

Why are the Democrats silent?

Crushing Prairieland sentences mark new stage in US ruling class' war on political opposition

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The extraordinary prison sentences handed down this week in the Prairieland Detention Center case mark a new stage in the war being waged by the US ruling class against political opposition to its criminal rule.

Eight defendants convicted in connection with the July 4, 2025 protest outside the Prairieland facility in Alvarado, Texas received a combined 450 years in prison. Benjamin Hanil Song, convicted of attempted murder of a law enforcement officer, was sentenced to 100 years. Maricela Rueda received 70 years. Cameron Arnold (also known as Autumn Hill), Savanna Batten, Zachary Evetts, Bradford Morris and Elizabeth Soto were each sentenced to 50 years, while Daniel Rolando Sanchez-Estrada, who prosecutors acknowledged was not present at the protest itself, received 30 years.

Sanchez-Estrada was not accused of participating in the shooting, planning an attack or providing material support to any alleged act of violence. Instead, he was sentenced to 30 years in prison after being convicted of concealing documents for moving a box containing artwork, journals, poetry, magazines and antifascist zines after his wife, defendant Maricela Rueda, had been arrested. Prosecutors argued that these materials constituted evidence of the alleged conspiracy. In effect, Sanchez-Estrada received a sentence longer than any imposed on a January 6, 2021 coup defendant for handling literature protected by the First Amendment.

In fact, every Prairieland defendant received a sentence longer than the harshest punishment imposed on any participant in the January 6 attack on the Capitol. While anti-ICE protesters were sentenced to decades in prison under the banner of combating “domestic terrorism,” Trump granted sweeping clemency to more than 1,600 January 6 foot soldiers, including Proud Boys and Oath Keepers militia members. At least 97 of those recipients have since been arrested for, charged with or convicted of additional crimes, including violent offenses, child sex crimes, domestic violence, stalking, grand larceny and plots to kill law enforcement officers and public officials.

The Justice Department hailed the verdict as “the first sentencing of defendants affiliated with Antifa following President Donald J. Trump’s executive order designating the group as a Domestic Terrorist Organization in September 2025.”

Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche declared that the sentences “make clear that Antifa terrorists who attack law enforcement and federal facilities will face swift and uncompromising justice,” adding

that their “violent extremism has no place in our country.”

The administration is attempting to establish a sweeping new precedent: that political beliefs and associations can serve as the basis for terrorism prosecutions carrying decades-long prison sentences. The government’s theory rests on the proposition that left-wing political activity itself—including participation in organizations, possession of literature and communication with other activists—can constitute “material support” for terrorism.

The government’s claims collapse under the weight of the factual record. Prosecutors portrayed the protest as a coordinated terrorist assault on law enforcement, yet produced no evidence of a plan to carry out a mass casualty attack. There were no deaths. There was no organized attack. There was no “Antifa terror cell.”

The only exchange of gunfire involved former Marine Benjamin Hanil Song and Alvarado police officer Thomas Gross. Song maintains that he fired after seeing Gross raise his weapon toward a fleeing protester. Whatever the legal issues surrounding that exchange, it does not justify the transformation of everyone present, and even those not present, into members of a terrorist conspiracy facing decades or life in prison.

The conspiracy charges encompassed individuals accused of traveling together to the protest, communicating through encrypted messaging applications, possessing anti-ICE and anarchist literature, and participating in political organizations, including the Emma Goldman Book Club.

Protected political speech, books, zines, online messages and political associations figured prominently in the government’s presentation of the case. The prosecution argued that such materials constituted “material support” for terrorism when combined with other evidence.

The Prairieland prosecution is one component of a broader legal and political offensive by the US ruling class to establish a police state and shred the Bill of Rights. Since returning to office, Trump has issued an executive order targeting alleged “Antifa” activity and signed National Security Presidential Memorandum-7 (NSPM-7) ordering a nationwide crackdown against “anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism, and anti-Christianity” thought. Then Attorney General Pam Bondi followed with a memorandum directing federal prosecutors to aggressively pursue conspiracy and terrorism charges against political opponents.

In May, the Trump administration released its “America First” Counterterrorism Strategy, drafted under the direction of Sebastian Gorka, Trump’s senior director for counterterrorism. Gorka has longstanding ties to the Hungarian far right and has repeatedly promoted fascistic and anti-communist politics.

