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NEIL: Oh, you were at that show?

MR&R: Yeah, we were supposed to play, but then it got shut down.
MATT: What band was it?

RICHARD OWENS OF MAXIMUM ROCK 'N' ROLL INTERVIEWS

NEIL & MATT OF THE PATERSON ANARCHIST COLLECTIVE & NEW JERSEY ANARCHIST BLACK CROSS

NEIL: Anyway, I wanted to get going with a book, and I wanted to get into, that we name of the band was W@R. It never really did get out too much. We were on one compilation, the squat or Rot compilation [it was 3]. And from that as we got more into the band, we became increasingly more political, trying to get better, it's a thing and what we were singing about reading more about it, trying to get more political songs, politicizing the band and politicizing the people who were into the band.

MATT: I guess we saw the band as a vehicle to put the politics out there. And what happened within the band was a struggle. Some people were more into it for the music, and some people were into the politics more so than the music. And the band wasn't able to continue working together, because our side of the band wanted to use it more as a vehicle to get the politics out, the other side was like "yeah, the politics are good, it's fun to sing about it, but we're more or less into the music." So basically, there was a split in the band. Me, him [Neil] and another guy Henry, left and formed the political organization. We started putting up fliers, mostly at shows in the area, like the warehouse in Hawthorne.

MR&R: Did you get a good response to that?

NEIL: It was pretty mixed. At the show in Hawthorne, it wasn't a community who had ever been exposed to anything like that before. Some of the kids really got into it. I remember we made shirts the night before and they wanted shirts and they were taking the information. But other people were not only not into it, but they were really intimidated by it and they felt like they should be intimidating us. There was almost a fight but...

MR&R: Almost a fight?

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MATT: What band was it?

MR&R: Those Unknown (~~plug plug buy our record!~~)

NEIL: Anyway, we had started out a while ago. Probably the first thing that we were into, that we wanted to get going was a band, a punk band. We wanted to make the band very political. The name of the band was W@R. It never really did get out too much. We were on one compilation, the **Squat or Rot** compilation 2 or 3 [it was 3]. And from that, as we got more into the band, we became increasingly more political, trying to get better at it, to understand what we were singing about reading more about it, trying to get more political songs, politicizing the band and politicizing the people who were into the band.

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MR&R: Almost a fight?

NEIL: Yeah, well, you know, we played a show at the place in Hawthorne not long before that. The only show we ever played. This is what I'm talking about now. We had presented ourselves as a political band. We threw out fliers, burned flags at the show, and just making political statements through-out. After the show there were confrontations. The rest of the organization came out of...

MATT: We had the band thing going. We had also had problems with the police as far as growing up in the [Paterson] area. I had a confrontation in Wayne with the police. I don't wanna get too much into that. It was just a fight and the police came and broke it up. But the police officer and I had gotten into an argument and about five or six of them beat me up real bad. At the time I ended up in the hospital. Afterwards we started talking and said "let's get together and form an organization around police brutality." That mostly came out of our personal experience with it. When we first got together as a political organization, that was our main focus, police brutality. A lot of our early literature focused on that and we put a lot of posters around Paterson and a lot of people in the community, not involved in punk culture or hardcore or anything like that, just community people came out.

MR&R: Yeah, I know you did a zine called **Copwatch** that monitored local police activities. How did that go over?

NEIL: That was really good. Out of **Copwatch** came a larger newspaper called **Plain Words**, in which **Copwatch** was a section of it. But **Copwatch** always remained the most popular section of it. And after the paper was changed to **Plain Words**, people still asked for **Copwatch**, because that was the part that they liked out of it.

MR&R: Was that, **Plain Words**, a paper you put out yourselves?

NEIL: Yeah, the collective got together and we'd collect information about different police attacks on the neighborhood. And also, a lot of it came out of our own experiences, because as we started doing work, we had gotten harassed a lot. We got arrested for hanging up posters and they wanted to charge us with a felony, destroying telephone poles, because we were stapling posters into the poles. So the paper had a lot to do with our own harassment and how we were dealing with it. Then it also went into different police issues in the area. After we put out the first issue of **Copwatch**, it was pretty well received. We got letters back from different people who had read it and we really tried to get a wide distribution, at least in the Paterson area. We handed out a lot of copies and I know a lot of people got it. After **Copwatch** had done well, we tried to get a bigger paper dealing with more than just police issues, and we dealt with different issues that were going on in Paterson. That was called **Plain Words**.

MR&R: Was that strictly local, strictly community based?

