

## A Tilted Guide to Being a Defendant

The Tilted Scales Collective



reviewed by Dyno and Hazel

*“I remember the first time I was charged with a felony; I was really scared too.”*

These weirdly comforting words came from a new acquaintance, after one of the authors of this review shared how they’d been affected by recent legal complications. The acquaintance had come to town on an “Earth First! Roadshow” tour to spread the word about the history of the radical environmental movement, and the skills and knowledge necessary to keep it going. Their skills and knowledge were indeed helpful. But in the end, their level of camaraderie and empathy was the most valuable thing they shared.

Not everyone is lucky enough to have the in-person advice and mentorship of someone who has walked a similar path when their activism comes up against the criminal legal system. *A Tilted Guide to Being a Defendant* (And an abridged zine, “The Criminal Legal System for Radicals”) fills that hole, and more. This book is an invaluable read for anyone facing political charges, supporting a loved one facing charges, or engaged in radical action. We are two people who have used this book as an important support through difficult legal experiences (one of us is still facing charges), and we’ve collaborated to share our thoughts on this important resource.

*A Tilted Guide to Being a Defendant* is written by the Tilted Scales Collective, a group of anarchist legal workers with experience organizing and participating in defense committees, advising defendant groups, and giving workshops on the topic. The book outlines personal, political, and legal goals to consider when facing criminal charges due to politically-motivated actions. These intersecting goals almost certainly contain contradictions, and the book discusses how to balance these in ways that agree with both our revolutionary commitments and our own personal boundaries. It goes into detail about organizing joint defense strategies with co-defendants, working with your lawyer, using media as a defense strategy, and surviving prison. For instance: How can you work with other defendants or an organized defense committee within the constraints of the criminal system? How can you strategically use access to independent and mass media to affect public opinion about your case? How can you frame your messaging to honestly represent your actions and the cause that motivated them? How can you best work with a lawyer in order to make the most of your legal situation, likely going beyond what would be a traditional legal goal? The authors draw on a profusion of political criminal cases throughout the book, both historic and in the recent past, to honestly assess and answer these questions.

Perhaps the most important piece of this book are these references to political cases, discussed in detail, and used as ‘lessons learned’ for defendants facing political charges. When one of us was in jail, solidarity and comfort were found in remembering all political prisoners now and before us — everything they’ve risked and fought for. Getting to learn more about political cases from this book has inspired a deeper dive into those cases which feel particularly related to those currently facing political charges in the US.

The Tilted Scales Collective described multiple cases in which co-defendants had a hard time working together under such stressful circumstances, or even worse, snitched. The authors assure that having a healthy relationship between co-defendants throughout a case has proven to be essential to organizing a joint defense, and winning a case. Presently, most defendants facing criminal charges related to Stop Cop City/Defend the Atlanta Forest have been given no-contact orders with their co-defendants. The book provides a clear reminder that these no-contact orders are designed to isolate us and weaken our ability to fight political cases in the most strategic way possible — collectively.

As the Tilted Scales Collective says, “This system has less power when people fear it less”, and this book offers so much reassurance and a feeling of empowerment — the polar opposite of how the criminal justice system is designed to make defendants feel. We found confirmation in all of the examples of baseless scare tactics the prosecution and the state use early on in cases — like the pattern of throwing out draconian charges to encourage snitching and stifling of our social movements, which are later often lightened significantly or dropped.

The authors also emphasize a media strategy which refuses to engage with the state’s narrative of our character and of our movements. We must set the terms of these debates in the media and will not get sucked into the state’s analysis of “terrorism” and “violence”. Engaging with that narrative, at best, just weakens the depth of our arguments.

In *Representing Radicals: A Guide for Lawyers and Movements*, the Tilted Scales Collective has come out with a second, stand-alone volume specifically for attorneys interested in learning how to best represent defendants against politically motivated and values-driven actions. Lawyers are trained to represent what they see as the best interests of the defendant they are representing. This can be problematic, however, when the defendant wants to act in solidarity with others in their group who may be less well-positioned in the criminal system, or if the defendant values the interests of the movement as a whole over what the lawyer says is the best interest of the defendant. This book is designed to help lawyers understand these tensions, and help those they are defending achieve legal and political goals.

Overall, we can’t recommend the work of the Tilted Scales Collective enough. Learning how the criminal justice system impacts social movements is critical to the strength and longevity of our movements. It is our hope that working to free political prisoners from the legal system can inspire more resistance to those destroying the earth.

