?

JC: Freedom of speech is one of the basic rights we have in America. This is supposed to be the land of the free. You're supposed to have opinions and be able to state them publicly without fear, whether it's on politics or religion.

The whole reason we have the Bill of Rights is that there was a tyranny, and people were afraid of being killed by the king for saying the wrong thing. When you start taking away freedoms, and start saying that something you say is "terrorism" and cannot be a joke or political statement—when you start taking away that right, people start living in fear.

Everyone I know that knows about this case is now afraid to say stuff online. They see that even if you are joking, you can be arrested and put in jail for an indefinite amount of time. If you take away freedom of speech, then we've lost everything in this country.

TC: Have you been following the ongoing revelations about Edward Snowden and about NSA spying on the population?

JC: I think he's a whistleblower. People are divided, and some people say he is a traitor, but I say he's a whistleblower.

I don't understand why the NSA is listening to people's conversations or monitoring the phone calls—of American citizens! It goes back to the Bill of Rights. We're supposed to have privacy. You're not supposed to be able to listen in to things you're not supposed to be listening into.

I saw they were listening in to his [Justin's] phone calls from jail with me and to his father. I was horrified. The idea that people are listening to your phone calls and making judgments about you and making files on you—it's horrifying. Most people live in a bubble and don't understand that this kind of stuff is going on.

The government is listening. It's terrifying that we live in this kind of country now, or that we've been living in it all along and didn't know it.

TC: Is there anything else you would like readers of the WSWWS to know?

JC: I would want them to know that we have to fight for our rights. The rights that we think we have, we don't. If we don't stand up to the government, the police, the court system—we don't deserve our rights unless we stand up and fight for them.



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