NEIL: Mostly. It was about a 16 page paper and the first five or six pages were about local issues. Then there was the **Copwatch** section. Then there was national and international news. That was how the ABC [Anarchist Black Cross] started. We started doing a page about political prisoners and different prison issues that were going on.

MR&R: The ABC is a political prisoner organization? Did that grow out of Paterson, out of the Paterson Anarchist Collective [PAC] or was it part of a nation wide movement?

NEIL: Actually, the ABC came out of the Russian Revolution. It was actually called the Anarchist Red Cross and it organized aid for political prisoners in Russia and defended against attacks from the Cossack Army. Once things had gotten going in Russia, they changed the name from the Red Cross to the Black Cross, so they wouldn't get confused with the International Red Cross who was also organizing aid over there.

MR&R: Was this before or after 1917 [the year of the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik consolidation of power]

NEIL: It started not long before, but before 1917.

MR&R: The distinction between the Black and Red Cross, then, was after 1917?

NEIL: Yeah. It existed primarily in Europe organizing for political prisoners until today. The 80's is when it first came to the United States. I believe it was Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin [Black anarchist organizer and former political prisoner] who was responsible for building the first ABC here in North America. We found out about it once we started doing work and getting plugged into different anarchist groups that were around when we started [1991]. We met some in different groups in NYC and there was an ABC in NY and we found out a little bit about it [the ABC], went to a meeting and... Really how we found out about political prisoners was through contact with them. There was [still is] a political prisoner in Trenton, NJ and he saw some of our newspaper articles. He got in touch with some of his people on the outside and said "try to get in touch with these guys, I wanna see what they're about." He started writing us and we started writing back and forth. And not long after that, another political prisoner, Ray Luc Levasseur, he read the article about when the bookstore was shot at. That was in the **Industrial Worker** [publication of the Industrial Workers of the World- IWW], they printed a good story about that. He wrote to us, telling us that he had been through a lot of the same things. So we really started finding out a lot more about political prisoners. It began to show us that the local work we were doing, whether it was focused on police brutality or whatever it was, how it was connected to a much larger struggle, how what we were doing wasn't just isolated.

MR&R: Who was the political prisoner in Trenton?

NEIL: Ojore Lutalo

MR&R: What was his case about? Why is he a political prisoner?

NEIL: He was highly influenced by the Black Liberation Army [BLA] which came out of the Black Panther Party [BPP]. It [the BLA] was a clandestine group to defend the black community. He was highly inspired by that. While he wasn't a part of it [the BLA], he joined the clandestine movement, the underground movement. His specific case, what he was captured for, was an expropriation of a bank in Trenton, NJ. He and two other people were captured for that. I think it was 1977, he did a few years, he got paroled, and he joined the underground again. He got caught again while he was in a fire fight with drug dealers in the community. One of the programs of the underground at the time was to try and get drug dealers out of the community because it [drugs] was really causing big problems. So he got caught during the fire fight, went back to prison, and now is serving, I think a 40 year sentence for the parole violation, and the original sentence from the bank expropriation.

MR&R: I know a lot less radical activists or thinkers would not agree with the notion that expropriating banks for various causes and efforts would define a person as a political prisoner. They might think more along the lines of somebody that was a victim of a travesty of American justice, something like that. You know, a court hearing gone wrong, a court case completely corrupted by whatever, whether it's purged testimonies or by a corrupt judge or jury or whatever the case might be, Why would you take the view that political activists expropriating funds from banks, why would you agree that this defines someone as a political prisoner?

NEIL: Internationally there is a definition that's been accepted by the international [political] community. This is not word for word, but basically the definition says a political prisoner is anyone who has been sent to prison for their political action. And there's a different definition, a prisoner of war is anyone who has been sent to prison for their political actions with the use of arms. So Ojore is actually a political prisoner, but in the more strict sense he is a prisoner of war. The reason we say that is because we look at what happened in the late 60's. There are many political prisoners who went to prison- they were framed. A situation was created where people who were working above ground, doing community work, were harassed to such an extent that it was ineffective. They'd be followed, they'd be arrested for selling radical newspapers. They'd be put in prison and kept in legal limbo. They'd be caught between the jails and the outside and the courts and it became ineffective. Also, while they were doing this a lot of the people who were being arrested were getting severely beaten and even killed [by the police].

MATT: And all this for supposedly legal struggle. What they were doing on the outside was

supposed to be protected by the constitution- passing out leaflets, discussing different political ideas. So there is a distinction between people who were arrested and framed for their political ideas, political beliefs, and the person who begins to act on their political beliefs, doing illegal activities.