Reflecting the political outlook dominating large sections of the ruling class, the strategy identifies “Violent Left-Wing Extremists, including Anarchists and Anti-Fascists” as one of the principal terrorist threats facing the United States, while making no mention of right-wing extremist violence. It repeatedly invokes the specter of “left-wing extremism” to justify expanded surveillance, investigation and prosecution of political opposition.

PrairieLand is the first major test case under this framework. Under the guise of combating “terrorism,” the administration has sought to establish that opposition to ICE, membership in left-wing organizations, possession of political literature and communication with other activists can be treated as evidence of a terrorist conspiracy punishable by decades or life in prison.

Federal prosecutors have since brought similar conspiracy charges against protesters in Minnesota and Michigan. In Minnesota, 15 individuals face conspiracy-related charges arising from protests against federal immigration kidnapping operations. In Michigan, federal prosecutors have brought conspiracy charges against anti-genocide demonstrators after an investigation that, according to the FBI, involved assistance from Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel’s office. Nessel, a Democrat, had previously pursued state charges against a separate group of anti-genocide protesters before later dismissing them.

The timing of this campaign is significant. As the federal government expands the use of domestic terrorism statutes against political protesters, influential sections of the corporate media are simultaneously portraying socialism as a growing internal threat.

One day after the New York City Democratic mayoral primary, in which three candidates backed by New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani won, Rupert Murdoch’s newspapers launched a coordinated campaign warning that socialism was “on the march” in America. The *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Post* portrayed the victory of candidates backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) as an existential political threat, publishing editorials and opinion columns invoking Cold War imagery and suggesting the election represented a fundamental danger to the American political order.

Trump himself followed with open anti-communist denunciations on social media, declaring, “America the Beautiful will NEVER be a Communist Country!!!” and, in a separate post, warned of “many Communists running in badly failing Blue States.”

The ruling class is not terrified of the DSA, which functions as a faction of the Democratic Party and works to contain growing opposition to capitalism within the framework of electoral politics. It is terrified of the broader social process reflected in the vote: the growing hatred among workers and youth for inequality, dictatorship, war and the attack on immigrants. The corporate media’s hysterical invocation of “socialism” is not an analysis of the DSA, but a warning from the ruling elite that any movement which threatens to escape its control will be met with repression.

The response of the Democratic Party to the PrairieLand sentences has been virtual silence. As of this writing, the only elected Democrat who appears to have publicly commented is Michigan Representative Rashida Tlaib, who called the sentences “a travesty and totally unjustified.” Even this statement did not call for the convictions to be

overturned, for the sentences to be vacated or for the defendants to be freed.

The *World Socialist Web Site* requested comment from several Democratic elected officials, including Texas state Representative James Talarico, who is currently running for the Senate. The only response received from Talarico’s office as of this writing was an automated email acknowledging receipt of the inquiry and providing links to donate to his campaign. Similar requests sent to Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Bernie Sanders had not received replies by the time of writing.

The silence is not accidental. While Democrats posture as opponents of Trump, they have nothing to say when anti-ICE protesters are sentenced to decades in prison for alleged political association and opposition to Trump’s mass deportation regime.

In January of 2025, a sufficient number of Senate Democrats voted for the Laken Riley Act to ensure its passage, vastly expanding mandatory immigration detention and handing the incoming administration sweeping new powers to jail immigrants without trial. More recently, Democratic congressional leaders maneuvered to ensure expanded funding of ICE and Customs and Border Protection, with no restrictions on their operations, even as millions protested the administration’s mass deportation campaign.

In recent protests outside the Delaney Hall detention center in Newark, New Jersey, it was Democratic officials who led the suppression of the demonstrations. New Jersey Governor Mikie Sherrill denounced demonstrators as “outside agitators” and deployed police to disperse protesters, while Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, also a Democrat, imposed a curfew to suppress opposition to the detention center.

The Democrats are far more terrified of a mass socialist movement of the working class than they are of Trump’s use of NSPM-7 to prosecute political opponents and destroy the First Amendment. The PrairieLand sentences underscore that the defense of democratic rights cannot be entrusted to the Democratic Party, its DSA operatives or the courts. The struggle against dictatorship requires the independent political mobilization of the working class on a socialist and internationalist program directed against the capitalist system itself.



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