

What to Expect, and What to Do About It: The View From in Here

by Robert Chan

There's long been an intersection between immigration, incarceration, and sentencing, and Donald Trump's policies will only worsen that. The past 30 years' PIC expansion is now repeating on a new front and will increase the carceral population through the further criminalization of undocumented immigrants. We know this because it's already happened in previous years. Trump's rhetoric about deporting 2-3 million "criminal aliens" is actually old hat; there was a similar focus in the Obama administration, and back then, more than 60% of those deported were swept up for misdemeanors, traffic violations, or just border crossings. What's new is that now, with Trump, the upwards penalty of 20 years for unauthorized border crossings will more frequently be exploited to maximize the catch of sweeps. Certainly, this will coincide with an uptick of arrests at the local level, as the feds lean on regular police to use the "Secure Communities" program, which links local law enforcement to the databases of the Department of Homeland Security, in order to cross-check all arrestees for their immigration status.

This surge of new arrestees will first pass through county jails and state prisons, providing extra revenue for those places that rent out existing space to ICE, and also providing fresh fodder for a PIC push to resume construction of new carceral bedspace. As undocumented immigrants are transferred to ICE custody, their swelled numbers will give the same excuse for expansion to GEO Corp., CoreCivic (formerly CCA), and others in the private prison hegemony that Trump has publicly expressed support for.

Such monetary inducements may hamper recent years' reforms in scaling back the PIC as Trump's net-widening furnishes "many, many jobs" through hiring thousands more human-catchers and thousands more turnkeys.

Also, Trump's allegations about fraudulent votes against him, will no doubt impede efforts to restore voting rights for the millions of people with convictions, while emboldening those who oppress our communities through gerrymandering and voter i.d. restrictions. In trying to reduce our voting power, Trump and his cohorts seek to pave a path for a retrograde u-turn in policies, including going back to the heyday of the PIC boom of the 1990s.

But we don't have to accept this. We don't have to stand still. We can resist and prevail if we work together. First things first, we must establish community networks in all of our neighborhoods for our immigrant brothers and sisters. Children separated from their parents should have a safe place to stay with stateside relatives and friends; we can build houses of refuge by coordinating with our many allies in sanctuary cities.

Also very important, we must continue running "know-your-rights" workshops so that undocumented people know what they'll face in the worst case scenario of deportation. Those picked up by ICE are often transferred to detention centers in remote locations, far away from resources and people who could help. Coupled with a severe lack of due process and no meaningful representation during mass group hearings, it's very difficult to put up an adequate defense.

Here in California's state prison system, we've drawn on the experiences of our undocumented comrades who've survived ICE custody before. They're sharing their knowledge of the deportation process with us so that we can ready first-time incarcerated immigrants. We also provide ESL study groups to equip people with the skills needed to overcome the language barrier and come out of ICE proceedings with some kind of humane result.

Among the general population of prisoners, we stay up-to-date on current events by sharing articles from periodicals like The Abolitionist, Prison Legal News, The Nation, Mother Jones, and California Lifers' Newsletter.

We know that Trump's pick for the next U.S. Supreme Court justice will be detrimental for all of us in how important case law is negatively decided on a range of societal issues, including policing and imprisonment. That's why here, on the ground-level, we're urging our fellow prisoners to speak out and write, to let their voices be heard. Now is the time to stand with our free-world allies as they daily protest Trump's latest ugly declarations and executive orders. In our thoughts and in our prayers, with our hearts and with our words, we stand with the oppressed and all progressives fighting for social justice.

Never before have I been so surprised and inspired by the outpouring of unity that's coalescing in the sea of courageous people stepping up against tyranny. We incarcerated, have more friends out there than we may realize, organizations like Critical Resistance, C.U.R.B. (Californians United for a Responsible Budget), The Other Death Penalty Project, Human Rights Watch, Campaign to End the Death Penalty, Fair Chance Project, A.R.C. (Anti-Recidivism Coalition), and CSU-LA's Words Uncaged. They could all use our voices in the fight, and by sharing our views and experiences, we raise political awareness and ultimately prepare for the next battleground - the ballot box. In two years, we have to get everyone out there to take back those congressional seats.

In the meantime, there's also elections for local district attorneys - they're important both in the regular course of policy decisions and also in cumulatively shifting statewide trends regarding the PIC.

Other states may not be as progressive as California, but still, we stand in solidarity with our imprisoned comrades throughout the nation in urging them to speak truth to power in this political moment, now, more than ever. Together, we can prevail!

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