NEIL: What the government would call illegal activities. So what happened is, from all this repression, it was either drop out, not do anything, to a lot of people that seemed just as impossible as working in the above ground, being harassed and not being able to do anything. So what they did was they went underground. Ray Luc Levasseur, he was one of the political prisoners who got in touch with us first, he was part of a group called the United Freedom Front. One of the things that I've read that they've always wanted to do is try to build a movement that was able to defend itself, which involved building an underground. All the political prisoners and a lot of the people you'll talk to that support political prisoners understand the necessity for both. The underground can't exist with out the above ground, and as history shows, the above ground couldn't have existed with out the underground. The above ground without the underground left it...

MR&R: Benign

NEIL: It left it open to anything, anything could happen, it was...

MATT: Defenseless.

NEIL: Exactly. And so what happened was they created an underground to try and defend the above ground, to try and defend the communities. The United Freedom Front, one of the things that they did was to pick military targets, supporters of Apartheid etc. In Ray Luc Levasseur's trial testimony, he was talking about how if you look at South Africa while Apartheid was pretty big, all the computer systems in South Africa were IBM, and all the security systems that helped to keep the Black majority powerless were set up by IBM. So what they [the United Freedom Front] would do is they would pick an IBM target, plant a bomb and blow it up. So yes, according to the law, that's illegal. But is what he did politically motivated or was he just some mad bomber? If you look at what happened, I think that anyone would have to agree, whether they agree with his politics or not, that what he did was certainly political.

MR&R: That's presupposing that American law does only preserve privilege for an elite few.

NEIL: And then we come to what has always been, from what I understand, one of the most sticky topics, expropriation. In order to live clandestinely, like many of these people were forced to do [because of state repression and terror towards political activists], it becomes increasingly difficult to hold some kind of job. If you're gonna live like that, if your gonna be able to finance your political activity- that is [for clandestine activists], defending the above ground organizations, they

begin to do bank expropriations. And there are all kinds of expropriations, not just from banks. And if you look at the history of any revolution, in any country, you'll find that this [expropriation] has always existed, there's always been this kind of thing. In different trial statements that I've read and statements from different people, they always claim that people who are part of the revolutionary underground, when they committed these things, they always... it wasn't like a stick up. In many cases it was announced that this was a revolutionary group doing it. Some of them would spray paint slogans, others would hand out literature. Kuwasi Balagoon, he was another anarchist prisoner of war from the BLA, all the charges that he was charged with, there was only one case where an innocent civilian had gotten harmed. They were trying to commandeer a car and he got in the way. The point is just to say that they're not bandits. It's not 'just' like a bank robbery.

MR&R: It's a selfless sort of activity.

NEIL: Exactly, that's the whole point. They're doing it to keep the underground going, to [enable themselves and the struggle to] survive. The underground, which supports the above ground. It's all like a cycle, you know? And if one thing gets messed up, like a lot of things did get messed up, then you find a lot of people in prison like we have now.

MATT: Worldwide, I guess the best example of that set-up would be the IRA [Irish Republican Army] and Sinn Féinn.

MR&R: That would be a good parallel?

MATT: That would be a successful example. The BLA and some of the other groups from the 60's and 70's, they weren't able to build what Sinn Féinn and the IRA did because...

MR&R: Why don't you think the BLA was as successful as Sinn Féinn and the IRA?

NEIL: It's not only the BLA. There were many, many different underground groups in the United States from all different communities.

MATT: In Ireland there's more of a history and more of a community, where over here the Black [and other oppressed] community is in such a torn up state that its not able to unify. There's more of a sense of nationalism in Ireland, and national unity. In Black America, any attempts to bring up nationalism in the Black community is always attacked by the government...

NEIL: And the culture that we live in really keeps us all separated too. It effects us all differently, but a lot of the same problems are in all the different communities. In the United States, we're living in a place where there are so many different people, more than any other country in the

world, and in order to successfully build some kind of revolution here, all that has to come together. In a place like Ireland where it's...

MR&R: Predominantly white...

NEIL: There's less things that have to come together. And the history, the Irish struggle is something like 700 years old. This country is relatively young. We have a lot to go through and we all have a lot to learn before we get to the stage where we see some different things happen.

MR&R: Essentially then, taking up the struggle for political prisoners, your not just patching up American justice. It seems to be more of an attempt to overturn it and create a new one.

