

# ABOLITIONIST STEPS

## |HOW DO WE REACH OUR GOAL?|

THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF ABOLITION CAN SEEM A LONG WAYS OFF. Considering the obstacles we currently face, how might we imagine reaching abolition? What practical struggles can we take up in the present? Part of the key to answering both of these questions is to view the path towards abolition as one that requires gradual steps rather than instant leaps.

What are these abolitionist steps? Are they reforms? Some reforms help keep oppressive institutions alive. They become tools to keep things as they are. They cause activists to become manipulated or taken over. They lead to harmful compromises that take us away from our goal. Are all reforms, however, necessarily bad?

## |ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE|

A HELPFUL DISTINCTION TO MAKE is between abolitionism and reformism. In a very clear way, abolitionism and reformism differ in terms of ideals. The abolitionist keeps a constant eye on an alternative vision of the world in which the PIC no longer exists, while the reformist envisions changes that stop short of this. This simple difference often comes from more deeply rooted differences in how the PIC is critically understood. Abolitionist analysis leads to the conclusion that the PIC is fundamentally unjust and must be brought to an end. Reformist analysis typically leads to the conclusion that the PIC can be made just if certain changes are made.

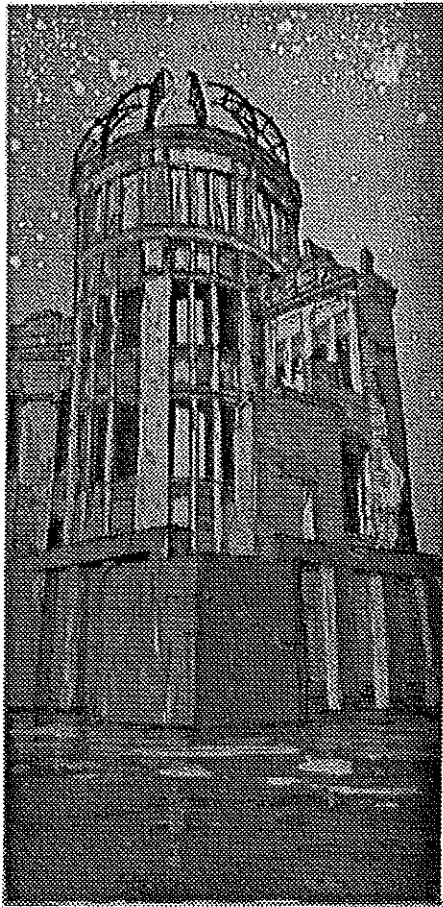
Both the abolitionist and the reformist might be for the same change, but they consider and push for these changes in really different ways because of their different understandings and ideals. As an example, consider the change of trying to get third-party monitors inside prisons.

Reformists might try to get monitors inside mainly because they want to see less brutality by guards against prisoners. Their underlying understanding might be that the brutal conditions of prisons would mostly disappear if it were not for a lack of professional accountability on the part of prison guards and administration.

Abolitionists, on the other hand, would begin with the belief that prisons are brutal and dehumanizing at their core. Participating in a campaign for monitors, however, could still be possible. Abolitionists could push for the campaign to be tailored towards their own ends. Public education could be presented with an approach that demonstrates the fundamental injustices of prisons.

Trying to get monitors inside prisons could also be tied to larger goals that lead more towards the direction of abolitionism. For instance, trying to get monitors could be connected to trying to get other changes inside prisons that guarantee prisoners the right to organize and have greater self-rule. This is exactly what happened during the 1970s at a prison in Massachusetts. The monitors came into the prison while the prisoners organized and governed themselves during a guard strike. Because prisoner organizing is a necessity for getting closer to abolition, such a reform would be a significant advance, even for abolitionists.

Abolitionist steps are about gaining ground in the constant effort to radically transform society. They are about chipping away at oppressive institutions rather than helping them live longer. They are about pushing critical consciousness, gaining more resources, building larger coalitions, and developing more skills for future campaigns. They are about making the ultimate goal of abolition more possible.



### | REFORMISM AT WORK |

A highly publicized reform happened in North Carolina where sentencing guidelines were restructured in 1993. These new guidelines increased the cruelty of sentences for “the most serious felonies” while diverting those guilty of “lesser offenses” to non-prison punishments such as community service, electronic monitoring, residential drug treatment, probation, and house arrest. One non-profit agency celebrated the sentencing guidelines for reducing the state’s “prison population for much of the 1990’s.” They also claimed that after the guidelines went into affect 10,000 to 12,000 people were diverted from prison each year.

To begin with, the non-profit agency’s claims are at least partially false. According to statistics provided by the North Carolina Department of Corrections, the prison population actually grew during the 1990s. In the fiscal year of 1993-1994, the prison population

was 22,848. In the following year, it leaped to 27,052. During 1998, the prison population reached highs well over 32,000. Clearly, even if the guidelines did redirect particular people who would have gone to prison, they did not lead to a decrease in the overall prison population, which instead increased dramatically.

