In the aftermath of the 2000 Republican National Convention, I was charged with multiple felonies and accused of assaulting several police officers, including then Philadelphia Police Chief John Timoney. I approached my case with the attitude that the only way to stop the attempts to criminalize me—and dissent in general—was to organize more effectively than the forces of the state that wanted to shove me into prison. Largely due to successful organizing strategies and community solidarity, I was acquitted after three-and-a-half years.

Today, we face similar challenges and must adopt similar strategies in fighting those who wish to put our comrades behind bars and criminalize our visions.

Lesson One: Do Not Focus on Guilt or Innocence

It is not legally or politically useful to speculate about or emphasize the innocence of those arrested. Building your support efforts around innocence is like building a house out of a deck of cards. You don’t want support to vanish if convictions are handed down or if those being supported plead guilty.

Lesson Two: Don’t Spread Fear and Paranoia

Our security culture needs to be revamped, but we cannot let fear of repression or snitches inhibit aboveground work. Without much larger numbers of people participating in and supporting radical solutions to environmental and social problems, we will be easily contained and neutralized. Our own paranoia can close doors, and it feeds into the very marginalization that the state is trying to create.

This is not a new concern. Noted activist Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has said, “I remember in the 1960s when all the terrible things started to happen, like COINTELPRO, the movement became so shut down. Mistrust grew. People were reluctant to let anyone in. New people didn’t know how to join the movement; they were made to feel unwelcome. We have to build it to be stronger.”

Lesson Three: Your Support Does Matter

It’s easy to feel that our actions will have no impact on the ultimate outcome of a trial, but this is not the case. The support that I received throughout the five-year period between my arrest and my acquittal was essential to my own psychological wellbeing. Support groups can also aid with legal research, grassroots investigation and evidence gathering, which all help to strengthen a defense.

Remember that the outreach we do for the defendant is crucial, since political trials are influenced by public sentiment. The judge in my case actually heard radio coverage of an event held by my supporters. The awareness that my supporters created diminished the power of my adversaries.
Lesson Four: An Injury to One is an Injury to All

The charges filed against individuals are meant to send a message to the rest of us. These cases are attempts to impede our collective ability to wage struggles against injustice. If we sit by and let repression build, it will weaken our ability to resist future persecution. We must set the course of history and prove that they can’t intimidate us. Together we are powerful.

We must ask ourselves: Are we creating a culture of resistance that romanticizes action but shirks solidarity? Those who rejoiced when Vail burned must now defend those charged with that action and others like it.

Some environmentalists and social justice activists are OK with the feds wanting blood from accused “ecoterrorists,” forgetting that this blood will be used to smear any movement that becomes a threat. The feds will use any convictions they gain to justify increased political repression toward the rest of us.

Lesson Five: Combating Marginalization

Besides attacking radicals and revolutionaries, repression attempts to squelch and sterilize dissent. The state knows that it is not our actions themselves that pose a threat to its power, but rather the possibility that non-activists will recognize radical action as something more than unconstructive, suicidal or impossible. Our enemies want to scare people away from participating in radical action and supporting radical solutions.

The authorities attempt to marginalize us, and they co-opt some of our demands to make us seem unreasonable. It is time for us to be honest: We need a lot more power than we currently have for us to succeed in stopping the environmental destruction and social injustice that surrounds us.

We must strive to create the conditions that the state fears. We need to create more than radical niches and small communities of revolutionaries, rebels and insurgents. If we want to walk our talk, it is necessary to nurture broad-based links with diverse groups who will acknowledge connection to us and recognize that we have interests in common.

Lesson Six: Map Our Connections

When looking to build broader support, we need to map out our personal web of connections. This includes our ethnic and religious heritages, and the places and communities to which we are connected. Who can we mobilize? Who can support us?

Repression can be the time to reconnect with our family and friends on our own terms. When I was facing felony charges, I tried to remember all of the people and organizations that I had ever been associated with—I even contacted the folks that I had gone to high school with. We might be surprised where solidarity comes from.

This is also a great time to talk about ourselves—who we are, what we value and why. Inadvertently, my case turned me from a behind-the-scenes organizer into a spokesperson for the radical movement. By showing who we really are, we can turn the negative situation of repression into a positive outreach scenario.