NEIL: One of our goals, or one of the things we'd like to see come out of our support for political prisoners is that- one of the things we were talking about before. A lot of people are looking at political prisoners right now. Among progressive people, political prisoners are being talked about a lot more. And one of the things I'd like to see come out of this is for the people who are looking at political prisoners is to look at the kind of things [struggles] that they [political prisoners] were involved in, why they're in prison. From what I can see, we're in really bad shape now, as far as a movement goes nationally. Anarchism is not the only movement that's in bad shape. All of us are. We're all in a pretty low period right now. One of the things we hope to do by supporting political prisoners is that people look at the kind of struggles that were going on when they went to prison, the struggles they were involved with. If we were successful in freeing all the political prisoners, there would still be a lot further to go. Personally, I don't think that's gonna happen. But the struggle doesn't end with political prisoners. It might be a good place to start in that we can say, "Here's a person whose been in jail 23 years." You can point out different things. You can point out the political reasons they're in prison. Then hopefully you can get people to think "I'm interested in the same kind of things, let me find out what they was doing." Then hopefully we'll be able to raise the level of consciousness from where we are now, to where we need to be.

MATT: Also it's a generation thing. If you look at it throughout history, there's always been social movements. There's always progressive and always counter revolutionary social movements. What we're beginning to see in America is the rebirth of a progressive social movement. Of course that's gonna be picked up by the youth. And it's important to realize that these political prisoners came from the last struggle, the last [progressive] social movement. The most revolutionary leaders, most revolutionary thinkers were attacked by the government. They were either killed, assassinated, or put in jail. For our generation to start moving and develop an ideology and strategy, its important to tap into that resource. Learn from their mistakes, learn from where they were successful.

NEIL: A lot of people who are getting involved today read the history. Well, political prisoners are

like a living history. We're afforded the opportunity to try and find them, to talk to them. A lot of them, after sitting in jail for 20 years, they've been able to think about the types of things they did and how they could've been done better. They're able to offer us that information. Not saying that what they tell us is gonna work, but we have the ability to try it out and see if it does.

MR&R: I think you've answered the almost exclusively communist argument against supporting political prisoners, or focusing on political prisoners which would be "treating the symptoms, rather than the cause of capitalism." I think you've given a sufficient answer.

NEIL: Yeah, the last thing I'd like to say on that point- Ojore Lutalo, one of the things he always says is that "Any political movement that fails to support it's political internees is a sham movement." You can't start a new movement while they're there... You can't go without bringing them with you. You can't leave them behind.

MATT: What does that say to the youth who are getting involved? "If I join this organization or advocate these political beliefs and I'm thrown in jail, you're just gonna let me sit there and rot?"

MR&R: That'll distance a lot more people.

NEIL: It's important for people to understand that no matter which way you look at it, no matter what progressive movement you're involved with, no matter what it is, political prisoners are largely responsible for their existence [or development]. They're the people that helped to build what we're involved with today. I know that if none of these people that are in prison today did the things that they did, and I wasn't able to read about it, it's very possible that I and a lot of people wouldn't be thinking about the things we're thinking about today.

MR&R: So, speaking of the difference between communism and anarchism, the way communist organizations have reached to the issue of political prisoners, a great many of them are supportive, but, like I said, they're critical of putting too much of an emphasis on that as an issue. You've pointed out why you need to put an emphasis on political prisoners and prisoners of war, but why did you shoot for anarchism, subscribe to anarchist thought as opposed to other schools of thought and activism that have already been established and played themselves out in past history such as communism or socialism?

MATT: I think anarchism is just as established as communism. Just as far as we see in America, communism was more out there. And when your younger and you want to get involved in revolutionary ideology, communism is very intricate and hard to understand. Anarchism is easier to ingest, easier to understand. That's why I was more inclined to anarchism. Since then I've studied about communism, and there's definitely things that communism did that were valid... there were things that were pointed out even before a communist state was established. Karl Marx

and Bakunin argued around the time of the First International, about communism. That it has things inherently wrong with it that would make it totalitarian, a dictatorship. I believe that criticism of communism is valid. You can't have a top-down structure, a top-down organization...

MR&R: Centralized?

MATT: Yeah, it needs to be more organic, more community based and from the bottom up. Communism is from the top down. Anarchism strives to be from the bottom up.

MR&R: Plus I think a big problem of Marx is that he excluded everyone but the proletariat- but the working class. He established a radicalized working class as the revolutionary force. It seems that anarchism has proven that it's not the radicalized skilled proletariat, but the lumpen proletariat- the unemployed and largely the peasantry that have been responsible for social upheaval in revolutionary movements. And it seems that anarchist thought had always supported that theory and it actually played itself out in history and materialized into a reality.