In many ways, the sentencing restructuring helped make matters worse. The restructuring made life worse for a number of the prisoners by setting them against prisoners convicted of a different class of crimes. Also, the arguments in support of restructuring continued the false explanations used to support the prison industrial complex in general. In other words, they argued that restructuring was needed to punish “violent criminals” and keep them out of society. The reformists never called into question labeling certain prisoners as violent and making them seem evil. They never called into question whether punishment was an appropriate response to the harms committed. They never called into question whether or not prisons make society safer.

### | ABOLITIONIST STEPS |

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF ABOLITIONIST STEPS. Almost all of them are changes (reforms) that could be used by reformists rather than abolitionists. How we struggle for a change and imagine its ultimate purpose guides what political ends it will serve. Here is a brief outline of some of those changes.

- Preservation of Life Reforms  
Ending the death penalty and putting appropriate health care in place.
- Quality of Life Reforms  
New or improved programs that provide better opportunities for education, therapy, drug and alcohol treatment, job training, art, athletics, and structured social activities.
- Prison Monitoring Reforms  
Oversight bodies that reduce administrative corruption, work to stop guard brutality,

and/or allow for greater prisoner control over life inside the prison.

- **Right to Organize Reforms**  
Changes in laws and regulations that allow prisoners to organize politically without the threat of punishment. Control units currently represent the number one threat to prisoner organizing.
- **Prison Population Reduction Reforms**  
Reforms that reduce the number of prisoners through either decriminalization, reduced sentencing, or increased parole (see *Shrinking the Prison Population*).
- **Alternative Practice Reforms**  
Replacing police, courts and prisons with responses to harm that reduce or eliminate state involvement (see *Alternative Practices*).

## EXERCISE

Divide everyone into two groups. Have one group be “reformists.” Have the other group be “abolitionists.” Give each group 15 minutes to design a campaign strategy for ending the death penalty. The goal of the reformists is to end death sentences by seeking the alternative of “life” sentences. The goal of the abolitionists is to seek an end to the death penalty without reinforcing the prison system.

At the end of the 15 minutes, each group will send a representative to the front to make an impassioned plea for their campaign. After each group has presented the case, discuss what was learned. How did the arguments of each side differ? Why did they differ?

I am a woman who is a survivor of sexual and physical assault both within my family and by strangers... As I questioned the effectiveness of prisons in protecting women from violence I realised that I had never once considered laying charges against any of my perpetrators. I considered why and I realised that instinctively I had protected myself from a process that I assumed would abuse me and my family. I grew up in a low income working class suburb where the police were not liked. We often took drugs and were involved in petty theft as teenagers. Avoiding arrest was a matter of survival and I never considered the police to be my allies. Male friends of mine reported being bashed by police and we were often pulled over in cars and harrassed as teenagers.

As a young queer teenager from a poor family I never considered reporting a number of rapes that I survived during those years. Looking back I still believe I did the right thing as I had neither the inner resources, the family support or the money to adequately protect myself from a legal process that could have scarred me further and escalated my drug use.



# ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES

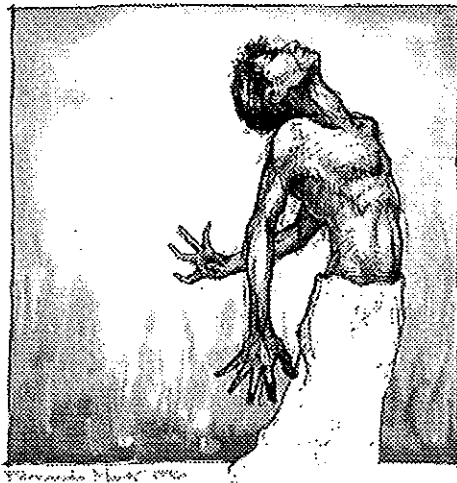
ALTHOUGH PEOPLE MAY DISAGREE ABOUT THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES for alternative practices, one way to develop a basic level of agreement is to think about what principles directly oppose those of the current punishment system. The PIC defines itself by punishment, authoritarianism, racism, profit-seeking, and state control. Ideal alternative practices would strive for personal and social transformation, accountability, equality, fairness, understanding, cooperation, sharing, solidarity, forgiveness, popular participation, and self-determination.

In the United States, an increasingly popular set of alternative ideas and practices is known as “restorative justice.” At its best, restorative justice reflects the above alternative principles. At its worst, restorative justice represents the wanderings of middle-class whites. These wanderings tend to exoticize and romanticize the aboriginal cultures from which the main restorative justice practices come. They also tend to lack a critical understanding of state and corporate power. This allows the punishment system to take over control of alternative practices. Finally, they don’t promote the self-determination of poor communities of color in setting up alternative practices. The title restorative justice by itself often raises suspicion from people from historically oppressed communities. Restore what justice? There never was any justice? For this reason, other titles such as “transformative justice” have sometimes been used instead.

