

# The Abolitionist

A Critical Resistance Publication

ISSUE #15

Free to People in Prisons, Jails, and Detention Centers

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ESPAÑOL AL REVES



Marilyn Buck tribute collage by Miranda Bergman and Jane Norling

## Letter From the Editors

Dear Readers,

Welcome to Issue 15 of *The Abolitionist*! We hope that this issue of the paper reaches you in the best possible health and spirits.

We've been interested in delving into the tensions between reform and abolition, the relationship of services and resources to abolition, and how to nurture and grow a movement that builds off of our collective history and legacy. Since a major facet of the political ideology of prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition is to assert our full humanity, how can we amplify the need for abolition as opposed to reform when we voice how our basic needs are denied? We know that the danger of trying to "fix" the system allows the PIC to say that it is responding to our concerns providing justification for the mass imprisonment and policing of our communities, which makes the long-term goal of abolishing the PIC impossible. How can we transform the material conditions of

our lives in a way in which we do not perpetuate and strengthen the ideologies that create the material inequality and devastation we face in the first place? In other words, how can we dismantle the prison industrial complex while we need to survive within it? How do we continue to build off of momentous eras of courage and strategy rather than struggling through the same tensions? We've included some more study questions throughout the paper for you to discuss and are eager to hear your thoughts.

As a response to the ongoing financial crisis of 2007-2009, we witness the PIC swallowing up more people and resources as we continue to struggle to transform our environments to create nurturing stable communities. We also know that repression breeds resistance.

In 2011, we've witnessed revolutionary upheaval on a massive scale. For the first time since the period of anti-colonial struggle, people

throughout the Arab world organized protests against their autocratic rulers that successfully threw out dictators across the region. Beginning in Tunisia in December 2010 and inciting and inspiring revolts across national borders, this *intifada* (literally: standing up) wakes us up to the vast potential of oppressed people seizing power and rising up against injustice.

Our *News Briefs* section offers more information to the current status of revolution. While the forces of oppression are strong and growing, the revolts against them have altered the balance of power in unforeseen and inspiring ways.

This resistance parallels the ferocity and courage of the Georgia Prisoners' Strike in December 2010, when prisoners under maximum security were banned from meeting and denied basic rights and successfully organized the largest prison strike in US history. In this issue, we offer an interview with Eugene Thomas, a

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*Critical Resistance seeks to build an international movement to end the Prison Industrial Complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe. We believe that basic necessities such as food, shelter, and freedom are what really make our communities secure. As such, our work is part of global struggles against inequality and powerlessness. The success of the movement requires that it reflect communities most affected by the PIC. Because we seek to abolish the PIC, we cannot support any work that extends its life or scope.*

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Image by Eng Thao

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*Please be sure to let us know if we have permission to print your full name and address along with your submission. See p. 5 for more instructions on submitting writing or artwork for publication.*

**Letter from Editors, Continued from p. 1**

prisoner in Georgia, about the conditions that led to the strike and its effects today.

In an interview with Jennifer Allen of the Border Action Network, the *Testing the Borders* column explores the reasons behind anti-migrant legislation and the current resistance against these measures in Arizona.

In "The Prison Industrial Complex is Class Warfare" by Michael Callahan, the *Labor* column further explores how immigration law is used as a way to control labor forces by criminalizing groups of people after their labor is seen as a surplus.

In "Life after Lock-up for Transgender People," the *Coming Home* column interviews Grace Lawrence from the Transgender, Gender Variant, Intersex, Justice Project (TGIJP), offering advice and resources for transpeople leaving prison.

In "Eagles in the Iron House: Supporting Native Prisoners in South Dakota" by Marletta Pacheco, the *First Nations* column explores how native peoples are uniquely situated in the PIC and the support available to prisoners in South Dakota.

In this issue's *Alternatives* column, we offer another story from the StoryTelling and Organizing Project, "Relying on Community Organizations Instead of the Police," along with some critical questions that push us to continue to think of alternative ways to respond to harm without prisons or policing.

For Critical Resistance, these past few months have offered many challenges and an abundance of work to dismantle the PIC. We include for the first time in this issue what will become a regular update on our current work and strategy across the national organization and individual chapters in *Taking Stock of Critical Resistance*.

Lastly, we offer this issue of the paper in dedication to our comrade Marilyn Buck. Marilyn has been the *Vicissitudes* columnist for *The Abolitionist* since its inception in 2005. She recently passed away on August 3, 2010, two weeks after she was released from serving 33 years in federal prison. Her life provides us with a strong example of lifelong commitment in struggle to abolish the prison industrial complex. We offer her piece, "The Freedom to Breathe: In Confinement, what happens to the self?" written in 2004, which reflects on meditation as a path to peace while inside. To honor her memory we have also included a piece read by activist Yuri Kochiyama at Marilyn's memorial in Oakland, and a poem from Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who has been active in CR, entitled "Catch". We are humbled and saddened by this huge loss to our movement, and so we allow this moment to fuel our anger and strengthen our resolve to fight to win.

On all fronts, we see people fighting for more freedom than they have ever seen in their lifetimes, even while conventional political wisdom tells us to settle for incremental reforms instead of liberation. Taking these fights together, we feed the abolitionist fire by gathering the courage to resist control and the creativity to envision a world defined not by imprisonment, by bars, walls, war, or capitalism but by collective liberation, struggling for everyone's basic needs to be met and daring to dream wildly.

As always, we hope that you find this issue of *The Abolitionist* exciting and informative. We would love to hear your thoughts!

**In Struggle & Solidarity,**  
*The Abolitionist Collective*  
Spring 2011

# RESOURCES

**All Of Us Or None**

*National organizing initiative of prisoners and former prisoners, to combat the many forms of discrimination as a result of felony convictions. Offers trainings on legal issues and campaigns around voting and employment rights.*

1540 Market Street, Ste. 490, San Francisco, CA 94102  
415-255-7036  
www.allofusornone.org / info@allofusornone.org

**American Friends Service Committee**

*Promotes healing communities rather than punishment, advocating against solitary confinement, the death penalty, and other human rights abuses.*

1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102  
215-241-7000  
afsc.org

**A New Way of Life**

*Provides housing and support services to formerly incarcerated women in South Central Los Angeles, facilitating a successful transition back to community life.*

PO Box 875288, Los Angeles, CA 90087  
332-563-3575  
www.anewwayoflife.org / info@anewwayoflife.org

**AK Press**

*Anarchist book collective that publishes and distributes radical literature. Write to them for a catalog.*

674-A 23rd Street, Oakland, CA 94612  
510-208-1700  
www.akpress.org / info@akpress.org

**California for Coalition for Women Prisoners**

*Its members in and outside prison challenges the institutional violence imposed on women, transgender people, and communities of color by the PIC. Provides support via resource referrals, conducts prison visits, and campaigns around immigrants rights and gender-related abuses.*

1540 Market Street, Ste. 490, San Francisco, CA 94102  
415-255-7036 Ext. 4  
www.womenprisoners.org / info@womenprisoners.org

**Justice Now**

*Works with women prisoners and local communities to build a safe, compassionate world without prisons. Focused on the needs of female prisoners, JNow provides legal services surrounding areas such as compassionate release, health care access and parental rights.*

1322 Webster Street, Ste. 210, Oakland, CA 94612  
510-839-7654  
http://www.jnow.org / cynthia@jnow.org

**La Raza Centro Legal**

*Community-based legal organization dedicated to empowering Latino, immigrant and low-income communities of San Francisco to advocate for their civil and human rights.*

474 Valencia Street #295, San Francisco, CA 94103-5927  
415-575-3500  
techforpeople.net/~lrcl

**Legal Services for Prisoners with Children**

*Advocates for the human rights and empowerment of incarcerated parents, children, family members and people at risk for incarceration.*

1540 Market Street, Ste. 490, San Francisco, CA 94102  
415-255-7036  
www.prisonerswithchildren.org  
info@prisonerswithchildren.org

**Prison Activist Resource Center**

*Works with educators and activists on anti-PIC issues, and provides resources such as a Prison Activist Resource directory (free to prisoners).*

PO Box 70447, Oakland, CA 94612  
510-893-4648  
www.prisonactivist.org / info@prisonactivist.org

**Continued on p. 8**

# Marilyn Buck Presents

**W**e dedicate this issue of the *Abolitionist* to our comrade Marilyn Buck. Marilyn has been the *Vicissitudes* columnist for the *Abolitionist* since its inception in 2005. Marilyn served a total of 33 years on an 80-year prison sentence for politically motivated actions in support of self-determination and national liberation and in opposition to racial injustice and U.S. imperialism. She was charged with aiding in the liberation of political prisoner Assata

Shakur\* in 1979, and has continued throughout her life and death to organize in support of political prisoners. Marilyn was finally released from a federal medical prison last July, and passed away from aggressive cancer two weeks later in the company of friends and comrades. We honor her, and cherish the time we spent together, organizing to abolish the prison industrial complex. ¡Marilyn Buck Presente!