MATT: The Black Panthers took up the lumpen proletariat ideology, that the revolution can be made by the lowest classes. Anarchism's easy to work with, it's more inclusive. Where as communism is a real hard line, dogmatic. And they don't have ways to counter different factors. They feel like, "We got the science down pat, this is the way you do it, anything else we just ignore. No, it doesn't exist if it doesn't fit." They try to make the world fit into their thinking rather than include the world into it.

NEIL: I think one of the largest problems we've had within the movement is our inability to work with one another. The communists, the anarchists, the socialists, who ever it is, we always seem to be at one another instead of with one another. Many of the prisoners and many of the groups we work with aren't anarchists, but one of the great things is that we haven't really let that become a difference. We talk about things, we talk about how we think about things, and some times we differ, but we never go at each other. We come with each other, we talk with each other instead of at each other, like, "this is what I think and it doesn't really matter. You can't prove me wrong."

MR&R: You're united around the issue of political prisoners?

NEIL: We're united on a lot of things, more than I would have thought. But one of the things that people in this country and all progressive people in this country, whether they are communists, anarchists, or whatever, need to understand is that we need to start to work with each other instead of against one another, and realize that none of us have all the answers. All of us have something to learn from one another I think. And don't make each other the enemy, because I really don't think that we are. And I really don't think that if we think each other is the enemy... If these different progressive forces have to play against one another, I don't think we'll get the things

accomplished that need to be. The only way we are gonna move forward is together.

MR&R: I know with the struggle to get a retrial for Mumia Abu-Jamal [who was framed for political activities and is now on death row] that there is a united front, that there are a lot of different organizations, completely different from one another, polar opposites in fact. Like the July 4th [1996] demo. [for Mumia] in Philadelphia, the Workers World Party was there, Paterson Anarchist Collective and NJ ABC, people from the Nation of Islam etc. Is that what you're speaking about?

NEIL: There's definitely issues, and political prisoners are one of them, where you have to unite and fight the issue. More or less, what I'm talking about is while we might be united to try and free Mumia, anything outside that arena we'll kind of turn our backs to one another. I think that's an attitude a lot of people have right now. It's really not conducive to change anything, to learning, we're not able to learn about one another. A lot of us, a lot of anarchists, have misconceptions about communism. If we continue to keep our backs turned to people, we'll never find out what they're really about. And a lot of communists have misconceptions and preconceived notions about anarchism. Until we're able to face one another, and sit down with one another and talk about it we're just gonna be against one another.

MATT: But the Mumia struggle definitely shows how it is necessary for all these various organizations to get together and unite at least a couple of key issues. Right now it's like divide and conquer, you know what I'm saying. The progressive movement is divided so it's easier to conquer. With Mumia, it shows how when all the organizations get together, it could make some kind of progress like the HBO special [HBO produced and aired a reasonably impartial documentary titled **A Case for Reasonable Doubt**]. That wouldn't be possible unless some kind of broad based movement was built in the United States.

MR&R: That's quite a leap forward too, the special on HBO. It seemed to hold the case in a good light. Do you think that was achieved largely through protest?

NEIL: I don't think that's solely the reason why, but it's as big a reason as anything else. I don't think that there's any one thing that made that happen. It's a number of things, all of which worked together to make that happen.

MR&R: Because I know until then there wasn't much media coverage at all.

NEIL: Especially not in the United States. The HBO special is almost identical to one done in Europe a year before [1995]. The BBC [British Broadcasting Channel] did a special on Mumia they aired on TV called **Date With Death**. This thing on HBO is almost identical to it. There's a couple things that have happened since the BBC special last year, the interview is new, but a lot of

it is exactly the same. Other countries have picked up on Mumia. I think the movement to free Mumia is bigger in Europe than it is in the United States. People are able to come together more over there and a lot of things, like this television special for one, the HBO one, it's likely that it might not have come if it weren't for the one in Europe first.

MR&R: That raises a bigger issue: why is Europe more progressive than America? What would you attribute that too? I mean, like you said, political organizations have had a hard time and it's a low level of struggle.

NEIL: Well, the left in Europe is a lot older and there's more of a history there than in the United States. We're still tripping and stumbling over things that maybe they've done in other countries already. They've learned from mistakes they've made already, while we're still making these mistakes.

MR&R: Do you think the States made more of an effort than European nations to suppress or discredit any kind of movements?

