

American teenager jailed as “terrorist” for Facebook post receives broad international support

Tom Carter
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Last week, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an interview with the mother of Justin Carter, a teenager from Austin, Texas who was jailed as a “terrorist” for a sarcastic comment he made on Facebook.

At the time of that article, we noted that a petition for Justin Carter’s release on Change.org had gathered 1,000 signatures since his incarceration in February. In a matter of days, his petition has reached nearly 70,000 signatures and counting. Since being interviewed on the WSWS, Justin Carter’s parents have been interviewed on CNN, ABC, BBC Radio, National Public Radio, and elsewhere.

As a result of the wide support Justin Carter has received, a Texas attorney specializing in criminal defense has volunteered to represent him free of charge.

“I’ll never forget that you were the first to contact us,” Justin Carter’s mother, Jennifer Carter, told the WSWS. “We went from being a family desperate to get anyone to help to having overwhelming support from around the world.”

“I think it’s amazing,” she continued. “I’m getting letters from people in countries where the governments I thought were more repressive, when you hear about them in the news. Everywhere there is a general sense of outrage that something you write online can be used against you in this manner. I’ve been very, very grateful for all the kind words and support.”

Thousands of statements accompany the signatures on Ms. Carter’s petition (addressed to President Obama and the Texas prosecutorial authorities), giving a sense of popular sentiments.

“Justin Carter and I were good friends when he lived in California and was going to the same school as me,” wrote David Inglis of California. “I believe that his

arrest was unlawful as it restricts his constitutional right to free speech. It’s one thing to say something, which he said he was just kidding about, and it’s another thing to act on something. I am genuinely furious at Justin’s unconstitutional persecution and at our Federal Government. To make such claims that his words were genuine when he was clearly joking is insulting. America has become a country of fear and unjust persecution because of the amount of power our police force has been given because of our fearful Government.”

“Freedom of speech is a principal pillar of a free government,” Chris King of Florida wrote, quoting American revolutionary Benjamin Franklin, “when this support is taken away, the constitution of a free society is dissolved, and tyranny is erected on its ruins.”

“Prime example of draconian prosecutorial overzealousness and blatant disregard for the First Amendment,” wrote Brian Swetnam of Maryland yesterday. “Why is this teenager still in prison for making an offhand comment? Why is law enforcement wasting taxpayers’ money incarcerating a kid for a poor choice of words? I’m ashamed to be American on this Independence Day while my government allows this sort of thing to happen. Shame!”

“This case represents a very dangerous precedent in the criminal justice system in the USA, whereby people are being arrested and prosecuted for what they say,” wrote Patricia Walsh from Slovenia. “That entire policy is completely contradictory to the US Constitution and the principles that underlie this country. It has the feel to it of not prosecution but rather persecution.”

“This is the first step to totalitarianism,” wrote Olga Baeva from Rostov-on-Don, Russia. “We still

remember times when somebody could disappear because of a joke about the government. We can't let this happen again—when we're killing people because we don't like what they are saying. This arrest is just like a killing, maybe even worse. This is a first step.”

“The USA has always been a flag bearer of ‘free speech.’ This incident is disheartening and presents it in a different light altogether!” wrote Rahul Singh of Bangalore, India.

Similar statements have poured in from the UK, Canada, Poland, Finland, Australia, Korea, Bangladesh, Belgium, Israel, South Africa, France, Portugal, Italy, Sweden, Ukraine, Slovenia, Germany, Ireland, Turkey, Luxembourg, Qatar, and elsewhere.

Despite the huge international response, Ms. Carter told the WWSW yesterday that her son is still in dire straits. For the past three weeks, he has been in solitary confinement. This measure is ostensibly for his own protection, since he has been repeatedly assaulted by other inmates.

On the phone with his relatives, Justin Carter remains very depressed, despairing of ever regaining his freedom. He has been advised that the broad support he has received will have no legal effect on his criminal prosecution. At some point last week, Justin was placed on “suicide watch.” Accordingly, all items were removed from his cell and all phone calls were disallowed.

In a recent handwritten letter to the judge presiding over his case, Justin begged for leniency. “I was a smartass, sarcastic, a regular keyboard warrior, and I was dumb,” he wrote. He said he had only gone online after work to “vent, play, laugh and relieve stress.”

Justin Carter's supposedly “terrorist” post was made during a trash-talking session related to the popular online game League of Legends. In response to accusations that he was “crazy” or “messed up in the head,” Justin Carter wrote, “I'm f--ed in the head alright. I think I'ma shoot up a kindergarten and watch the blood of the innocent rain down and eat the beating heart of one of them.” Then he wrote, “j/k” (“just kidding”).

An anonymous person immediately submitted this post to the authorities—presumably out of context—and Justin Carter was arrested at work the following day. A SWAT team later raided his apartment and confiscated

his computer, which the authorities claimed contained “violent video games.” A judge vindictively set the bond for his release at \$250,000, later increasing it to \$500,000, and Justin Carter has remained in prison ever since.

While Justin Carter's situation remains precarious, his mother said that the broad international support, the new pro bono attorney, and the expanding petition for his release have provided her son with some reasons to hope.

Justin Carter's new attorney, Donald Flanary III, spoke with the WWSW about why he took the case pro bono. “This is a free speech case; this is an internet freedom case,” he explained. Mr. Flanary has already filed a motion to reduce the bond and plans to file a motion to dismiss the charges altogether.

“I am very sympathetic to the plight of Justin Carter,” Mr. Flanary said. “He's poor. He's indigent. He's innocent. And I think the First Amendment is something to be valued.”

By itself, Justin Carter's Facebook comment is, in fact, one hundred percent protected free speech. As late as 1972, US Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote, “the First Amendment means that government has no power to restrict expression because of its message, its ideas, its subject matter, or its content.”

More than four decades later, American democracy is collapsing under the weight of extreme social inequality and more than a decade of bloody militarism. From behind the smokescreen of the so-called “war on terror,” the basic structure of an American police state is emerging. No substantial commitment to democratic rights or democracy remains in the political establishment, which plans to meet future social opposition with mass arrests, the denial of basic rights, torture, and assassination.

“We need to take a good hard look at some of these ‘terroristic threat’ kind of laws,” Jennifer Carter said.



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