## The Freedom to Breathe

In Confinement, what happens to the self?

Marilyn Buck  
2004

*I am skinny-dipping. Stripping off my clothes, running into the water, diving down naked to disappear for a few breaths from the shouts and sounds of the world. Shedding clothes, embarrassments, care. The surface breaks as I return for air. For a few moments, I am free, opened, beyond place, beyond space.*

And then I am here. I breathe deeply, fully clothed in a compulsory uniform inside walls that do not vanish before half-closed eyes, seated during an officially-sanctioned time for Buddhist group meditation. My breath joins those of the women around me, travels across the walls and over the barbed wire. Freedom of breath cannot be measured, contained or punished – as I breathe, my aliveness asserts itself, even laughs at its constraint. Yes, in this place it is an elusive joy, but I feel it now, as surely as I feel the knots of anxiety loosen in my shoulders.

The primary function of prison is to deprive the citizen of her freedom; there is no other lesson. To be excluded from society is supposedly the greatest loss one can suffer. Prison is the wall that separates and deprives, behind which the prisoner disappears from life – from family, from friends, from all that is loved. And without freedom of some kind, the human spirit shrivels, collapses into despair or bitterness. How easy it is to succumb to resignation, to gather anger to fill the spaces between the bars, between the interstices of one's own ribs – to isolate one's heart, and only then gain a perverse comfort.

In the first years of my sentence, I was awash in bitterness; every day I mourned the loss of my world. I was angry, but above all, fearful. I shut myself off, afraid that if I were to let my guard down in prison, even for a moment, I would be left defenseless; I might lose my essential self to the anonymity of concrete cell blocks. I walked prison halls fearful, dreading collapse. The self I clung to was a rigid, fragile thing.

Many prison years passed before I decided to try sitting, and only then did I really begin to breathe. My heart became less constricted; the dharma path opened. I grew less afraid of what could happen to me.

Deepening my breath, lengthening my spine, I learn to discard my preconceptions and expectations – all the many hopes and fears and attachments that have given shape to my life. I learn to lay aside anxiety about what I am missing, what I do not have, what might happen to me in here. I confront the fact that I am, in truth, uncertain about whether I really want to release my fears, my anger. I am conflicted. Without the armor of my anger and self-righteousness, I become intimate with the many forms of suffering in this prison world – and so I feel vulnerable, exposed.

Each day presents a new confrontation with reality. I want to run; instead, I breathe. One breath – the freedom to choose my response in that moment. In sitting, I encounter joy; I know that through this practice I can arrive at a place of genuine peace.

The path is before me. It is my choice to follow.

*This piece originally appeared in Tricycle, Vol. XIII, No.3.*

## Catch

by Alexis Pauline Gumbs

For Marilyn Buck in Black August

preacher's daughter[1]  
what is a wall  
what blooms beyond the body  
what is left  
\*  
you could write a letter  
into dandelion wish  
thread hope into green garlands  
\*  
to wear catechism loose  
form everyday practice  
life lost nurturing life eternal  
\*  
what is a wall  
patient gardener of the word yes  
unwilling to wait for the language  
we could say it in  
\*  
what is a fist  
what blooms in explosion  
in excelsis  
in the decision to risk everything  
and never take it back  
\*  
poisoned decades  
flowering furiously  
into cancer  
\*  
answer me this  
marilyn  
\*  
you who can never again be  
interrogated  
isolated  
chained  
\*  
where do they grow  
white girls like you  
awake and ready  
to catch hell with both hands open  
\*  
what is a wall  
what blooms  
what is left

[1] Assata Shakur (freed from prison by Buck's action in concert with the Black Liberation Army) wrote: When I think of Marilyn as a preacher's daughter, I think of her as someone who wrestled with the moral problems of our times and who was not afraid to take principled positions around those issues. Marilyn had a choice. She could have remained silent; she could have reaped the benefits of white-skin privilege. But instead she chose the path of righteousness. She has defended the have-nots, the powerless, and as a woman she has struggled for the liberation of all women. The only reason that she remains incarcerated is because of her political activism. She needs and deserves the support of all those who are committed to freedom and the abolition of pain and suffering on this earth. She deserves to be supported, she deserves to be respected, and she deserves to be free.

## YURI'S COMMENTS AT THE BAY AREA MEMORIAL



Linda Evans holds microphone for Yuri Kochiyama at Marilyn Buck Memorial in Oakland, CA

My friendship with Marilyn began over 30 years ago. After she went to prison I heard the stories of her bravery and her commitment to the struggle. She took strong principled stands against imperialism and racism. I began writing her letters and later visiting her in prison.

Even with all that she endured Marilyn didn't turn bitter, she remained positive. She supported fellow political prisoners. She managed to stay informed and in touch with the fight for just justice all over the world. No bars could restrain her heart.

Marilyn loved red poppies. To Marilyn red poppies were a sign of life; a blaze of color, which Marilyn explained made death and honor one. Delicate, vulnerable, bringing smiles to faces. Marilyn lived for others.

She began her life of activism in Texas, and then moved around without stopping to fight racism, injustices and brutality. She became a leader, but was also a follower and a team player. Marilyn was a fighter. She was courageous. She was humble. She inspired. She never seemed to tire. She was a poppy that would not wilt.

“Freedom of breath cannot be measured, contained or punished – as I breathe, my aliveness asserts itself, even laughs at its constraint. Yes, in this place it is an elusive joy, but I feel it now, as surely as I feel the knots of anxiety loosen in my shoulders.”

Marilyn managed to provide arms to the Black Panthers. But she also wrote poems, lovely and powerful. She loved humanity. She loved life. She loved peace and quiet. She was a teacher when needed, but also a student. And most of all, she was a sister to all of us.

Today as we celebrate her life we carry her in our hearts. And as we leave here today, let us treat each other with kindness, and compassion. Let us be courageous as we stand against racism and injustice. And let us never give up.

Like Marilyn, let us be humble and powerful and beautiful, so that the seeds of this wild red poppy continue to bloom. ■

# Taking Stock of Critical Resistance

*The Abolitionist Editorial Collective would like to provide an update on how Critical Resistance has developed since our 10th Anniversary Conference (CR10) in September 2008 (as covered in Issues #10 & 11). Just as the world we live in, CR has gone through a number of changes—some minor, some quite drastic. We will regularly include informational and analytical updates on CR's work through a national and chapter-by-chapter scope.*

*Since CR10, Critical Resistance began to strengthen our work by collectively developing a strategic plan to guide our national work over the next three years. In taking up the challenge posed by our enemy, we identified core strengths and weaknesses of our organization which will help us to recognize and act on our strengths in order to capitalize on the opportunities available to us; to transform threats into opportunities and through the process of understanding and struggling with our weaknesses, to turn them into strengths. As we are transitioning into our implementation stage, we will print the Executive Summary of the Strategic Plan in the next issue of The Abolitionist.*

*Threats posed by the prison industrial complex and capitalism banged on our door at the end of 2010. Between September and December 2010, we lost core funding from two foundations through a combination of changes in foundation priorities and the economic downturn. The economy has also led several other foundations on which we have come to rely to suggest they may not be able to support us at the same levels as before, or at all.*

*By December, we realized that the only way forward was to launch an emergency fundraising drive, and also to adopt painful but strategic cuts: we reduced our national paid staff from 4 to 3 full time organizers, and consolidated those staff in Oakland. Our infrastructure and political education director, Kai Barrow, has stepped down from her paid position and into a membership role.*

*In December, we put out a call to raise \$100,000 by March 1st. While we didn't quite make*

*it, we did raise a solid \$70,000: a huge accomplishment for an organization our size. We got gifts ranging from \$2 to \$10,000, from more than 500 people around the world.*

*Moving forward, we still have a lot of money to raise. We absolutely need to pull in the next \$30,000 by June 1st to reach that first goal of \$100,000 and keep our infrastructure together (offices, salaries, bills, etc). And then we're going to need to keep going, knowing full-well that the strongest response to this kind of immediate organizational crisis is to embrace creative grassroots development work all day, every day.*