NEIL: Repression here is probably worse than it is a lot of other places, definitely. Any kind of protest, the repression here is a lot worse than many other places. That's not to downplay the repression in any other country, because people have died as a result of being involved in movements in all these countries. We're certainly not the first, probably more like the last to be involved. But repression, because of the nature of this country, is severe and total in a lot of cases. You can see what happened with the movements, 10 to 15 years ago. Totally wiped out... nothing left. Whole organizations were destroyed, organizations of thousands and thousands of people were destroyed, people were killed, intimidated, put in jail, some of them were exiled, can't even come back to their own country. If they come here they'll be in prison, if they're not in prison, they'll be dead.

MR&R: That brings up the whole thing that a lot of people have that "Well things aren't perfect in this country, but it's better than any other country." The average person will say that and sincerely believe that, but you point toward state repression here as a key to destroying organizations and movement. How would you respond to that, that thought? And why do people believe that?

NEIL: Partially, in a lot of ways, that's true. People in the U.S. are a lot better off [economically] than people in poorer countries. But if you look at the reason why, it's because the U.S. exploits all these other countries. Because of colonialism we go over to weaker countries, poorer countries and take them over. And people here receive the benefits of that, while people in those countries receive the worst end of the stick. That's why you'll see so many people come to this country to live, to find opportunity etc. Poor people in this country in a lot of cases, in a lot of pretty big cases, do live better off than poor people in other countries, but it's at the expense of those other

countries.

MR&R: Earlier on, a number of years ago, you had a book shop [Right To Existence Books]. I don't know what point in the history of the collective that was- was it soon after you were first established?

NEIL: Yeah, it was pretty early on. Earlier in the interview we talked about putting up the posters on police brutality. A number of people responded to the posters, we got together and had meetings and one of the first things we wanted to do was open up a space. It wasn't specifically a bookstore. We definitely sold a lot of books and materials there, we had periodicals, but it was a space where we had events. A lotta kids came in to watch political films after school or read books or whatever. It was a community space where you could go and find out about different things that were going on, different progressive and revolutionary things that were going on. We opened it up in October of 1992, and we had started only a year before that. It was good. A lot of good things happened from that. A lot of things we find out now, like three years later, the bookstore, the space, had an effect on people that we only see now, a while later.

MR&R: How do you see that now?

NEIL: Different people who stopped by, who picked up stuff from the bookstore, you wouldn't hear from them for two years, but you still find they're involved because of...

MATT: Mostly we were right next to the High School, and a lotta high school kids would come in- you know, maybe freshman or sophomores- and pick up literature. Now I'll run into people on the street four years later and they'll be like, "I remember man! I used to come down there and pick up newspapers. I still saved 'em all, I still read them." It did get them interested.

NEIL: It sticks with them you know? It was definitely a good thing and something we wanna try and do again. As the bookstore opened up and as we did more things, it goes back to the repression, we got a lot more repression. At that point, some people who were involved in the organization, they stepped back, and they said "It was cool to help out for this or that, that was cool. But I'm not into getting arrested or shot at." So they stepped back. After we had the bookstore for about a year, we weren't able to keep it open consistently. That was one of the biggest problems.

MR&R: Because of membership?

NEIL: Yeah, membership. And both of us were working full time jobs to pay for the store, pay for the books and to pay the electricity and phone bills and everything. We'd be at work full time and there'd be no one to keep the store open. We'd come from work and open the bookstore and we'd

be so beat that we didn't want to stay there for so long.

MR&R: And you can tie that in with the justification of expropriations, bank expropriations.

NEIL: If there was a movement capable of fielding an above ground and an underground, this was the type of thing the underground did. They did make these kind of expropriations and they funded the above ground with them. So the membership wouldn't have to kill themselves and work more than 40 hours a week to keep a community space open.

MR&R: Then you could focus on political activities.

MATT: We also didn't have the ability as far as community support. We had some community support, but if the police were to make a larger move on us- say kill us, or arrest us, set us up- the people would've forgotten about it in a couple of weeks because there was no underground or above ground movement to help sustain it. And that's something that's hard to build.

MR&R: It seems anarchism was snuffed out of Paterson a long time ago too. Did you have much support from other organizations when you opened the bookstore?

NEIL: There was no other organizations in Paterson. When we first opened up the bookstore, not long before that we printed up **Copwatch**. We handed out **Copwatch** all over the place, so the cops knew about us. Occasionally we would protest in front of the police building, when we were on trial for hanging up the posters. Shortly after this is when we opened up the bookstore. The cops had raided the bookstore. They found **Copwatch** and were like, "These are the guys that do **Copwatch!**"

MR&R: So they had no idea before that.

