

July 2,  
2017

Dear Abolitionist Reading Group,

Please find enclosed, my written responses, offering reflections on the articles assigned to me: "Arming Ourselves With the Most Powerful Ammunition There Is" by Laciño Hamilton & "Juries and Justice" by Demontrell Miller.

If you want to publish any of my responses, I'm okay with that and with my name being used. As always, I stand behind my words.

Thanks for the chance to participate in this, I look forward to the replies from the outside participants.

In Solidarity,



Robert Chan

"The Beat Goes On": Yesterday's Lessons, Today's Challenges

by Robert Chan

Issue 27 of the The Abolitionist has an article titled "Arming Ourselves With The Most Powerful Ammunition There Is" by Lacino Hamilton. In his article, Lacino states that prison emerged as "the states' response to Black economic dislocation and urban unrest" - this would place such a response after the industrial boom of World War II, after the great migration of Black people away from the rural South, northward and westward to big cities. However, the advent of prison as "a central institution in Black lives" was actually much earlier. In fact, it was soon after the Civil War, in the form of the convict-leasing system that insidiously proliferated across the Old South and was fed by the web of petty laws that ensnared Black bodies and sentenced them to years of hard labor. This was perhaps the earliest intersection of the carceral state, racial subjugation, and capitalism. Convict leasing was an extension of slavery, as seen in its later forms - chain gangs and penal farms patterned after the old plantations.

This reminds us how far back go the deep roots of the carceral state. It's only with accurate historical understanding that we're able to honor those who came before us and effectively apply Lacino's true principle of "a collective memory and connected link in our long chain of struggle."

Lacino is on point in emphasizing how the Black Panther Party put forth the view of prison "as a set of relationships," in recognizing how intertwined the PIC is with capitalism. Besides police and prison guards, there's also a horde of profiteers that gain through the PIC: bail bondsmen, medical/mental health providers; transportation companies; drug testing services; video visitation; phone companies; money transfer services; commissary suppliers. These are the ones inside the walls. Outside, there's the community corrections hustle, encompassing day-reporting centers, halfway houses, electronic monitoring operators, substance abuse programs, and private providers of probation and parole. Like Demontrell Miller pointed out in his article "Juries and 'Justice'" it's "big business," with so many hands having a vested interest in keeping human chattel in these cages.

Consequently, this is one of the most important issues for the prison abolition movement - we must clearly see these economic hooks if we're to effectively dismantle the PIC. As Lacino put it, "we cannot abolish the prison system without abolishing all other systems that support it."

Another important issue is that of solidarity. Demontrell asserts that more Black people on juries would mean less Black people imprisoned. This is accurate in one sense, but in a larger sense, it's an oversimplification. For the Black community (like other communities) is rent by class divisions that manifest in political differences. Middle-class Blacks (like middle-class people of other ethnicities) tend to look through an individualist lens at "crime," attributing it to a person's lack of values and seeing police and prison as an appropriate response. This view is from a certain longstanding assimilationist tradition of trying to gain acceptance into "mainstream" society. Such a bent affects political decisions. For example, over half of the Congressional Black Caucus in 1986 supported the now infamous 100:1 crack cocaine law. And Black mayors in 1994 showed up to back Bill Clinton's Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which boosted the PIC's

expansion and further oppressed all imprisoned people. These sobering facts remind us that a common racial identity does not automatically translate into a unified political consciousness. For it always takes a committed activist core to point the way and speak truth to power. As Lacino noted, the Black Panther Party did this by recognizing that "it is impossible to separate 'criminals' from the circumstances that criminalize them."

Similarly, in the 1940s & 1950s, the NAACP embraced a structuralist perspective that saw the truth of how institutional racism enables state violence. But in the following decades, the NAACP fell away from that bold stance, and it wasn't until 2008 when it again made the problem of mass incarceration a priority issue.

Much more is needed though. In the last few years, social media has exposed to the wider society what the Black Panther Party originally articulated in point seven of its 10-Point Program - the need for "an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people, other people of color, and all oppressed people in the United States." However, a problem is that many Black people are employed as police, prison guards, and other personnel of the PIC, so an inherent conflict of interest exists that can only be overcome by the kind of dedicated political education demonstrated by the Black Panther Party. Helping people realize that their livelihood rests on the backs of their suffering brothers and sisters is no easy task, but it is essential to forging the bond between Black liberation and prison abolition.

On this note, Lacino pointed out that imprisoned people's "lived experiences often allow them to see more clearly" these truths. So, we imprisoned people must use these experiences as a connected link to create partnerships with people in the free world. We must not forget that the Black Panther Party sought allies among oppressed peoples all over the world. Likewise, we imprisoned people must be willing to work with diverse sectors in here and out there. There's no doubt that Black people are disproportionately imprisoned, putting them at the forefront of the abolition movement. At the same time, it's important to remember that in terms of raw numbers, White people are still the largest group imprisoned, particularly working-class Whites who suffer the same structural disadvantages as many Blacks. If the goal is to dismantle the PIC, it doesn't make sense to forgo the support of this many potential comrades just because of their skin. What we have to do is help them realize that their class interests are actually the same as ours, that the PIC no longer regards them as "White," but as only bodies to fill cells. If we can do that, if we can make this truth universally understood among all imprisoned people, then we can mobilize a formidable sea of voices that will be heard loudly beyond these walls. As Lacino advocates, we must embed "direct challenges to the carceral state within social struggles while working to popularize a wider set of radical politics." Only in this way, in solidarity, will we be able to effect real change to abolish prison once and for all.

###

ROBERT CHAN J+30838  
CSP LAC A3 208  
P.O. BOX 4430  
LANCASTER CA. 93539

SAINTS CLARETTA, CA 943

03 JUL 2017 PM 5:1



*Attn: Abolitionist Reading Group*

**Critical Resistance**

**1904 Franklin St., Suite 504**

**Oakland, CA 94612**

A-3  
STATE PRISON  
GENERAL DELIVERY

94612-292529