*Because the real roots of this crisis are far bigger than just CR's bank account, or the decisions of a few foundation funders, our job is figuring out the economics of building an organization that can, among other things, build an entirely new economy. Over the coming months, please donate if you can and encourage others to as well. Please send us any and all of your fundraising ideas, and please keep your eyes and ears open for updates and calls for support. Thank you for all of the resources you're helping us pull together.*

*By reaching out to our comrades, allies and larger networks for financial support, we have begun to transform this series of financial threats into opportunities to strengthen our work. Instead of giving up we've recognized this time as more reason to sharpen our analysis and dedicate more blood, sweat, tears and guts into this movement, for this financial threat only showed us how necessary building an international movement to abolish the PIC really is.*

*As part of our ongoing efforts to strengthen our work, both in strategy and analysis, we'd like to offer a brief update on the latest news from Critical Resistance's chapters and the work we are currently engaged in (as follows below). We invite readers to write us back and share what you think about the campaigns we are working on. What questions do you have and what kinds of strategies would you choose to use?*

## Oakland

Critical Resistance Oakland recently formed an anti-policing work group, based largely on our work in the Plan for a Safer Oakland coalition (a 3-point platform with All of Us Or None to create real safety in Oakland by providing re-entry support and services to people released from prison, investing in community instead of police in prisons, and standing up with our youth). Over the last year, we have been engaged in struggle against current and proposed gang injunctions in Oakland as part of the Stop the Injunction Coalition (STIC). Gang injunctions are civil court orders and act as wide-reaching restraining orders that impede the movement and activities of certain individuals in a particular area by imposing limits such as restricting who they can hang out with as well as instituting curfews. We know that gang injunctions are not only costly and ineffective responses to harm in our communities; they rely on racial profiling and are used as a way to push poor black and brown people out of neighborhoods. In addition, named individuals are not afforded a court appointed attorney and must pay nearly \$1,000 to appear in court. City Attorney John Russo rammed through a temporary injunction against 15 individuals in 100 blocks of North Oakland targeting African American men and is currently fighting to implement an injunction against 40 individuals in a 400 block area of the Fruitvale district targeting Latino men.

STIC has a two-pronged strategy, focusing on both legal and grassroots efforts. We've been bringing the struggle to City Council and recently organized a Week of Action Against Gang Injunctions, which included bike rides through the "safety zones", a day of education that reached more than 600 students, a vigil against all violence, and a rally attended by over 600 people including high school students who walked out of class and marched from Fruitvale to City Hall, shutting down at least 9 major intersections. Our main focus since the beginning of this campaign has been to highlight community-based ways of addressing immediate harm and the root causes of violence. We want support and services for people coming home from prison, meaningful and engaging education opportunities, affordable housing, jobs and activities for youth. So far, Oakland City Council has promised no new gang injunctions, which we can definitely claim as a victory.

CR-Oakland has also been working diligently with the broad-based statewide Californian's United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) alliance to launch a brand new campaign called the Budget for Humanity (B4H). The B4H demands

that California: 1) Stop All Prison and Jail Construction; 2) Reduce Overcrowding and Release Our Tax Dollars; 3) Stop the Cuts and Invest in Our Future. In order to gather support for the campaign, CURB have been spending most of the new year in Sacramento, L.A., and San Francisco - lobbying elected officials, testifying at legislative hearings, and participating in rallies and actions with our allies to protest the budget cuts to Health and Human Services and Education. CR-Oakland has also been working with the CR-Los Angeles chapter to plan two statewide events that brought attorneys from the Plata/Coleman prison overcrowding lawsuit, organizations working on the California state budget, and organizations and family members working to shrink California's prison system together to sign on to the campaign and get involved in the many activities ahead of us this year to stop the expansion of California's prison and jail systems.

What's clear about these two campaigns is the interrelatedness of our work around anti-expansion and anti-policing. It's no coincidence that more and more cities around California, including Oakland, are attempting to sweep up people with gang injunctions just as the largest prison expansion bill in the history of the world is being implemented. Policing and imprisonment are two sides of the same coin. Resisting the PIC means both making these connections and struggling on multiple fronts.

**T**he Oakland Chapter continues to struggle in building an effective strategy for organizing and strengthening our communication with people locked up. In addition to continuing to publish *The Abolitionist*, we have created a new pamphlet with information on CR's work and politics, as well as the type of resources and mail from prisoners that we respond to. If you would like to receive this pamphlet, please write to us: Critical Resistance, 1904 Franklin Suite 504, Oakland, CA 94612.

## Los Angeles

The Los Angeles Chapter of Critical Resistance is located inside Chuco's Justice Center at 1137 E. Rodondo Blvd., in Inglewood, CA 90302. The chapter is actively engaging in monthly political education sessions along with the other CR chapters nationally. They have recently done two workshops at A New Way of Life (see resources section) on self defense, the role of art, and engaging in conversations around STOP (StoryTelling and Organizing Project) stories. As a partner

organization to STOP, they continue to raise awareness and make art after listening to the stories. They have trained most of their membership to collect stories. They have recently also done a presentation on CURB (Californian's United for a Responsible Budget) at Amity, a six month program for people who are on parole.

## New Orleans

The New Orleans chapter of Critical Resistance is located at 930 N. Broad St., in New Orleans, LA 70119. Their paid chapter member, Andrea, has now stepped back into a volunteer membership role due to our financial concerns. Their chapter has also been participating in the national monthly political education sessions and has been learning how to discuss materials while challenging each others ideas with respect. They are bumping up all of the materials with their own work, and learning several things from each session that they can apply. They are seeing political education as a tool and each month feel like they are getting a new tool.

The chapter is also part of the Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition "OPPRC", which brings together around 20 organizations with abolitionist and reformist ideologies to strategize stopping the expansion of OPP (Orleans Parish Prison). They are asking for a prison cap at 1,438 beds, which is right now at 4,300 beds, and asking for a decommissioning of those beds, meaning to demolish those buildings and cells. After Hurricane Katrina, the Greyhound station became a jail. This was set up before rescue, food, or water. The Sheriff asked FEMA for more money to build a jail that was meant to hold 1,438 beds, but since there were already other jails open the total number of beds available could be as big as 5,800. At the beginning of February 2011, the City Council unanimously voted to adopt an ordinance that caps the jail size and calls for a decommissioning of those buildings, to happen by 2013. The chapter is pushing the Sheriff for alternatives to incarceration, instead of continuing to expand the PIC. The coalition wants more money to go back to supporting communities, the education system, and addressing the root causes of these issues.

The chapter also had a legal clinic from June 2009 to November 2010. In 2007, they had an expungement day along with other organizations and including the courts and judges who waived the expungement fees. They held monthly trainings on how to get your record expunged. They are currently taking time to evaluate the clinic and will soon announce if they plan to continue it.

The chapter also responds to mail from prisoners. If you are in the area, please write to New Orleans! Write to: Critical Resistance New Orleans 930 N. Broad St., New Orleans, LA 70119. Unfortunately, due to financial concerns, CR NOLA is no longer able to take calls from prisoners.

## Houston

We're also thrilled to announce that after being inspired by CR10, a group of people in Houston decided they wanted to start a CR chapter. While still in early stages of building up membership and campaign and project work, CR Houston has been participating in our national political education curriculum, and has been discussing building strategies for attacking the school-to-prison pipeline in Texas.

## New York

Sadly, our New York office has closed down. We are currently rebuilding our work in NYC. For more information please contact our national office in Oakland: 510.444.0484 or write to us at Critical Resistance, 1904 Franklin, Suite 504, Oakland CA 94612.

**Send Us Your Writing and Artwork! We accept articles, letters, creative writing, poetry, interviews, biographies, and art.**

### Ideas for Articles and Artwork:

- Practical steps toward prison industrial complex abolition
- Ways to remain physically and mentally healthy while imprisoned
- Examples of prisoner organizing
- Updates on what's happening at the prison you're at (for example: working conditions, health concerns, lockdowns)
- Legal strategies and important cases that impact prisoners
- Alternatives to policing, punishment, and prison
- Experiences about life after prison
- Reflections on identity (for example: race, class, gender, family roles)
- Op-ed on an article published in recent issue

### What to Submit:

- Articles should not exceed 1500 words (roughly 5 handwritten pages)
- Letters should not exceed 250 words
- Empowering artwork that will print well

### How to Submit:

- Specify how you want your name and address printed with your article.
- If possible, send a copy of your submission, not the original.
- Submissions will automatically be copy-edited for grammar and spelling.