NEIL: No, they had no idea that that was us. Now they knew where we were. This was the place. Matt and another guy that was with us at the time, we hadn't even opened yet, they were waiting to sign the lease and for PSE&G [Public Service Gas and Electric] to come and turn on the gas and electric on. The cops found the place and raided it, tore it all up, they were threatening people. One guy said he was going to do anything he could to make sure we weren't going to stay there.

MR&R: Were there people there at the time?

MATT: Yeah, it was me and another guy. It was about 7:30 in the morning. As soon as a cop drove by, they kinda knew who we were, they recognized us and they saw us sitting in front of this building we had rented and they called up for reinforcements. All of a sudden they just all came. There was cop cars coming from every direction. They came into the place and and they're

like "We found the secret hide-out. Call the sergeant." We were laughing at it because they were thinking we were bigger than we were. They were seeing all this revolutionary literature getting passed out... they called the sergeant, the sergeant came down, they looked around, they looked through out little box of literature and everything. All they did was make threats. They said, "Your not gonna last here a week." Things like that. A week later, we had bullets through the door.

NEIL: Yeah, they shot the place up.

MR&R: What was with that? Was there anybody in the place at the time?

NEIL: No, shortly after it happened [our] people came by, we had gotten a shipment of books or something like that. We walked through the door and there were magazines laying on the floor ripped up and...

MATT: When I came in, we just came back from New York, we were dropping books off, and I was looking around and said, "Hey, what's all this stuff laying on the floor?" And I look around and I say, "Oh, there's holes in the door." I'm not thinking bullets or nothing. I'm like "Who was putting holes through the door there?" Then I put it all together. I pick up like these bullets on the ground. I said, "Someone must've shot through this door here!"

NEIL: The magazine hanging over there [a anarchist magazine just about torn in half hangs framed on the door of their office] is one that got ripped up by the bullet that went through it.

MATT: Funny thing is, there's a picture of Neil on the inside cover [of that issue of the magazine] and the bullet like just missed him [the picture]. Kind of ironic.

MR&R: You would attribute that to the to the police then? You would assign responsibility to them?

NEIL: They were the only people that knew [about our store at that point]. And even in the newspaper article [printed on the shooting], the mainstream press, we called them up and said that this had happened etc... etc. The only people that knew we were there, because like we mentioned, we weren't even open yet- was our landlord, and he lived all the way down in south Jersey, us, and the cops. Like two days before there was the raid, where they were saying they were gonna get us, you know, they were threatening to kill us, to shut us down, and everything, and then, you know, this happens?

MR&R: So apparently you were a threat. You were perceived as a threat?

NEIL: Yeah... but the question you asked before, had we received any support? There wasn't

really a lot of groups in Paterson doing this type of thing. So we reached out for help from different groups in other cities. Primarily some of the other groups in New York. The first group to come down and help us was actually the Black Panther Newspaper Committee [BPNC]. The BPNC was people who were in the BPP [in the 60's and 70's] who were still active. So this guy Breeze, who passed away in late 1994 [MPBUH], he came down and he said, "Look, we did the same thing twenty years ago. Our offices got shot up." He was the first person to come down. He gave us a stack of newspapers, and we set up a date for him to come to talk at the bookstore. That was actually one of the first events we had. He came down and talked about some of the same things he did twenty or so years earlier that are happening now. He was real helpful to us in just giving us advice and pointers on different ways to handle things, a lot of the harassment. Not long after this some of the [political] prisoners started writing us and they began to help us a lot. But locally there was really no group no organizations to help out [this included existing anarchist groups in NY].

MR&R: It's brilliant, the support the political prisoners and the BPNC. Is it the same party that is still in existence?

NEIL: Well, there is no BPP now.

MR&R: There's the new BPP.

NEIL: Are you talking about the ones in Texas?

MR&R: Yeah

NEIL: No, that's different.

MR&R: It seems like a reciprocal relationship, supporting the political prisoners and the feedback you discussed earlier.

NEIL: We were really fortunate to have the help of some really excellent people.

MR&R: As far as political prisoners, who would you say- not that anyone is any more important than any other- who would you say the main political prisoner that you would like to inform people of?