Lesson Seven: Expand Our Base of Support Through Networks of Solidarity

Most people simply aren’t interested in “civil liberties” or “the right to dissent,” let alone the right to break unjust laws or to challenge the assets of exploitative institutions. This does not mean that we shouldn’t work to change the interests of the majority. But we should recognize that we can build broader support if we emphasize our tangible contributions to the community over our particular tactics.

This was the main thrust of the defense around my case. We highlighted the valuable contributions that I had made to the community and my ongoing commitment to organizing. Even if people did not believe that I was innocent, many supported me because they knew that the fight against landlords, as well as environmental and economic injustice, would be weakened by my absence. They knew this because I had worked with them for years to address these issues. By illustrating why jail would deprive the community of a valuable and constructive person, we were able to steer the focus away from the legal questions and the terrain of the state. Instead, we showed how the government would waste resources by imprisoning those contributing to the social good.
Lesson Eight: Racism and Resources

Many community organizations are descended from historical movements that, at one point, were marginalized and criminalized by authorities. The suffrage movement, the slavery abolitionists, the labor movement, ethnic and immigrant struggles for justice, and even those seeking religious freedom—all these movements have gone through times when they were painted as villains and violent troublemakers. We need to reach out to members of various organizations, and we must fight against political amnesia by reminding them of their past.

Our support work should also include a recognition of the repression faced by immigrants and people of color. We should build upon our common interest in eradicating and preventing the growth of the prison industrial complex. We should learn from the ways that restorative justice advocates have utilized economic issues as a way to reduce the popularity of expenditures for criminal injustice. We should highlight how more funding would be available for housing, health care and other services if the state were not squandering taxpayers’ money to persecute and punish activists.

One more way to bridge this gap is to emphasize the ways that repression maintains systems of oppression and injustice. Our challenge is to foster principled alliances with others who share a common enemy, so that when we are under attack, others will come to our aid. Many marginalized seniors and tenants, who never would have gone to a political prisoner event, showed support for me because they related to the way I was criminalized by the police. I learned that we gain a much larger base of support when we highlight the role of repression in maintaining common systems of oppression.

But these alliances are strongest when they are well established. The day-to-day solidarity and organizing work that we engage in is a social insurance that can be harvested when under attack.

Lesson Nine: Strategic Thinking

What does being strategic really mean? It means making a plan on how to achieve goals and monitoring your success along the way. It means learning from mistakes and thinking carefully about how to outwit—and outorganize—your enemy.

Just as the forces of repression try to isolate us from our support, we need to isolate them from their own base. In my case, we discovered that John Timoney—the cop who was charging me—had worked with the British Army’s efforts against the Irish Republican Army. We publicized this to the Irish Republican segments of the New York community—including the police—to divide Timoney from one of his bases of support. Through a combination of lobbying and disruptive tactics, we made Timoney unwelcome at police accountability conferences. By mobilizing community groups from multiple cities, we were even able to cost him his job as security consultant for the 2004 Democratic National Convention.

Lesson 10: Stopping Nightmares and Fulfilling Visions

In Uruguay, organizations like the Plenary for Memory and Justice confront and expose torturers active in the CIA-backed dirty war. When these organizations talk about justice, they do not just mean finding out what happened to their disappeared comrades. They are also working to fulfill their fallen comrades’ visions of freedom and justice for everyone. We need to stay focused and continue the work of those who are under attack by the state.

Success in achieving justice for our comrades and realizing our radical visions is dependent not only on our willingness to put our bodies on the line in direct action, but also on our ability to acknowledge that we can be crushed easily by the state unless we are constantly building and expanding our base of power.

Today’s nightmare for our locked-up comrades should be our wake-up call to re-evaluate and reinvest in our strategies for bringing our visions to fruition. By building networks of solidarity, talking about the community work done by our comrades, making connections with the struggles of immigrants and people of color against the prison industrial complex, and organizing the unorganized, we will be better able to counter state repression and create the world we are striving toward. If we do not, the future—for our comrades, ourselves and the Earth—is bleak.

Camilo Viveiros is a community organizer from Fall River, Massachusetts, who encourages radical activists to do more outreach and power analysis to develop revolutionary approaches to community organizing and popular education. He believes that repression can breed resistance but only if we strategize and organize. He faced more than 100 years behind bars if convicted of the charges waged at him by John Timoney.