## |TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE|

Transformative justice usually defines crime as harm. With this definition in mind, the

main goal of transformative justice is to repair the harm done as much as possible. Ideally, transformative justice seeks the transformation of individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Also, transformative justice at its best places the power to respond to harm back into the hands of the people most affected by harm. In communities of color, for example, transformative justice practices could lead to greater self-determination. The institutions of the state and of white supremacy would no longer control and dictate responses to acts of harm.



## |CIRCLES|

The circle is a well-known and successful transformative justice practice that comes from the aboriginal communities of the Yukon in Canada. At the very least, circles are usually made up of two discussion facilitators, the person who inflicted the harm, the person harmed, family members, and members of the community affected by the harm. In circles conducted under the direction of the state, lawyers and officials in the punishment system are also involved.

Following a set of core principles to which everyone involved agrees the circle goes through a process to think about the problem. First, the circle tries to understand the harm done. What happened? Why did it happen? Next, as much as possible, the circle designs a tailor-made response for repairing the harm and addressing some of its causes. The person who did the harm can volunteer to compensate the person who was harmed if damage to physical property happened. If a history of interpersonal conflict led to the incident, the facilitator can help come up with an

understanding between the people involved, disagreements can be mediated, and disputes can be resolved. Neighbors and peers can form support networks for assisting the recovery and transformation of both the person harmed and person who inflicted the harm. If the appropriate resources exist, counseling and drug treatment can also be provided.

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## ROLE PLAY EXERCISE

Use a circle to address a specific incident. First, think of an example of harm such as an assault that people in your group could possibly experience. Describe the important background information that you will all need to know about the incident. Next, think of the people involved and affected. In addition to the person/s harmed and the person/s who harmed, think of family members, friends, and community people who were somehow affected. From this list of people, assign different roles for people to act out.

Here is one example to help think about how to deal with an incident for which a young person is responsible for committing the act of harm.

**INCIDENT:** One high school youth has severely beaten another high school youth to the point where the youth who was beaten will have partly deformed facial features for the rest of his life.

**BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE:** The high school youth who committed the act of violence has an alcoholic father who beats him. Add other background details that might reflect your own particular community. Feel free to spontaneously improvise details during the role play.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS:** If possible, have at least the youth, their parents or guardians, two discussion facilitators, a high school teacher, and a neighbor. Other cast members could include sisters and brothers of the youth or classmates of the youth.

After you have taken the necessary steps to develop a situation and cast of characters, follow this circle process:

Sit in chairs arranged in a circle. Use a talking piece that can be held in your hands and passed from one person to another. This talking piece shows who is speaking. Only one person speaks at a time. The talking piece passes around the circle from one person to another so that all have an opportunity to speak if they want to. The facilitators will then lead the group through a discussion highlighting the following questions:

1. What values or principles should guide our circle as we see discuss both what happened and how we plan to address it?
2. What happened? How were you affected by what occurred?
3. As much as possible, what can we do repair the harm that has been done?
4. What can we do to prevent future forms of harm in our community?

**NOTE:** For some of these questions, the talking piece may need to go around the circle more than once.

When the circle has arrived at its final resolutions, step out of character and discuss the experience. What did you like? What didn't you like? Do you think circles are a potentially effective way of addressing harm?

### |SOME TRAPS AND LIMITATIONS|

BECAUSE TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE PRACTICES ARE OFTEN SUGGESTED and set up by people who are not abolitionists, there are some potential traps and limitations for using this from an abolitionist perspective.

- In many cases, current laws regarding sentencing prohibit establishing alternative. But, alternative practices can be instituted by communities on their own without state intervention.

## A TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE SUCCESS STORY

In the Yukon, circles have been used for crimes ranging up to manslaughter. The successes of circles are multiple. First, circles typically do not lead to prison sentences. After the initial eight years in which circles were used, the prison population was cut in half. Circles have allowed the aboriginal people in the Yukon a significant measure of self-determination in a racist system. At its highpoint in the late 1990s, aboriginal people were 20% of the general population while they were 77% of those admitted to custody and 97% of those admitted to probation. Third, circles have achieved significantly lower rates of recidivism and have thereby contributed to lower crime rates.

- There is the danger of the practices being co-opted by the state in a way that actually leads to more people becoming entangled in the system. The state might use alternative practices only for relatively minor harms or conflicts that it would not even address otherwise.

- Transformative justice practices only address certain forms of harm such as those that occur between neighbors. They do not address harm brought on by corporations or the state. For these cases, actions of protest and resistance might be better.