### Writing suggestions:

- Try to write an outline before you write the piece. Ask yourself: Does the first paragraph tell the reader what the article is about? Do the middle paragraphs support and strengthen the main argument. Does the last paragraph have a conclusion and some suggestions for action?
- Remember that writing is difficult for all of us and that your ideas are worth the struggle. Try reading your piece out loud to yourself or sharing it with someone else. Doing this will help you clarify your ideas and get feedback on how you can strengthen your submission.

### Send your submission to:

The Abolitionist c/o Critical Resistance  
1904 Franklin Street, Suite 504  
Oakland, CA 94612

**Please note: we do not accept individual appeals for money, legal support, or publicity.**

## PRISONER SUBMISSION

# Concept: "Unity"

By: *Yskari Yero Douglas*  
H-64600, Pelican Bay

Unity is the state of being one. Most of us want it, but do not know or quite understand how exactly to bring it about. There is a lasting truth in the saying that in unity there is strength; as well as in united we stand, divided we fall. Yet, there is more to unity than just wanting it, or even in just coming together. Unity is not that simple; if so, we'd have it already.

Unity is not ready-made; it is a process. It involves both dialogue and commitment: dialogue around the issues where we plan to struggle, and on points of strategy; and commitment to the decisions and resolutions agreed upon, as well as commitment to a common set of principles and values--developed in common--and to making unity a success.

“Unity is possible without having uniformity...yet, for unity to work, there must be unity of purpose, and consequently unity of action.”

Unity involves genuine camaraderie with those whom you plan to unite with. The acquaintance or relationship must transcend the superficial or surface. An understanding of permanent or standing positions must be established.

Unity is possible without having uniformity. In a coalition or united front type of situation there may exist differences in perspective or ideology, yet for unity to work, there must be unity of purpose, and consequently unity of action. It must be emphasized that unity in strategic approach to accomplishments and reaching goals/objectives must accompany unity of action.

## Here are a few keys to making unity work:

1. Always follow majority vote in decision-making\*;
2. Always view collective interests as being more important than individual interests;
3. Always struggle to understand the focus of unity;
4. Always struggle to make unity a success.

Finally, adhere always to the principle laid down by those in the struggle that came before us, all for one and one for all. It should be our aim to have unity, but not simply for unity's sake. Let it be to set and to reach goals. Let out unity be to win whatever battle we take up!

### As one we will win!

**Editor's Note:** While we agree with the overall sentiment expressed in this submission, Critical Resistance's decision-making process relies entirely on the Consensus Model, rather than majority rule. While achieving consensus can be time-consuming and difficult, it is central to CR's non-hierarchical vision and principles. The consensus process enables and develops greater participation from members and ultimately helps to align our visions for a different and better world.

CR Chapters often make their own decisions using political guidelines to which they are accountable, and paid staffers and volunteers at different levels make some decisions themselves that relate to the work they do. However, everyone is expected to check in regularly with other members, especially those in working groups they are involved with, on any decision they cannot or should not make independently. Members struggle with each other to make decisions that are in the best interest of CR as a whole as opposed to decisions based upon individual member's interest or benefit. ■

## How Consensus Works

**1. Present Issue:** state clearly what we need to decide. how we motion

**2. Background:** presenter should have something short prepared, then Q&A.

**3. Discussion:** have a clear time limit.

**4. Proposal/Test for Consensus:** someone offers a proposal. facilitator restates it, asks for clarifying questions. test for consensus.

**5. Concerns:** people with concerns share them, then a time-limited discussion about them (you don't need to offer a revised proposal immediately).

**6. Revise Proposal to Deal with Concerns:** someone offers a revised proposal that incorporates the concerns as much as possible. **test again for consensus.** if there are still concerns, go back to step 5.

**7. Table:**  **or** **Consensus!**

send to small group to think through OR pass OR put on later agenda with more time OR declare block

\*blocks vs. stand-asides: if a decision goes against one of our collective goals, block it. if a decision doesn't do this, but violates a personal principle/goal, standing aside is appropriate.

# Free 'Em All: Carrying the Legacy of Prisoner-Led Resistance in Georgia

Interview with Eugene Thomas



Oakland protestors stand in solidarity with striking prisoners in Georgia

***Nothing comes to a sleeper but a dream. The ability to fight enables freedom.***

*On both sides of walls, people resist the tentacles of the prison industrial complex everyday. While the prison industrial complex ruthlessly attempts to squash our rebellious acts by criminalizing our dissent and naturalizing surveillance over our lives, sustained, collective resistance is a triumph to strive for. Thankfully, we are not starting from scratch-- in fact we weaken our collective power if/when we insist we are.*

*December 2010 marked a momentous uprising against the prison industrial complex, as thousands of prisoners across Georgia went on strike to protest basic living conditions inside. This collective action falls within a long trajectory of prisoner-led struggles in the United States, from rebellions at Attica, to Walpole, to Folsom. These examples of prisoner-led resistance underscore invaluable elements of building a political movement for liberation: igniting mental shifts from individual to collective thinking and forging a culture of solidarity to withstand repression.*

*Critical Resistance strives to match the courage inside by learning from the Georgia Prisoners' Strike and taking it as a call to build a stronger movement to abolish the PIC. In this effort, CR gathered an interview via phone with Eugene Thomas, a lifer currently at Reidsville. Eugene has been supporting the strike by circulating information about what happened, as well as strategies and messages organizers used inside to expose the Georgia prison system, and what people inside and outside can do to act in solidarity with Georgia prisoners.*

*Even though none of the demands of this particular strike call for abolition of prisons (like the Attica uprising), let us think of how prisoners exposing prison conditions can further a movement for abolition. Abolition is based on the belief that the prison industrial complex cannot be fixed or reformed, for it operates just as it's designed to. Abolition is based on the belief that social inequalities cause violence and interpersonal harm. Struggling for abolition means restoring and asserting our full humanity.*

## Eugene's interview is as follows:

The prisons that initiated the strike are all level 5 prisons (Macon, Telfair, Hays, Valdosta, Baldwin and Smith). They hold people serving the longest sentences.

I'm at Reidsville now, Georgia State Prison—what they call the “Bottom.” It's like the San Quentin of Georgia. It's a mess

down here, but it's a whole lot better than what it used to be back in the 50s, 60s and 70s. But it's still some garbage, as all of them are.

The grievances that the prisoners stated through a strike have existed forever and are inherent to the prison industrial complex as a whole. Prisoners organized themselves in response to basic prison conditions—violence (beatings) and physical mistreatment, inadequate medical treatment, labor exploitation, a ruthless parole system, lack of nutritional food, and lack of access to education.

A lot of prisoners had issues with being charged a medical co-pay and not receiving constitutional or decent care. A lot of the time, when you sign up for a medical visit, you would go there, and you would have to wait 2 to 3 or 4 hours.

On top of that we also have to pay a separate fee for the medicine. For example, if you had athlete's foot, an overly common health problem because of prison conditions, that's \$5 for the co-pay and then \$7-10 for the cream, per visit. We want adequate medical care that we don't have to pay for.

We're also having issues with our labor being exploited, so we are demanding a living wage for working. A lot of us work in the Georgia correctional industries making glasses for different eye shops in different prisons, like Angola. I worked in an optometry lab up in Hays and we made glasses that they pass off to Lens Crafters and certain companies under Medicaid. Some of us work making the license plates and vehicle tags for the state of Georgia. All of this stuff is so profitable, while the prisoners making it get nothing.

The administration/prison system is taking our money off our accounts that our family and friends are sending us. This is money that's already been taxed because it's money orders, and then the administrators tax it all again.

If you get written a disciplinary report for misbehavior and found guilty, they charge you a \$4 processing fee (i.e. tax). Of course 9 out of 10 times you're going to be found guilty. With punishment, you get the sanctions, like isolation time or mail, phone, or yard restriction. It's almost guaranteed you're automatically going to be found guilty, because the money goes to the Georgia Department of Corrections (GDC). Very few people win disciplinary hearings. When you're not making money, the charges for disciplinary reports just add up. It's like a double jeopardy for us: we're locked up, we get sanctioned, we get fined.

We had issue with Georgia's correctional industry, along with the parole system. In Georgia, we don't go before officials on

a parole board. We only receive a letter in the mail telling us how much time we have to do, whether or not we're going to be paroled, if they're rescinding our parole. We don't get to appeal it and the worst thing is they justify denying your parole for vague reasons, like “due to the nature of the offense” or “due to the severity of the crime.” The severity is already factored in when you are sentenced. We don't have a human person in front of us, so we can't reason or rationalize with someone in power. So we were demanding parole boards.