NEIL: Well, because Mumia's [Mumia Abu-Jamal] case is so detrimental right now, he's facing life or death, I would encourage everyone to find out about him and how they can actually get involved and help. Not just to know about him, but try and help out, to help build a movement that can free him. And believe me, if that is successful, it'll create the conditions where it'll become a

lot easier to free many other political prisoners. It'll create the conditions to build a movement where the freeing of political prisoners is likely, where it's easier to obtain. The way we've gone about supporting political prisoners isn't so much where we found out who was doing this or that. The way our organization works is we try and find out, to the best of our knowledge, who's a political prisoner and which one needs the most support. One of the most successful programs of the Anarchist Black Cross Federation (ABCF) is the Warchest Program. What that does is it collects money from the different groups in the federation, and different supporting individuals [and groups]. They all send in money, and this money is then distributed every month to those political prisoners and prisoners of war who receive the least financial support. The more money that we get in, the more money we're able to send out every month.

MR&R: So you take a monthly fee from...

NEIL: The pledges, yeah.

MR&R: -and then donations outside?

NEIL: Yeah, each group that's involved in the federation is obligated to send a certain amount of money every month. They decide how much they can afford. Different supporting groups and individuals, they pledge to send money, however much they can afford, every month. Then all that is centralized into an account. Different people or groups tell us about different political prisoners and prisoners of war [who they believe could use financial support]. We get in touch with them, if they say "Yes, we can use the money" we send out a form asking some questions about their financial situation. Whoever is in the worst financial situation [based on answers to the questions] gets the money. Right now there's four checks of \$60 goes out every month [there's more now]. And there's also another part of the Warchest called the Emergency Fund. That's for all political prisoners and prisoners of war. It's for those who don't need that money every month, but if something happens, like... one of the political prisoners, Jalil [Muntaqim], he's one of the New York Three, part of the BPP. he's been in prison for like 25 years now. Anyway, he got transferred from one prison to another and they lost all his stuff. It was like in the middle of winter, so he didn't have any coat and he didn't have any gloves. So we were able to go into the Emergency Fund and help buy him a coat and gloves. [The very next winter they transferred Jalil to another prison and again lost a lot of his belongings. Again the Warchests' Emergency Fund purchased a coat and gloves.] Just recently we sent out money to a political prisoner [anti-imperialist political prisoner David Gilbert]- he's a political prisoner who does a lot of legal work, so we were able to help him buy his legal books, and those books are really expensive. Another prisoner of war [Puerto Rican prisoner of war Carmen Valentín] listens to the radio, the news. Her radio broke and so we're gonna buy her another radio. The prisons are crazy though. You can't send a radio in this one prison [or any federal prison]. They have to buy the radio that's at that prison. So it's this crappy little radio and they charge all this money for it. And there's not too

much of a way around it. You know, a lot of political prisoners don't receive the proper financial support, and so what we're trying to do is create a fund they can all rely on. It's been around since late 1994 and we've been able to do a lot, but the need is much more than what we have.

MR&R: Prisons in general in America... We'll I've heard statistics that argue that America holds more prisoners than South Africa during Apartheid, in proportion to the population. I've also heard that various prisons are actually working for big corporations. Instead of working for the state, prisoners might labor for say, IBM, assembling PC boards and things of that sort. That seems to tie into the issue of... free slave labor for American corporations. Is that part of your work, attacking that?

MATT: It's not right now, but it definitely should be. It's issues like this where a movement around political prisoners and the harshness of prison conditions can unite with other movements like the labor movement. A true labor movement would be against the exploiting prison labor. That's an issue we can come together with the labor movement on. Like I said, we're not a very big organization so we have to focus our attention on what we feel is a priority at the moment. But that's definitely an issue that needs to be taken up.

MR&R: Yeah. We're almost out of tape, so if there's any last thing you want to say, about the organization...

NEIL: For me, how I got involved in politics was through punk music. I was highly inspired by [political] punk bands. That's one of the reasons that when you approached us for this interview, I really wanted to take advantage of it. I would always read MR&R and get a lot of different things out of it. It was a source of my development and how I came to some of the conclusions I did. It kinda shows a continuum. Like I'd be able to read MR&R and be inspired by it, and take that inspiration and do something with that. Somebody else would see what I did and be inspired and do an interview with us for MR&R. So it just kind of went full circle. And one of the things I'd like to see from people involved in the punk and hardcore scene is take what they like out of it and build on it. Just try and [make] progress. Try to put it into action.

MR&R: Take it a step further.

NEIL: Cause one of the things that I was always frustrated with in the punk movement was that it was stuck. It didn't move forward. One of the things I'd like to see happen and one of the things that needs to happen is, no matter what it is you like about it, take the best out of it and move forward. That way there will always be progress.

MATT: Politics is more than just singing about it. There's an extra step that you can take to do more. ★