The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we’ve been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

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ANARCHIST RESISTANCE IN PRISON: COMRADE Z

Aired on April 23, 2020

This conversation with Comrade Z was conducted through the mail and is about the situation at the Darrington Unit in Texas. Comrade Z details some of his experiences there as well as some of the abuses taking place. The conversation includes hard to read subject matter including details on the terrible conditions at Darrington and discusses suicide and death of prisoners.

Aired on April 23, 2020
I tell ya! I gotta let ya go for now. It’s been an amazing and liberating experience. You all are amazing. Please allow me to send hugs to Sean Swain, Eric King and to all the comrades who are in the trenches fighting their ringmaster. Thank you for setting the example. I hope to be in that position soon. Thanks y’all. Hope to hear from you soon. I would like to close with a quote from Benjamin Tucker:

“Power feeds on its spoils and dies when its victims refuse to be despised. They can’t persuade it to death; they can’t vote it to death; they can’t shoot it to death; but they can always starve it to death.”

This interview was conducted via mail with Comrade Z, aka Julio Alex Zuniga, an anarchist prisoner in Texas, about the situation at the Darrington Unit.

Comrade Z was mentioned by Jason Renard Walker at the end of our interview that we aired on April 19, 2020. Although all three conversations cover some hard to listen to subject matter, we want to give a special warning to Comrade Z’s portion, which talks in detail about terrible conditions at Darrington and discusses suicide and death of prisoners.

You can read another interview with Comrade Z that appeared recently on ItsGoingDown.org and you can check out and/or purchase his artwork on Instagram by viewing @julioazunigaart. Thanks to Matt Brodnax for helping us set this interview up and his support for Comrade Z.

As of the time of publication, Comrade Z can be written to at:

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TFSR: Would you please introduce yourself for the audience? Who you are, where you are, how you got there?

Comrade Z: Hello Everyone, Thank you for having me on The Final Straw. It’s an honor. My name is Julio A. Zuniga. Alex is what everyone calls me, or Comrade Z for those who are standing with me 10 toes down in solidarity.

I am a survivor of B-Line solitary confinement at Dirty Darrington Unit and currently trying to reach out to activists and anarchists in the area who can help me organize a statewide work stoppage. Enemy of the State and of the Dirty Darrington administration, my whole heart and soul is hellbent on bringing the attention of the entire nation to the administration and it’s human rights violations, cruel and unusual punishment, physical assaults by staff, mailroom policy changes, inadequate law library, commissary price gouging, infestation of roaches, mice and spiders, sewage leaks in the cells, constant power outages, the list goes on and on.

The torture tactics are of primary concern because it’s driving people to die by suicide. So far it’s been 1 suicide per year since I’ve been here. How I got here was because abolitionists in East Texas rose up against Telford Unit, for Housing Administrative Segregation inmates at that facility without telling the surrounding community about it. They were against it. People of New Boston, TX and Texarkana found out about TDCJ housing G4 and G5 offenders because an Officer Davison was murdered by a solitary confinement offender who was being tortured by Telford Unit by withholding his mail and refusing him basics he needed, like food. This caused the entire town to begin the takedown of wardens and the torture of all inmates by using lockdowns for 90 days or more, then by stopping all hot meals for an entire year in 2017. So, since that officer died in 2015, it was the people who brought forth change to that unit. It is now a pre-release unit, no administrative segregation offenders and no solitary confinement.

TFSR: What inspires you these days? What brings you joy?

CZ: Oh that’s easy – Defiance from Detritus Books is my inspiration. I’ve gotten very close to Comrade Mongoose and against the peace and dignity of the Texecution State I’m in constant contact with Comrade King and Comrade Swain. I wish them the best in the struggle and hope to see them soon, for I am coming up for parole soon. It’s a crap shoot, but optimism is helpful in situations such as this. I get my jollies by sending Matt handcrafted portraits of all kinds of cool, weird characters. Y’all are actually owners of one of my pieces. Thank you.