The meals are not nutritional at all. The menu will say that we're having Salisbury steak or chuck-wagon steak, but you get down there and you'll see that stuff and you'd be amazed. The vitamins are cooked and boiled out of the food. We just get something to say that we're eating. The meals consist of a whole lot of sugar and salt. We'll get a breakfast in the morning with some generic frosted flakes, a little piece of cake, and a scoop of shank, a kind of gravy with meat. That'll be it. You wind up eating a whole bunch of sugar thinking you got full because the sugar hyped you up, and an hour later you're crashing and now you're starving, because you didn't get any substance. You got no vitamins. You just got tricked. So brothers were asking for nutritional meals. We don't have any nutritional food in the store either. When we request nutritional food in the store, they tell us that it doesn't sell. We're forced to eat honey buns (nothing but a bunch of sugar) and chicken noodle soup (nothing but a bunch of salt), and it don't do anything for you.

We wanted better education because the way it is now the first people they put in GED schools have shorter sentences. Everybody else just has to wait. The administration does this knowing that there is not enough time for the majority of those guys to get a GED. Those of us with long sentences have no access to higher education.

There was a time in the prison system in Georgia when you could get college degrees in the state and they would finance your education by funding you with grants. Someone I knew well earned a couple of degrees while doing 10 years in Georgia in the 80s. He got out in '91 or '92 and taught in the public school system for four years. Taught. Now he's back in. Well you know that's impossible now, because we don't have access to higher education. So that was one of the issues: having access to higher education, and everyone having equal access to education.

But these have been the conditions in prison. The strikes happened now in December 2010 for two main reasons.

The first is because of overcrowding. The GDC closed down a bunch of prisons. They closed Rivers in 2009, Frank Scott, Milan, Bostick and Mines. All of these prisons house at least 1,000 people. All the while, they aren't releasing anyone. In fact they're over-sentencing people and denying parole left and right. They shut down the facilities and shipped the guys off wherever they could fit them in at.

Now you have prisons that fit three men to one cell. You know, a cell that's designed, space-wise, for two people, if that. This overcrowding creates frustration. When two guys in a room have to maneuver around one another they figure out a system where, you know, he's up on the floor in the morning brushing his teeth, while I'm going to lay down on the bed 'til he gets finished and goes out and then I'm going to come up and I move about. Now you got three people and you're pressed for time all the time. So it's creating greater frustration about our basic living conditions.

The overcrowding perpetuates tensions between prisoners and escalates violence and fighting. There are so many examples of where guys have been in three-man cells and some are gang members and one of them was neutral so he wasn't necessarily involved or trying to be and was attacked. Or you got a situation where two guys have been in there for years, they tight and you come in and it throws their whole routine out of sync, and they don't like you, and so it's automatic that you're going to get it.

It's dangerous. The administration doesn't stratify prisoners according to gangs or affiliation or anything. They just throw them in there. In fact, the administration relies on tensions between prisoners because it distracts us from focusing on

the system, makes us constantly live in fear and distrust and not unite with each other. It's easier to dehumanize us that way.

This shows us how interconnected all of these issues are. It's getting so crowded in here, they're cutting back on food even more. I have been locked up going on 18 years and I ain't never been this hungry before in all of my time. In the summer time we're burning up. I ain't got to tell ya'll that attitudes can stem from being overheated and irritable. It just all came to a head. You got guys being over-sentenced, guys getting two, three life sentences, and sentences for 45 years and then you're working them for nothing, and then you charging them and taxing them and you ain't feeding them. This shit is just unbearable. I'm surprised it ain't jumped off a long time ago.

The second reason why the strike happened when it did was because of the season. Organizers planned it in December because they knew that people would be locked down after. If you go to the hole in December it's not as unbearable. If you go to the hole in the summer, it be stifling. I was in the hole at Autry and I was suffocating. When the nurse came through I would ask her to take my temperature. It's just that hot down here in Georgia in these holes. You would be in there and they would bring you ice and you'd be eating ice cubes and all that would do is make cramps in your legs or stomach and you would have to move to use the bathroom and then you're back hot because you're moving around. The only thing you could do is strip down to your underclothes and just put water on the floor, on the cold concrete floor, and just lay in the water and just hope like hell that you don't die. This is the way it is. The organizers were wise in planning that for December.

The strike popped off by brothers circulating the information to each other in prisons and across prisons. They had been putting everybody up on the fact that December the 9th they were going to strike. They were going to "sit down"; that's what we called it. We weren't going to do anything "violent". We weren't going to do anything to antagonize the administration or the prison. We were just going to sit down, because these conditions are not working for us.

Our objective was for no one to get hurt. It was about letting the administration and the Georgia Department of Corrections officials know that we're tired and that they ought to do something about all this. They're just taking and taking from us, and things have got to change. They should be letting us go. And they just take our money and feed us nothing.

In some sort of way at one or two prisons, I think Macon State and Smith, the administration got wind of it all before brothers could actually sit down and locked them down. It was already in the making. It was already in motion. Administrations tried to stop it by doing a little bit of this and a little bit of that but the organizers were able to let people know, go forward, go with the plan. The mentality toward the administration was: "you ain't stopping nothing. We're still going to do this," and that's what happened.

Prisoners were able to communicate with each other about the strike because guards and even administrative people bring us contraband. They do it because we're overworked and underpaid, so they sell us communication devices for a fee to make easy money for themselves. When things like this strike come up, we utilize them to make contacts with each other and to spread the word. That's how this thing was organized. It was organized through texting and email and phone calls, whether on the Georgia department phone system, or on the cell phone.

The strategy was not only to get more prisoners to participate in different prisons, but also to have people on the outside looking in and staying aware of what's going on so that

when it all jumps off people in society will already know what's going on and can keep an eye on us. People's family members, wives, sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, they got the word out and contacted other people, so it came off.

At the particular facility that I'm at, we haven't seen any impact or changes because this particular prison did not strike. There have been a number of prisoners identified as leaders of the strike transferred to the hole here at Reidsville, but no one has been allowed to communicate with them and their identities have not been formally released. But the administration, guards and officials pretty much kept us out of communicating with those brothers at the striking prisons. They cut the power off to keep them from charging up their phones and cut the heat off when it was like 30 degrees.

From talking with other people who are monitoring the strike and are supporting outside, some family members and activists outside are in talks with the Georgia Department of Corrections Commissioner Brian Owens and Deputy Commissioner Derrick Schofield. One group that formed out of urgency for the prisoners involved in the strike is called the Concerned Coalition for Prisoners' Rights, and they have been negotiating with GDC authorities. The coalition consists of the NAACP, the ACLU and the Nation of Islam. The US Human Rights Network has also gone into the prisons. They took a delegation in there around December 22nd. They spoke with some of the prisoners outside of the presence of some of the officials and the administration. They said they would be in negotiations with the Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner as well.

There have been some very serious beatings. Brother Walton Dean was beaten so badly he has severe brain damage. Brother Miguel Jackson has been beaten real badly. These were beatings that were provoked by the tactical squad.

This is how they do when they see us doing things peacefully and sitting down: Brothers would be like, "You can't make me get up, I'm sitting down, man. I don't want to work. Just give me the DR [disciplinary report]. I don't want to work." But when they see that that don't work, they find a way to get you up and get you out the cell: "Just come out the cell. We just want to talk to you," but then they'll just probably push you, know what I mean?

It's a bad situation. It's understandable why the higher security prisoners would be the first ones to kick something off like this, because they are the ones with the most time. Most the guys at those camps got light sentences. Folks in these closed security prisons have the least to lose. Right now according to Georgia State *y o u* have to do just about 30 *y e a r s* on your sentence *b e f o r e* you're



eligible for parole. The administration can kill them and they can stay doing their time.

The brothers have said that if this does not work peacefully, then the next one would escalate. Something has to be done. If they won't go into negotiations now to just figure out what's going on, what's happening, you know, then I fear for what's coming.

Right now we still have some work to do with this first strike. There are 37 people missing according to Black Agenda Report and Elaine Brown (former member of the Black Panther Party and current co-founding member of the Concerned Coalition for Prisoner's Rights) that have been shipped out to different prisons. The commissioner from the Georgia Department of Corrections told Elaine Brown he would release the names to her of the prisoners and could assure her that nothing has been done to them violently.

I've also been hearing a lot about the Lucasville brothers and their hunger strike that started January 3rd. I'm totally in solidarity with those brothers. I just asked that the people don't forget about them either.

