

Peaceful antiwar protesters sentenced to federal prison terms during pandemic

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Three Catholic activists from the group known as the Kings Bay Plowshares Seven were sentenced last week to between 10-14 months in federal prison for protesting against nuclear weapons at a US naval base in St. Mary's, Georgia on April 4, 2018.

The sentences of the Catholic Worker antiwar protesters were handed down in a virtual courtroom by Judge Lisa Godbey Wood of the US District Court for the Southern District of Georgia.

Carmen Trotta, 58, of New York City and Clare Grady, 62, of Ithaca, New York, were sentenced to 14 and 12 months in prison, respectively, on November 12. Martha Hennessy, 65, was sentenced to 10 months on November 13. All three were also sentenced to three years of supervised probation along with restitution payments of \$25 per week. Hennessy is the granddaughter of Dorothy Day, the founder in the 1930s of the Catholic Worker movement.

Although Judge Wood imposed less time than specified by court sentencing guidelines, she rejected appeals from supporters of the protesters that they get no prison terms at all under conditions of the raging coronavirus pandemic.

As Martha Hennessy told the *Intercept*, “I’m hoping that with the amount of time that I’ve been given, that I will be there only briefly, and then I hopefully will be sent either to a halfway house or home confinement,” adding, “There are millions of people who are trapped and contracting Covid-19 and dying in the prison system. Ninety percent of prisoners are people dealing with violence, trauma, poverty, addiction, neglect, abuse in childhood—and this is how we’re treating them?”

Kings Bay Plowshare Seven attorney Matthew Daloisio said that the defendants have been punished enough and warned that some of them have previous

health conditions that make them more susceptible to serious harm from the pandemic. Daloisio added that he questions why prison would be applicable to the protesters at all.

The seven Plowshares activists were charged with three felonies—conspiracy, destruction of government property and depredation—and misdemeanor trespass for breaking into the Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base and carrying out various nonviolent acts of protest against the presence of six nuclear submarines armed with 20 Trident warheads at the base.

They broke into the naval base by using a bolt cutter on a remote gate and then walked two miles through swamps to locations where they prayed, splashed bottles of their own blood onto a wall, spray painted messages against nuclear weapons onto a sidewalk, hammered on parts of a shrine to nuclear missiles and hung protest banners before they were arrested.

The Kings Bay naval facility, which covers 16,000 square acres in Camden County, Georgia—approximately 35 miles north of Jacksonville, Florida—is the US Atlantic Fleet’s home port for the nuclear-armed submarines.

The defendants were convicted on all four counts against them on October 24, 2019 after a two-day 12-member jury trial at which they were barred from citing their religious convictions or mounting what is known as a “necessity defense” and argue that their lawbreaking was necessary to halt the far greater crime of nuclear war.

The sentencing of Trotta, Grady and Hennessy follows by approximately one month the sentencing of Plowshares protesters Patrick O’Neill of Garner, North Carolina, to 14 months and two years of probation, and Jesuit Father Steve Kelly of the Bay Area in California, to 33 months, minus time served since the incident,

plus three years of probation. Catholic Worker activist Elizabeth McAllister of New London, Connecticut, was sentenced in June to time served, plus three years of probation, after spending more than 17 months in prison awaiting trial.

The final member of the Kings Bay Plowshares Seven, Mark Colville, 59, of New Haven, Connecticut, has been granted a delay of his sentencing hearing until December 18 because he refused to waive his right to appear before the judge in open court instead of attending a virtual hearing.

The three activists that appeared before Judge Wood last week were permitted to make statements prior to their sentencing. Carmen Trotta told the court, “[I] deeply believe that what our country needs, desperately, is a great deal more resistance to its ongoing foreign policy, which is a threat to the globe, not merely for nuclear weapons, but even through, simply, the ongoing war.”

The aggressive prosecution, conviction and sentencing of the peaceful antinuclear war Plowshares protesters—who chose to take their nonviolent action on the 50th anniversary of the assassination of the Martin Luther King, Jr.—demonstrate that the political and judicial establishment in the US cannot tolerate organized political opposition to imperialist militarism and war.

As has also been the case throughout the protests against police violence that began last spring following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis cops on Memorial Day, the ruling elite is prepared to use the forces of state repression against peaceful protesters demanding equality and basic democratic rights.



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