TFSR: Is there anything I failed to ask you about that you want to talk about?

CZ: You all can check out my Instagram @julioazunigaart or contact Matt to place an order for a handmade portrait. I only have No.2 pencils to work with because this unit will not allow my supporters to send me art supplies. Anything that makes people happy like greeting cards and pictures are slowly being taken from us as well. Go figure. This is Bible seminary college too. This is the unit that pumps out “field ministers”. Unbelievable, huh? Bass-akwards,
come here to lie to everyone that they are doing everything they can to change these laws so that we actually become productive. The only laws passed are laws to make it harder on us to get home to our families. For the oppressed indigent offenders who cannot afford hygiene products, organizing a hygiene run to bring forth relief, peace of mind, and a sense of compassionate care. I’ve seen exactly how good this place could be, but as long as we have ringmasters like these hypocrite wardens, coward-ass majors and captains, vindictive supervisors who love to use cowardly acts and body slam people while in restraints such as Sergeant Akinsonu, Sergeant Williams, Sergeant Estrada, Sergeant Baker, who writes her own rules when it comes to keeping people down. All these cowards and a few more on my shit list need to be burned at the stake for their

I was not blessed with any kind of support, so I intentionally got into trouble just so they could ship me off. Best move I ever made, so I thought. However, that is how I ended up here.

**TFSR: What can you tell the listeners about Darrington Unit and your experience being held by the TDCJ?**

**CZ:** The Dirty Darrington Unit is a hub unit. Thousands of inmates pass through here weekly, transferring to other units, coming off of UTMB Medical Branch at Galveston, or Psyche Unit Jester 4. Some of them are bleeding, soiled in feces and urine. All mentally ill persons coming off Jester 4 have had no kind of hygiene for over 3 days. All these lay over cells are so unsanitary it takes a healthy person 24 hours to get sick by sleeping in one of these cells. There is nothing humane about that. They usually house people with wrong custody levels, endangering lives at will, resulting in physical and sexual assaults. It’s Dirty Darrington’s specialty.

I encourage you to ask administration how many lives Dirty Darrington has claimed because they refused to help suicidal inmates. Also, how administration uses offenders to switch on others with a false hope of beating a disciplinary case, then throw them back into population, leaving them to kill themselves behind the dishonor. On the 2nd week of November 2019, a guy killed himself after spilling the beans on others. When he asked them to help him because he felt suicidal, they ignored him. This is the suicide I witnessed that really proved verbatim the words Sean Swain voices in Last Act of the Circus Animals. When Rico killed himself, the show was like Cirque de Soleil. You had every basic need availed to you – blankets, mattresses, toilet paper, toothbrushes, toothpaste, cleaning materials, officers serving trays like they do in population with full portions. They even gave us light bulbs. It was disgusting to see it. You saw paint crews, utility crews, the works. For a week the unit experienced humanity, but once the coast was clear and the administration got away with murder, it was back to torture tactics, a pattern I have seen one too many times on Dirty Darrington.
Overall my experience has been depressing, lonely, stressful, painful. I’ve seen this administration use psychological torture for 23 months straight, for this is how long I’ve been held in solitary confinement. Only recently was I magically released and placed in E-Line (G5) administrative segregation – the filthy administrative segregation area that is notorious for roach infestations, no lighting in showers, no restrooms on the rec yard so if you have to urinate or have a bowel movement you are going to on the same area men play basketball. Fecal matter is all over the floor and people wonder how they got sick. Easy – as soon as you come in from outside rec, they serve chow. If you have been playing basketball then munch on your baked chicken, then suck the grease off your fingers. You just sucked on chicken flavored fecal matter and urine. Dirty Darrington knows exactly what it’s doing. Environmental disaster, B-Line, E-Line, G-Line, A-Line, C-Line, D-Line are all torture areas. In the winter it’s cold showers. In the summer they heat your water for you. No coincidence. There is so much more. There are over 200 men in administrative segregation and solitary confinement on Dirty Darrington. Some men are going through it worse because they believe this is normal prison policy. It’s not. I’m here to expose this unit and it’s human rights violations. I appreciate you hearing me out.