There are so many issues going on. We have so many political prisoners, so many wrongfully convicted prisoners. But I do want people to keep those Lucasville brothers in mind because from my understanding, those brothers are really suffering. They're on death row and suffering worse than any prisoners on death row. I mean they don't even have the rights that death row prisoners are supposed to have. I really want people to really consider that situation.

A situation is really bad when a person decides to go on a hunger strike—to deny himself that which sustains his life. It reminds me of what the Irish political prisoners did in Ireland—Bobby Sands and the other brothers, who back in 1981, ten Irish political prisoners starved themselves to death to get England to recognize them as political prisoners and not common criminals. We don't want another situation like that, where you got four brothers, you know, one after another starving themselves to death.

I would like for the public, or all people who are acting in solidarity towards us, to push to the Department of Corrections commissioner to release the names of those 37 prisoners and to get in contact with one or two if not all of those prisoners and ask them what's going on, or how they are doing.

I know that in a revolution, and in a protest sometimes, it can go bad. People can get hurt and perhaps lose their lives. Transfer is the least of our worries. Our greatest concern is with brothers transitioning, not transferring. You can kick me out of camp and send me to another one, it don't make no damn difference, but I don't really want to lose my life. I don't think anyone does. But, you know, it happens, and we want to try to secure those brothers, because they had the heart to do it, to even organize it and they need us right now.

**Free 'em all. We've got to free 'em all.**

*The Concerned Coalition to Respect Prisoners' Rights was created to support prisoners who undertook the recent strikes in Georgia and beyond. Contact the Coalition:*

c/o US Human Rights Network  
250 Georgia Avenue SE, Ste 330  
Atlanta, GA 30312  
404-588-9761

[www.facebook.com/pages/Concerned-Coalition-to-Respect-Prisoners-Rights](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Concerned-Coalition-to-Respect-Prisoners-Rights)  
[concernedcoalition@gmail.com](mailto:concernedcoalition@gmail.com)

Write to Eugene Thomas at:  
#671488  
Georgia State Prison  
2164 Georgia Highway 147  
Reidsville, GA 30499

# Relying on Community Organizations Instead of the Police

## A Story from the StoryTelling and Organizing Project

**“Our goal is not ending violence. It is liberation.” –Beth Richie**

*Without an understanding of the social, economic and political factors that foster and encourage harm, one cannot begin to adequately prevent future harm or appropriately respond to harm that has already occurred.*

*Addressing harm requires informed observations of the circumstance and trends that accompany it. For instance, with the high rate of gun homicides in the US, one observes that the US is a highly militarized society. The militarized nature of our society can be seen at all levels: armed forces, police, and the civilian population. No country in the world possesses a military budget that approaches the size of ours.*

*Growing numbers of people in the US are realizing the connection between state violence and interpersonal harm as systems of oppression (capitalism, racism, heterosexism, able-ism, etc.) traverse policies and practices to create conditions of severe inequality and insecurity, creating harmful social relations. Thus in addressing harm, we are in every way fighting for something much larger than that interpersonal conflict. We're struggling to transform our society, and reclaim our humanity.*

*But we still face the question: In a society maintained by the prison industrial complex, what can we do besides call the police when someone has or is threatening to hurt themselves or someone else? How can we respond to this situation in a way that actually confronts harm and transforms our relationships so that this harm does not happen again?*

*Below is another story from the Story Telling & Organization Project (STOP), testifying to a situation in which the storyteller was supporting an intervention with another person who has a history of self-harm and harm to others, and was threatening escalation.*

*Similarly with many of the other STOP stories, our minds may be flooded with questions about particular details, such as: what exactly was happening in the situation? Or: What has happened to this person after this intervention? While these are certainly valid questions, we try to focus on what this group of people did do to respond to this situation.*

*We encourage you to think back to the Winter Issue #14 of The Abolitionist in the Whose Streets column from Rose City Copwatch. How can community organizations create or support interventions that address multiple layers of harm—institutional policies and practices as well as systems of oppression and interpersonal harm? What do you think is required of an organization to successfully address different kinds of harm? As abolitionists, being weary of falling into a trap of reform, in which we end up supporting the prison industrial complex to oppress people “better,” how can we make sure we are building alternatives that in no way support the prison industrial complex?*

*We'd love to hear about your thoughts and discussions inspired by this story, so please drop us a line.*

## CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS

### Why did you not want to call the cops?

StoryTeller: It just wasn't an option, on multiple levels. The police are, you know, the enemy. So it's like you just don't call the cops. Now, what's inside of that, I don't think it's just a theoretical political thing. There's the fact that the police had just shot this person in front of hundreds of people,

you know, video tape rolling. They had just been incredibly violent out on the street. There was a police state downtown. On every level calling the cops was not an option, right? So there's the political level in which you don't call the oppressor to help you out. You just don't.

Then there's the level of our politics being like: we need to figure out ways to deal with this shit that aren't about calling in the source of violence. So then there are all kind of layers that happen with that, so then there's like well why don't we, right? And in this situation why don't we? Here is this person who is distraught, has a gun, and is a person of color. There's no fucking way we could trust the cops to do anything but—I mean what, what were the cops going to do at best? The safest thing that they would possibly do would be to physically disarm this person which would involve, you know, violence, right? And lock him up. That is the best-case scenario. So it addresses none of problems at all.

It was about this person's safety, but in a way that was not just responding to a crisis around their safety but also like what can we do? You know, it's not just what can we do by any means necessary to stop this self harm or harm to another person. It's actually about: how is what we're going to do right now going to reverberate to helping this person move through this period in their lives that is unfolding, in this very acute way right in this moment? I mean I guess that that's actually kind of hopeful [laughs], that even in those moments of crisis you are actually thinking about why the moment is serious is also about the future.

You might be told in all these other ways in life about de-escalating violent situations, like if you have beef with your neighbor that's getting kind of heated, people say “well, just try to talk it out,” or “you could hire a mediator,” or “call a lawyer.” The discourse ends, I think, when there's a gun involved. Or an act of violence. “Oh, well then you call the police.” And it's almost like it's a natural thing, right. It's like an act of nature.

And so we don't call the police, we call this community organization. I think that was cool—I mean it's cool that it exists, it's cool that we knew about it, it's cool that we did—but I think also what's cool is that that's where our mind went very quickly in this crisis moment. And so, once again it engenders a little bit of hope, around our abilities to respond when the resources are so scarce.

We started talking about what we had done and we started talking about what could we do and where was the harm. What were the different levels of harm, right? Where are our efforts, where are our loyalties, where are we invested, where are we in relationship to all this stuff, what are our priorities?

And we talked about that and that was really good, and I think that that's—what became the center was this thing that's going to happen next week which is potentially traumatic to this person and he has acted out in this and this way previously. His mode of acting out has intensified. So the harm or the potential harm has intensified, the harm to himself and therefore, the potential harm to others has intensified. So, what can we do to reduce the harm? We started talking about everything that we can do. One of the major things we talked about is like: who else can we involve?

That's when it came to mapping out who else can help. And the help being specific to what are the most like urgent things and what we're trying to learn from these things, right? It's like, where are people's people in these situations? The analogy was: it's a lot easier to lift something that's really heavy if you have more than two people doing it, especially if it's something heavy that you all care about. And you all carrying it is in relationship to you caring about it and it affects how you care about it down the road. I was like, true, where are these people's people? ■

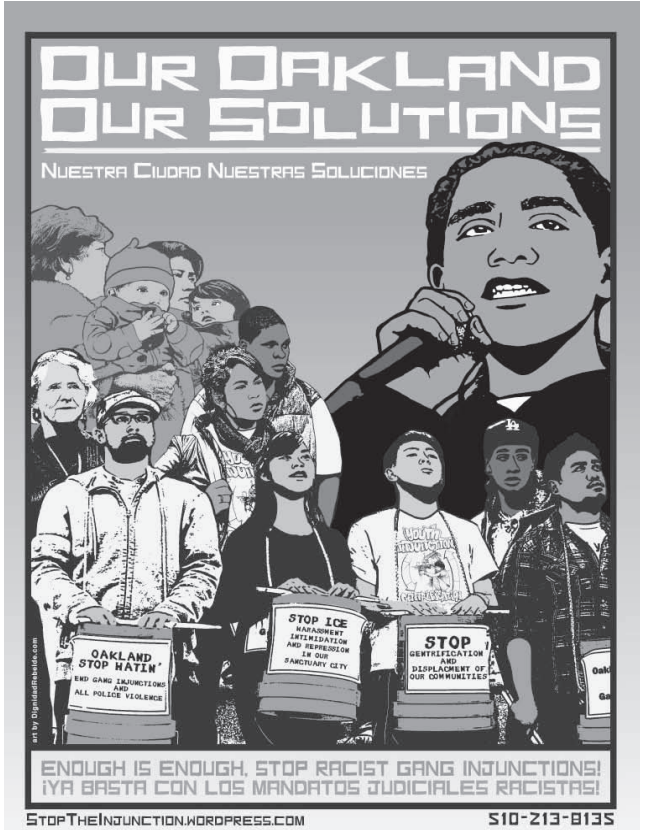


Image by Melanie Cervantes | DignidadRebelde.com

## Resources (cont'd from p. 2)

### Prison Law Office

*Strives to improve the living conditions of CA state prisoners by providing free legal services.*

