

Anti-NATO protesters in Chicago sentenced to years in prison

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On Friday, April 25 Cook County Circuit Court Judge Thaddeus Wilson sentenced the NATO Three—Brian Church, Brent Betterly and Jared Chase—to five years, six years and eight years in prison, respectively, followed by two years of probation.

Last February, the three were found guilty of two counts of possessing an incendiary device and two counts of misdemeanor mob action. The jury acquitted the three on two separate charges of domestic terrorism, brought by Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez. They have been in prison since May 2012.

At the sentencing, Betterly reaffirmed his commitment to "peaceful protest against Western powers and transnational corporations." He spoke of his political commitments as a father who wants a better life for his child and as someone who identifies with struggles of oppressed people.

Chase, who was given the longest sentence, suffers from Huntington's disease, a degenerative neurological disorder. A doctor testifying on his behalf at the sentencing said he may need nursing home care in as little as five years.

The NATO Three are victims of a police frame-up of a group of protesters ahead of the May 2012 NATO summit in Chicago. The police targeted them for their alleged political sympathies with the Black Bloc, an anarchist protest group.

The NATO summit itself was held amid preparations for war against Syria and Iran, and around 5,000 people attended the protests. Hundreds were arrested and more than 60 were beaten by police, which were committing acts of "indiscriminate violence," according to the National Lawyers Guild.

At that time, President Obama said of the immense police presence, "Obviously [Chicago Mayor] Rahm [Emanuel] was stressed, but he performed wonderfully

and the Chicago police, Chicago's finest, did a great job under, you know, some significant pressure and a lot of scrutiny." For his part, Emanuel claimed police "did a tremendous job under very stressful situations over the last four days and they make everyone of us proud of the finest police department in this country." (See "Massive security preparations ahead of NATO summit in Chicago")

Church, Chase and Betterly were arrested during a May 2012 police raid of a south side apartment, after pouring gasoline into empty beer bottles. These actions were planned and instigated by two Chicago police officers posing as protesters, Nadia Chikko and Mehmet Uygur.

Cook County State's Attorney Alvarez's office waged an aggressive campaign to portray the three men as violent and dangerous terrorists, charging them under a never before used Illinois state terror law passed in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

After the jury acquitted the three men of terrorism charges, Alvarez defended the state's approach, comparing the situation to last year's Boston marathon bombing. "We saved people from being hurt, OK? ... Have we forgotten about Boston? Have we forgotten about homemade bombs in backpacks?"

At the sentencing, prosecutors argued for 14-year-long prison sentences, again raising the terrorism charges the men had been acquitted of, while praising the police provocateurs. Assistant State's Attorney Jack Blakey said, "Why bring up Boston? Because in Boston there were no undercover (police) to intercede."

During the sentencing, Judge Wilson said the case "may not have been terrorism, but it is terrorizing."

In the course of the trial—itself largely hidden from the public and requiring background checks for anyone wishing to attend—the state's allegation that the three

coordinated acts of destruction were revealed to be utterly bogus.

The evidence against the three consisted mainly of secretly recorded conversations, gasoline purchased by the police agents and a bandanna provided by the police agents. There were also some beer bottles with fingerprints of two of the three defendants, with no indication of when they might have last touched the bottles.

The prosecution argued that the defendants' outlandish discussions and lack of preparedness for alleged acts of mayhem were not relevant, and that it was the defendants' intent to harm that should be considered.

Rather than supporting the prosecution's charges of terrorism, the tapes exposed the efforts of the police agents to press the men into taking part in the police agents' plans to make Molotov cocktails out of gasoline and beer bottles. The recordings showed the three men to be interested primarily in partying with their friends.

On the recordings, Brian Church is heard to say, "No," when Officer Chikko encouraged him to test the Molotovs.

At the time of their acquittal, Betterly's attorney, Molly Armour, said, "This is a line in the sand. The war on terror can't go this far." In fact, the case demonstrates that the police state measures implemented in the name of the "war on terror" are primarily aimed at suppressing political dissent.

With widespread hostility to militarism, including the US-backed NATO war plans against Russia, and social anger over the immense growth of social inequality in America itself, the frame up and brutal sentences handed down to the NATO Three is aimed at intimidating and silencing political opposition.

The authors also recommend:

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[10 February 2014]



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