**TFSR: It’s hard to imagine that the staff and administration aren’t aware of the conditions there. Are they showing any signs of working to fix the situation?**

**CZ:** I knew something was terribly wrong with this unit when it runs through 4 wardens in less than 2 years. They are aware of every single atrocity. They personally handle all grievances and it’s rare an inmate ever wins on Step 1. They have to go all the way to Huntsville with their grievance to get fair treatment. By that time it’s been 60 days solid since the claim was made.

contraband cell phone I met “Mongoose Matt” by calling a random tattoo shop. Haha! It was awesome. Fineline Tattoo NYC is Matt’s workplace and it took all but 60 seconds to make one of the best friends I’ve ever had. It makes me so proud to say that. Shortly after getting pinched for contraband Matt has been there through all my solitary confinement, sending in anarchist literature, commissary bread for hygiene and art supplies, and in 7 years now on a 15 year sentence for a so called “murder” it’s his solidarity and support that saved my life and sanity.

Dirty Darrington had officers from the McConnell unit come hit us for shakedown and those creeps took all my property and left me with nothing. This was my breaking point. I just felt like giving up, but Mongoose comes flying in with letters and powerful words of encouragement and because of him I am fighting today. They tried to break me intentionally. I know this for a fact. Only problem is I survived. TDCJs “Cease to speak or cease to breathe” motto doesn’t scare me. I have nothing to lose. Now, I’m asking for you to stand with me until we punch a hole in this darkness and make it bleed light. Sean Swain is the other reason I fight. How you doin Sean?

Here’s the deal – folks out there, my only weapon at the moment is this here pen. I want surrounding activists to contact me so we can get started. This is still far from over and I believe that it’s only through the voice of the people that we can bring this down on a statewide level. I could use all the support available in my fight against the state. Things are slowly changing for me, so I will be allowed more visitors on Dirty Darrington Unit. Soon I will be allowed to call out. In the meantime, anyone can write me. There is so much to learn and prepare. No doubt that without your direct support places like Dirty Darrington and surrounding plantations will continue to thrive, rubbing it in the community’s face.

The Texcution state is also a slavery state. Shut em down. Nobody is gaining a thing. It’s a slap in the face when the officials of the state
One thing I know is we have nothing to gain for staying in good standing. “Good time credit” is not counting toward parole. “Work time credit” is another tool they have to control prisoners. Only the prisoners that still believe in the tooth fairy are too scared to accept this fact. People have tried for years to have these laws passed. Republicans are not interested in helping us. With a statewide work stoppage we will bring all these men’s dreams to fruition. We need to spread these facts to the entire state and shut it down. Stop slaving for your ringmasters. You want a real change, stop doing your slave jobs. Stop putting money in politicians pockets and ask them to put it your account to pay for the work you do. Slave days ended over 150 years ago – Why do you volunteer to work for the oppressor? Those of you who have no one, wouldn’t you like to support yourself in prison instead of risking solitary confinement for stealing food to sell in your living areas for hygiene. I can go on and on.

TFSR: What are working conditions like the prisoners incarcerated by the TDCJ as you’ve experienced? What sort of privileges come along with work, what sort of pay (if any), and sort of work is it?

CZ: They work these guys to exhaustion. They do not pay. The work is back breaking. No one will receive as much as an extra portion of food. These units are still slave plantations, only the name has changed. Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Research “The Sugarland 95” – You’ll see what I’m talking about. It’s time to bring this slavery to a screeching halt.

TFSR: How have you experienced support while you’ve been on the inside? What would you like from folks on the outside?

