

Extreme 30-Year Prison Sentence for Artist Daniel “Des” Sanchez Estrada in the Prairieland Case (TX) Highlights Federal Attack on Freedom to Dissent

written by Free Des Support Committee | June 23, 2026



Fort Worth, Texas - Judge Reed O'Connor, a George W. Bush appointee to the US District Court for the Northern District of Texas, today sentenced immigrant and artist Daniel “Des” Sanchez Estrada to 30 years in federal prison over possessing and moving a box of zines—politically expressive pamphlets. His case, informally known as “Prairieland,” has attracted extreme skepticism from civil rights organizations including the Freedom of the Press Foundation and National Lawyers Guild, and is part of a growing number of cases in which federal prosecutors are pointing to the possession of First Amendment-protected materials as evidence of criminal support for terrorism.

Speaking prior to sentencing in the courtroom, Sanchez Estrada stated, “I worked really hard every day in this country, and I believe in human rights and helping others in need. I donate money and art to help animals and other people... I’m a father, a husband, and a teacher. But I’m not a terrorist.”

In sentencing Sanchez Estrada, Judge O'Connor rejected motions for acquittal or a new trial filed by Sanchez Estrada’s public defender, Christopher J. Weinbel, that highlighted the state’s failure to identify how the literature in question constituted evidence or prove that Sanchez Estrada intended to conceal it. Writing in the rejected motion, Weinbel noted plainly that prosecutors “relied entirely on stacked inferences and speculation, which the Fifth Circuit consistently rejects as proof. [T]he Government’s own admissions highlight that the object of the offense was unknown, leaving the jury to speculate about what constituted the alleged evidence.”

Reacting to Sanchez Estrada’s sentencing, attorney Moira Meltzer-Cohen, who represents people arrested in the course of First Amendment activities, asserted, “This entire prosecution has been calculated to test the state’s ability to quell dissent. But the way forward is not silence, it is courageous solidarity with those who are being punished on the basis of their protected beliefs,

associations, and activities. And as devastating as this has been for those affected, I do believe their rights will be vindicated in the post-conviction process.”

Seven other Prairieland codefendants received sentences as well, ranging from 50 to 100 years in federal prison. One of them was Sanchez Estrada’s wife, Maricela Rueda, who received an astounding sentence of 70 years, exacerbating the strain on their family and leaving their teenage daughter in the care of relatives. According to court observers, Judge O’Conner acknowledged the court’s political agenda in handing down maximum sentences to “send a message to anyone who shares a similar ideology.”

Background

Sanchez Estrada, a 39-year-old artist, was found guilty on March 13, 2026, alongside eight codefendants who participated in an anti-ICE protest at the controversial Alvarado ICE detention facility. Under the auspices of “National Security Presidential Memorandum-7,” which was issued after the killing of Christian nationalist influencer Charlie Kirk, Sanchez Estrada was federally charged with “corruptly concealing a document or record” for moving a box of zines the day after the protest. Although he was not present at the protest, nor did he know about it, prosecutors argued that the content of the literature made it evidence of the defendants’ material support for terrorism, and shockingly alleged that the decision to move the box was a conspiracy between Sanchez Estrada and his wife.

Following his arrest, Sanchez Estrada, a former DACA recipient and current green card holder, was singled out by ICE, doxxed by DHS, and threatened with deportation. He has received support from numerous advocacy organizations, including the National Lawyers Guild, Abolitionist Law Center, Immigration Legal Resource Center, Texas Civil Rights Project, Houston Leads, and Texas Jail Project.

As stated by Seth Stern, director of advocacy for the Freedom of the Press Foundation, “Being guilty of possessing literature is a concept fundamentally incompatible with a free society. We don’t need a constitutional right to publish (or possess) only what the government likes, and the ‘anti-government’ literature in Sanchez’s box of zines is exactly what the First Amendment protects.”

Members of the Free Des Support Committee are enraged and heartbroken by Sanchez Estrada’s sentence and continued imprisonment, and the ramifications of the Prairieland case for the First Amendment in particular and dissent in general. They urge people to continue to support him and the other Prairieland defendants, through letters, donations, and advocacy—until all are free.

Donations to Sanchez Estrada’s defense and support fund can be made at <https://freedes.net>.