

SEVEN STEPS TOWARD ABOLITION

When we use abolition as an organizing tool, it can be confusing how exactly to support abolition on the day-to-day level, especially when we work in coalition with people who aren't sold on abolition (yet). These are some guidelines, questions and ideas to think about as you plan and evaluate your campaigns.

1. LIFE AND SCOPE

The Critical Resistance Mission Statement says, “Because we seek to abolish the prison industrial complex (PIC), we cannot support any work that extends its life or scope.”

What we mean by not ‘extending the life’ is that the work doesn’t try to make the PIC less harmful, or to fix it, but to make it less possible for the PIC to continue. What we mean by not ‘extending the scope’, is that any work we take up doesn’t support cages that aren’t clearly prisons (like mental hospitals or prison hospices) instead of prisons; it doesn’t make it easier to feed people into prisons (by putting cops in schools, for example); and it doesn’t validate any part of the PIC.

So even when we interact with state agencies like courts or legislatures, it’s done strategically and in a way that weakens those systems, not by appealing to

them as potential sources of justice.

2. WHERE ARE YOU WORKING

We organize in different ways and places, and we have to use different levers of power to undo the PIC. And while we have to work in as many ways and places as possible, we need to give the most emphasis, presence, and support to fighting the most harmful aspects of the PIC – especially within our groups. This can mean things like insisting on leadership from people of color, challenging heterosexism within your group, or highlighting white supremacy in your literature. It can also mean taking the time to work through how a campaign will connect the communities doing the campaign to the communities being targeted, and thinking about how fighting a specific part of the PIC can make the whole system weaker.

3. COALITIONS

As abolitionists, figuring out whom to work with might seem hard when not very many identify as abolition-

EXAMPLE: It can be hard to tell when you’re using state agencies strategically and when your appeal to a court or legislature confirms its power. For example, pressuring state legislatures to decrease funding for state corrections departments during budget crunches is a useful way to challenge PIC expansion. However, it’s important to make clear that (most) legislators do support prisons and police, and that opposing the PIC isn’t just a matter of balanced state budgets, and that while we might be able to force legislatures to support our work sometimes, it is always going to be a matter of political force (instead of a matter of faith in democracy or the idealism of a representative). Otherwise you might find yourself in some tricky situations (in one instance, activists in California pushing for cuts to the corrections budget recently were told that if they wanted to see a decrease in funding they should support cuts to prisoner education and job training programs). Sometimes you can work against this just by saying it: telling the media and people you’re working with that a campaign is appealing to such-and-such state power strategically – not because you have faith in the government- can go a long way toward changing how people inside and outside your campaign understand that work.

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ist. At the same time, abolitionist politics helps you see broad connections throughout the PIC, making coalitions more necessary and more exciting. But in coalition work it can be especially hard to sort out the 'life and scope' questions. Some things to think about are:

- Is the coalition's work abolitionist even if the members aren't?
- How do you relate to the non-abolitionists in your coalition? How are you working to shift their goals from reform to abolition.
- Who's indirectly involved in your coalition? Who funds the groups you're working with? What other coalitions are those groups in?

4. NO TO NIMBY

Not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) organizing tries to prevent something harmful from happening in one community by directly or indirectly suggesting it should happen somewhere else (someone else's backyard). A good example would be a group that organizes against a prison proposed for their community not by saying the prison shouldn't be built, but that it needs to be moved to another place. NIMBY campaigns are sometimes easier to 'win', because the project can still be completed, so all it really does is move the problem temporarily out of sight. Effective abolitionist work means saying 'no' to the PIC anywhere and everywhere.

5. HEALTHY SOLUTIONS?

Part of building toward abolitions is building other institutions and practices to maintain and create self-determination for communities and individuals. This doesn't mean that every campaign against a part of the PIC has to offer an exact alternative, but we should be thinking about those things – if you're fighting a new prison, what do you want done with that money and land instead? If you're fighting against education and health care cuts, where from state funding of the PIC could you get money (e.g. replacing cuts to education with cuts to the prison or police budget)?

6. WHOSE WORDS ARE YOU USING?

What are the ways you frame the problem, your work, your demands, and your solutions? Do they rely on the PIC's categories of criminals, fear, and punishment, or do they help us to build a world where we are accountable to each other and address harm by providing for our collective and individual needs? Does your language help broaden people's general vision of fighting the PIC, or does it only spotlight a particular problem?

7. SHORT- TO LONG-TERM

How does your current project contribute to abolition? Does it offer immediate support to people harmed by the PIC? Is it a movement-building or educational tool? Does it connect issues that seem separate? What is it going to make possible down the line?

I think that as we develop prison abolitionism, we also need to build on the visions of communities that have organized around the basis of identity. By that I'm not saying that we need to go back to the narrow identity politics where we can't work together unless we come from the same racial group, or sexual group or whatever, but I do think that sometimes for prison abolitionist language begins to erase the language of race and identity and sexuality, and to a lesser extent gender. And if we do that, then it becomes less – it doesn't seem so relevant to communities of color that are very much used to organizing within a framework of anti-racist, African-American, Latino language. So I think that we need to develop an abolitionism and abolitionist statement and vision that is totally infused with the cultures of the people who are incarcerated.

– Julia Chinyere Oparah

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Here's a shorter version of our questions about supporting abolition.

They aren't intended as a checklist, but rather as a quick guide to some of the questions we think it's most useful to ask. They're things to think about as your work develops to make it stronger, not an entrance test for the abolition club.

a quick guide to the questions

1 LIFE AND SCOPE
Does your work seek to make the prison industrial complex (PIC) a less workable solution to problems, and to limit its reach over our lives?

2 WHERE ARE YOU WORKING
Does your work take on aspects of the PIC that are most harmful? Do you work to fight forms of harm like white supremacy, heterosexism and class prejudice both in your campaigns and within your group?

3 COALITIONS
Are you working in coalitions with abolitionist goals? Are you working to help other coalition members understand abolition?

4 NO TO NIMBY
Does your work reject the PIC everywhere?

5 HEALTHY SOLUTIONS
Does your work suggest workable ways to maintain self-determination, meaningful safety, and collective health?

6 WHOSE WORDS ARE YOU USING?
Does the language you use challenge commonly accepted notions of safety, responsibility and justice?

7 SHORT- TO LONG-TERM
Does your immediate work make future challenges to the PIC possible?