General Delivery, San Quentin, CA 94964  
www.prisonlaw.com

### Rose City Copwatch

*Works to eliminate or radically change police institutions (Portland, OR).*

PO Box 12353, Portland, OR 97212  
503-715-1409  
rosecitycopwatch.wordpress.com  
info@rosecitycopwatch.org

### Storytelling and Organizing Project (STOP)

*Community project collecting and sharing stories about everyday people taking action to end interpersonal violence.*

PO Box 24840, Oakland, CA 94623  
510-978-4014  
www.stopviolenceeveryday.org  
stories@stopviolenceeveryday.org

### The Other Death Penalty Project

*Resource for lifers, passed along by Alfredo Gomez in High Desert State Prison. Raises awareness about the cruelty of life sentences without parole.*

PO Box 1486, Lancaster, CA 93584

### Sylvia Rivera Law Project

*Working to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination or violence. Provides legal aid to trans people affected by the PIC.*

147 W 24th St, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10011  
212-337-8550  
http://srlp.org / info@srlp.org

### Transformative Justice Law Project of Illinois

*Provides free, holistic criminal legal services to low-income and street-based transgender and gender non-conforming people targeted by the criminal legal system.*

2040 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60647  
773-272-1822  
www.tjlp.org

### Transitions Clinic

*Medical home for individuals with chronic diseases recently released from prison.*

2040 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60647  
773-272-1822  
www.tjlp.org



# The Prison Industrial Complex is Class Warfare

By Michael Callahan

*In 2006, industrialist and investor Warren Buffett said, "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning." The prison industrial complex is a key front in this class warfare.*

*One of the goals of this labor column is to study the dynamic history of capitalism, its relationship to the prison industrial complex, and resistance. We envision the column as a collective learning project. We hope that by engaging the many aspects of this history we will be able to form a critical basis for our organizing and political work.*

*To get the conversation going, this article provides some broad strokes on primitive accumulation, surplus labor, and discipline. We have included questions throughout for you to discuss, write about, and submit to the paper. We encourage you to raise your own questions and to share your knowledge with our readers. We will print your responses in the next issue.*

## Primitive Accumulation

David McNally explains primitive accumulation as "rendering millions propertyless, while enabling a minority to accumulate great fortunes." Throughout history, capitalists have worked with the government to accumulate capital through stealing indigenous lands and forced labor. A lot of the US initial wealth and competitive advantage in the global economy came from these practices, which were backed by genocide, violence, law, and racism. Forced labor took many forms – slavery, debt peonage (a.k.a. indentured servitude), convict leasing, domestic work – depending on the requirements of production and the skin color and gender of the group being exploited. The disciplinary measures that accompanied forced labor also varied.

For example, slave pens were designed to secure those awaiting a good price on the slave market. Kidnapped Africans were penned up like livestock for months. These tiny quarters mimicked the slave ship. They were subjected to cruelty, torture, and outbreaks of cholera from having to live in their own waste. Mostly white prisoners in the first jails and penitentiaries in the North, on the other hand, were introduced to the rigors of Protestant reformation. Prominent Republicans like Dr. Benjamin Rush believed that "confinement in solitude with labor" could return these wayward souls to the productive ranks of the nation. Each of these methods attempted to brand a "work ethic" on the laborer and inscribe the social pecking order. Slave pens conditioned human beings for a life of backbreaking toil in the fields, whereas the penitentiary system mimicked the factories that prisoners were expected to work in upon finishing their so-called rehabilitation.

The rule of law has also been a mechanism for primitive accumulation and the maintenance of the social pecking order. Slave codes reduced Africans to chattel and loosely defined vagrancy laws criminalized indigent European immigrants like the Irish.

Immigration law and enforcement played a big role in controlling the flow of labor. The Chinese Exclusion Act and Operation Wetback are two examples. After helping build the First Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860s, Chinese laborers became the scapegoats of white supremacist

groups like the Workingman's Party in California. Chinese immigrants were attacked for taking jobs and depressing wages. These attacks culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred Chinese immigrants from entering the country. In the 1940s, the federal government began recruiting Mexican migrant workers through the Bracero Program to make up for labor shortages in the agriculture and railroad industries caused by World War II. In 1954, as labor demands shifted and pressure mounted to do something about undocumented workers, the INS initiated Operation Wetback. The border patrol and police arrested and deported nearly 1 million undocumented and Bracero workers.

The notions of inferiority and criminality that the above laws were based on can still be found in the ideology of public safety used to justify the prison industrial complex.

## Surplus Labor

Since the 1970s, prisons have continued to grow in times of recession and rising unemployment. "The PIC is the postmodern equivalent of the industrial revolution," writes Jamie Bissonette. "In the industrial revolution, peasants were released from the land. Marx called them *vogelfrei* or 'free folk.'



Image by Chris Stain

They were free to travel to market their labor. Today's *vogelfrei* are freed from productive labor itself. Ironically, they represent a loss in value as long as their bodies are free. Once their bodies are captive, once they are chattel of the state, they become both the raw material and the product of the PIC."

The prison industrial complex subdues capitalism's "reserve army of labor" at the same time that it provides jobs for nearly 1 million public employees. The benefits and costs of this growth are highly racialized and gendered. While prison labor is critical in the daily operations of prisons, the actual goods produced by prisoners for the market is a minuscule share of the economy (this may change as state governments consider using prisoner labor to close budget gaps). What is significant, Paul Wright explains, "...are the two million people, nearly all working age, removed from the labor market, in addition to the 700,000 or more people employed by prisons and jails to guard, house, and administer the prisoners removed from national labor markets." He goes on to say that the prison boom "is the most thoroughly implemented government work program in American history since the New Deal."

This growth in the prison industrial complex is directly tied to sweeping changes in the global economy and labor markets. In order to wrest back profits from a relatively organized US labor force, businesses began off-shoring their plants, leaving devastated communities and tight labor markets in their wake. As the manufacturing base shrunk and agricultural lands became unproductive due to mechanization, lack of profitability, and overuse, the financial sector sought out new investments.

Around the same time, Ronald Reagan began attacking labor unions and dismantling the social safety net. This freed up state capacity for other projects. As decent paying manufacturing and farming jobs were replaced with chronic unemployment, underpaid migrant work, and low-wage service sector jobs, surplus populations began to form in cities and rural areas. A large portion of prisoners and guards come from these economically devastated areas. Taken together, these factors created a perfect storm for the furthered emergence of the prison industrial complex. [Editor's note: For readers interested in a deeper understanding of these economic and political forces, Ruthie Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis in Opposition in Globalizing California* is an excellent source.]

One has to ask what would happen to profits and the social order if 2 million more people were added to the labor market? What if this group of people came to see itself as a "class for itself" and began asserting the human right to work and a living wage? What would happen to the political system if this largely Black and Brown segment of society wasn't civilly disenfranchised? What if women, the fastest growing segment of the prison population, got equal pay for equal work? What would immigration policy look like if migrant workers weren't exploited during labor shortages only to be criminalized and deported during periods of high unemployment? What would our society look like if our economy's first task were to provide for everyone's basic needs?

Today, the largest prison expansion project in history is itself in fiscal crisis and these questions loom larger and larger. The public debate on mass imprisonment is beginning to shift as local and state budget deficits force politicians to reckon with bloated prison systems they can no longer afford. Will states start using prisoners to replace unionized public workers? According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2008, the prison population increased by 0.8 percent marking a significant decrease when compared to the 6.5 percent average yearly growth of the 1990s. As legislators debate the early release of prisoners, and the terrain of class warfare shifts once again, we must rise to the occasion and take advantage of these small openings by putting strategies for survival into motion.