CZ: I had to go to extremes again to have the support I have today. I never conformed to prison culture. I love tattoos, motorcycles, art, hunting, fishing, boats and the only way I was ever going to see or hear about that is by reaching out. As a result of picking up a

It’s designed this way to ensure we never win any kind of grievance claim. Another way, as it is now, that they refuse us grievances all together on Dirty Darrington because they also are aware that if they hand them out they will be reading grievances for years. They know this place is crumbling to pieces. If it rains outside it rains inside too. The guards look like underwater welders when it rains. They wear rain coats indoors to stay dry. Nothing is being done except punishment and enslavement.

I am on a mission to learn from outside sources how to organize, to create a psychological warfare on this administration in the name of all the dead that could not deal with their torture chambers and for the mentally ill who cannot speak out against them who are, as we speak, living in horrible conditions on Major Pharr’s solitary confinement. It’s only a matter of time before another death by suicide. We can thank Dirty Darrington’s Administrative Segregation ringmasters for imposing torture on the already weak men by starving them, by withholding their mail, by refusing mailroom to give them pictures of loved ones or birthday cards, or by sending their shake-down team to physically abuse them and confiscate their property. It’s all designed to break you. It’s happening every day.

TFSR: How do the conditions you’ve described above affect the health of prisoners? What’s the condition of physical and mental healthcare available at Darrington Unit?

CZ: Personally I don’t get sick easy, but since being on Dirty Darrington I’ve had a serious sinus infection, primarily from the mold in the showers and the dust that carries all kinds of germs. As far as psyche at Dirty Darrington goes, it’s got potential. As far as physical, you’ve got the infamous Nazi doctor Speer, extorting everyone, but not giving adequate care to anyone. If you get sick they still allow this idiot to practice. Nothing gets done about his childish outbursts. He once tried to do a rectal exam on me, He said it was my yearly check-up. This was the first time I met him. As he stood
up and slapped on a latex glove my spidey-sense told me to ask a simple question, “What’s the name on the computer, sir?” He said “You’re Contreras #... blah blah blah” I was like “I’m out!” I’ve had problems with this doctor ever since, namely because retaliation is a trend on Dirty Darrington when you file a grievance. I tried to explain to everyone what this man tried to do. No one tried to help. He’s still here. All my medical treatment was taken away by this man for no reason other than I am or was chronic care hypoglycemic. If you have heat restrictions, work restrictions, anything that will make your ailment easier to handle Dr. Speer will terminate it and then send you into a Twilight Zone of sick calls, just so he can charge the co-pay. Others – he refuses to treat simply because it’s not life or death.

TFR: Can you talk about the suicides that you’ve been aware of during your time and are there any in particular you’d like to reflect on? Are there any strings that tie the circumstances together?

CZ: Well, I’ve been on Dirty Darrington for two years, going on three. I got screwed out of my legal work, got all my medical restrictions taken away, basically because I am indigent and I have no one on the outside to call here and raise a fuss, which is the only time you see inmates get what they need.

So, B-Line 3rd row, 15th cell, 2018 – A young man hung himself. The image of a nurse chest compressing this man never left me. It really caused me a lot of anger. It was senseless. It taught me just how they break men’s minds. It would disgust you. I remember this older man who would wake up screaming and just slowly, losing all reality, these torturers left him in that cell with a stack of trays, full of food with dead mice and roaches that he would just stack up toward the end of his sanity. Inmates could smell death. They tried to talk to him but couldn’t stand the stench of death. So, they brought Captain Lance the kitchen boss to remove the trays, stacked 20 high. But, you cannot talk to a broken man. He was a vessel, nothing more. After 2 canisters of pepper spray, still nothing until finally Captain Lance had the courage to tell administrators that he was no longer right. It was his voice that forced them to send him off that night, never to be seen again. For months they left that man in this condition. It’s happening now. This is normal? I’m not trying to hear that.

For these men, I ask to be armed with support, to feed the torturers a taste of their own medicine. I opened my eyes all the way at this past suicide in November 2019. I’m done talking. We need a bombardment of activism, protest, support. We need an uprising so this administration will be forced to take responsibility for all their fuckery.