- Transformative justice practices only address the immediate, localized factors that lead to harm such as alcoholism and interpersonal conflicts. They do not address larger societal factors such as deindustrialization and system wide poverty.

- Transformative justice practices are designed to address forms of harm for which responsibility is admitted and for which the harmed person voluntarily agrees to use a circle.

- Transformative justice practices have not yet been fully developed to extend to severe forms of harm such as murder.

- It is still unclear how well certain alternative practices work when major power imbalances exist between the people involved. For example, it is not clear how well circles work when both youth and adults are involved.

- The practices do not change certain parts of the punishment system such as policing or investigation.

Despite these traps and limitations, transformative justice is worth checking out. Some of the limitations such as its local scope in dealing with forms of harm can

be overcome if transformative justice is paired with other abolitionist campaigns.

Other limitations such as the lack of proven alternative responses to certain kinds of harm will only be addressed through more opportunities for alternatives to be tested and more involvement of abolitionists in developing transformative justice.

Finally, the trap of getting co-opted can be overcome if transformative justice is suggested from an abolitionist perspective rather than a reformist one (*see Abolitionist Steps*).

## | OTHER ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES |

### COMMUNITY HOLISTIC CIRCLE HEALING PROGRAM

In the Ojibway community of Hollow Water in Canada, a different form of the circle practice has been used to specifically deal with sexual abuse. Community leaders estimate that 75% of the population are survivors of sexual abuse and that 35% are "victimizers." To address

this problem, community members took it upon themselves to create an alternative response to abuse.

People who plead guilty are sentenced to three years of probation. During this time, trained community members use an intensive program of assessment, preparation, and therapy to bring together those involved in a circle. As a result of this program, recidivism rates have been dramatically reduced.

#### CIRCLES OF SUPPORT

In Ontario Canada, "circles of support" have been used to assist in the reintegration of those convicted of sexual offenses into the community. This program involves volunteers forming support groups for individuals re-entering. The support group provides guidance, advocacy, and care for them as they adjust to life on the outside. The support group also assists them in mediating between the police, the media, and the surrounding community.

I am an abolitionist  
in regard to jail and prison.

I was raped -twice- while I worked as a paid staff for SNCC in 1965 in Arkansas. I was 23 years old at the time. I am white, my rapists were African-American men. Both were young adult community members (college students) who were working with SNCC. In both cases I knew them slightly...

I could not imagine then or now turning these two individuals over to the police. The racial mix—black attacker - white victim; my understanding of how they would be treated by the police and the criminal justice system; my position as a SNCC staff member and the damage the publicity would do our organization; my expectation of how I would be treated by the criminal justice system and the press for 'putting myself in this "dangerous position"' of working in this interracial organization: these and other factors meant that it felt both unethical and personally and politically damaging for me to file charges against the two men. No matter how I had been hurt physically, emotionally, psychologically, and socially, I knew that calling in the police would have only been much much more damaging...

I continue to strongly believe in community-based solutions to violence, even if I am the person who suffers from the violence.



WHEN WE USE ABOLITION AS AN ORGANIZING TOOL, it can be confusing how exactly to support abolition on a 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 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.

**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.

### 3. COALITIONS

As abolitionists, figuring out whom to work with might seem hard when not very many identify as abolitionist. 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 built in 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 abolition 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 this 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 the 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 an abolitionist statement and vision that is totally infused with the cultures of the peoples who are incarcerated.**

**JULIA SUDBURY**

# SUPPORTING ABOLITION

## A QUICK GUIDE TO THE QUESTIONS

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.

### **|LIFE AND SCOPE|**

DOES YOUR WORK SEEK TO MAKE THE PIC A LESS WORKABLE SOLUTION TO PROBLEMS, AND TO LIMIT ITS REACH OVER OUR LIVES?

### **|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?

### **|COALITIONS|**

ARE YOU WORKING IN COALITIONS WITH ABOLITIONIST GOALS? ARE YOU WORKING TO HELP OTHER COALITION MEMBERS UNDERSTAND ABOLITION?

### **|NO TO NIMBY|**

DOES YOUR WORK REJECT THE PIC EVERYWHERE?

### **|HEALTHY SOLUTIONS|**

DOES YOUR WORK SUGGEST WORKABLE WAYS TO MAINTAIN SELF-DETERMINATION, MEANINGFUL SAFETY, AND COLLECTIVE HEALTH?

### **|WHOSE WORDS ARE YOU USING?|**

DOES THE LANGUAGE YOU USE CHALLENGE COMMONLY ACCEPTED NOTIONS OF SAFETY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND JUSTICE?

### **|SHORT- TO LONG-TERM|**

DOES YOUR IMMEDIATE WORK MAKE FUTURE CHALLENGES TO THE PIC POSSIBLE?