For readers interested in a deeper understanding of these economic and political forces, Ruthie Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis in Opposition in Globalizing California* is an excellent source, available through AK Press (see Resources section). ■



Image by Jesus Barraza and Diane Ovalle

# Interview: Border Action Network

## Featuring Jennifer Allen, Executive Director

With Andrea Salinas

*In 2010, Arizona saw the passage of bill SB1070, a bill that expressly makes racial profiling against people of color policing policy. The bill allows police to stop and search anyone without search warrants of suspected “illegal activity.” If one does not have documentation of citizenship, they can be arrested and deported. The bill violates federal and constitutional law in giving local police federal policing powers. Many other states have been quick to follow in the foot steps of Arizona, introducing similar legislation. There are currently 29 proposed anti-migrant laws in the Arizona state legislature. A slew of bills were introduced in February that revoke 14th amendment rights of citizenship to children born in Arizona to undocumented migrants, and making all public institutions immigration enforcement entities creating monetary sanctions and jail time for those found without paperwork but also for those individuals or agencies who do not comply with enforcement.*

*Given these facts, this issue of Testing the Borders seeks to explore the real reasons behind anti-migrant xenophobic laws, and what these laws mean for other populations of color and working class people. We also hope that our readers will gain a better understanding of the situations that have given rise to migration. What follows is an interview with Jennifer Allen, the Executive Director of Border Action Network. Border Action Network was founded in Tucson, Arizona (AZ) in 1999, and has since been a leader in the migrant rights struggle.*



Photo by Alma Muñoz

The '86 law got implemented into policy and practice. Then under the Clinton administration in 1994, the then-INS director Doris Miessner (and later congressman), and then-border patrol chief Silvestre Reyes, now a congressman from El Paso, launched this whole Southwest Border Enforcement strategy that hinged on this idea of deterrence. That if you could just make the border as difficult as possible to cross, then people would just stop coming.

It was a policy that was doomed to fail from the get-go because it failed to take into consideration the profoundly compelling reasons that people have to leave their homeland, and their family behind and risk everything to navigate what's now become this whole labyrinth of life endangering risks to get into the US.

The Southwest Border strategy then started building up walls, sending thousands of border patrol agents, using Apache helicopters, stadium style lights, ground sensors, using military style tactics and training and techniques all along the border. Well initially, in the urban areas, like San Diego and El Paso. The result was that migration roots were not deterred. They were just shifted and they were concentrated.

So as we've gone from 1994 to the present, we continue to see people coming and willing to risk everything to be able to get in. People are literally risking their lives and many people lose their lives to come and look for work, to reunite with family members, flee violence and corruption. Most often, people are fleeing economic conditions.

At the same time, in the mid 1990's, we also saw the passage of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This had a profound effect on some of the staples of poor Mexican families, and opened up the Mexican economy and Mexican market for outside investment. This then undermined a lot of the sustainability of farmers and the stability of smaller towns and communities, so people lost their economic base which then also contributed to the need to look for money to be able to survive. Because of this, migration continued to the North.

In the US, it was also the time when we saw Proposition 187 in California. (Editors Note: Prop 187 was a ballot initiative in 1994 that aimed to prohibit health care, education, and other social services to “undocumented” peoples.) This marked the time when the movement started to rear its ugly head, being the strategy of attrition, of really just trying to marginalize, criminalize, incarcerate, and remove migrants from the US. Wearing people down to the point where they feel isolated, marginalized, and are in such fear, eventually leads them to just leave the country. The event that led to the formation of our organization was the murder of Ezequiel Hernandez in 1997. He was an 18-year-old young man from Redford, Texas who did what he always did when he would get home from school, which was to do his chores. It was May 21st, 1997; Ezequiel got home from high school to take the family herd of goats out and slung a 22 over his shoulder to ward off the coyotes and snakes, and headed out. Outside his home, but unbeknownst to him, as well as anyone else in the community of Redford,

Texas, the Marines were conducting an operation, kind of a training/drug war operation, and so there was a group of Marines who were hidden in a gully. They were all dressed in their gully suit- camo get ups and they see Ezequiel. He's a young Mexican-Latin man, out in the border area, and they see that he's got a gun strapped over his shoulder and they determine that he fits the profile of a drug runner and then one of them jumped to the conclusion that he is a threat and they ended up shooting and killing him.

The death of Ezequiel became an enormous wake up call for border communities from Rio Grande Valley in South Texas to San Diego, to really wake up and look into what was happening in the border region. To see who was doing what and where and what the consequences were. That event in the larger context of all these other dynamics playing out exacerbated all these growing, bubbling tensions, which led to our organization forming.

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**“Arizona would be such a different state right now if facts and analysis drove policy maker’s decisions.”**

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**AS:** *Can you speak more about how the policies have built up to what's going on today and the legislation that's passed in the past year particularly in AZ?*

**JA:** I think it is what we've been seeing—from SB 1070 to the current attempts to rewrite the 14th amendment denying birthright citizenship. We've got this whole litany of crazy legislation this year. Basically, turning schools and hospital admissions into immigration checkpoints, denying health services to people who go into hospitals for non-emergency care, the warnings of collecting students' immigration status and then generating reports that get published about the growth of excessive costs of educating immigrant children, to everything that would criminalize anyone who's driving without having legal status in the US. This is a continuum that we have been on within the state of Arizona, also along the border region, and to a certain extent throughout the interior of the country.

The ongoing border militarization which hinges on the notion that it is only successful if federal border agencies, like border patrol and homeland security, are effective at dehumanizing and criminalizing migrants. That sort of dehumanization and criminalization built the foundation on which many of these policies that blur policing and immigration enforcement into one have been able to thrive. We have not only witnessed the deaths of hundreds of migrants coming across this particular region, but armed civilian vigilante groups who literally hunt migrants as though they're living out these paramilitary fantasies in the border region. Sheriff Joe Arpaio denigrates people by forcing them to wear pink underwear in tent cities and work on chain gangs. This context paves the way for state legislation that becomes seen as natural. It has shifted the political atmosphere and political debate to the narrative that migrant families are not people. They don't have the same visions, hopes, dreams, interests as anybody else who lives in Arizona. This narrative redefines people as threats or as costs, or worker bees in a field of production. It has taken away people's basic fundamental humanity.

**AS:** *It has been said that NAFTA was a real turning point in that began to migrate to the US. Is that an accurate assessment of how much migration increased post-NAFTA?*

**JA:** I'm always a little bit cautious to not say that migration increased as a result of NAFTA, but it was perpetuated because of NAFTA. Around the passage of NAFTA, was also the crash of the Mexican economy and the devaluation of the peso, so as always the economic factors are profound in contributing to migration. According to border patrol and looking around in our communities, the number of people coming across has really dropped. That's largely a factor of the economy right now—it's harder for people to get jobs. I tell people over and over again: people would love to stay in Mexico, to stay in their towns with their families, but ultimately NAFTA really contributed to huge job losses in

After reading the interview, we invite you to discuss these questions with your networks and write back to us:

1. How will bills such as SB1070 that repeal constitutional rights at the state level impact policing policies for all people of color and working class people?
2. Do you see any connections between the movements to attack migrant rights and those to attack all workers rights to unionize and collective bargaining for fair wages and safe working conditions?
3. What are the intersections between the movement to abolish the PIC and those of the migrant rights movement?

**Andrea Salinas (AS):** *Thank you so much, Jennifer, for taking the time to talk to us and be published in The Abolitionist. I was looking at some of the history of Border Action Network on your website and I saw that you were founded in 1999. Since that time you have been at the forefront of the migrant right's struggle nationally. What was going on then that was the impetus to start the organization in 1999?*

**Jennifer Allen (JA):** Well, we can take a slight step a bit farther back. The last time there was a major kind of overhaul of our immigration system was in 1986, and that's often referred to as the Amnesty Bill, that president Ronald Regan signed. And while it's known for providing a path to permanent residency and eventual citizenship for a little over 2 million undocumented immigrants that were here in the United States at the time, it also laid the foundation for what has become an on-going increase in the trajectory of criminalizing immigrants, and, especially undocumented labor in the US, and also paves the way for a reliance on military style tactics and military style enforcement of the border region.

Mexico. An example that is probably used most often was the impact that NAFTA had on Mexican corn farmers. Once the corn industry in Mexico was forced open via NAFTA, Mexican corn farmers simply could not compete with the US corn farmers. Ironically, now Mexico imports most of its corn from the US. There are strong numbers that show the loss of Mexico's own manufacturing sector plummeted since NAFTA passed to the present because of the impact of opening up the Mexican market. This led to widespread unemployment, so workers were forced to move North where more work is.

**AS: Legislators say the policies are needed to address the dire financial and unemployment situation that has been caused by migrants coming into the states draining resources and taking away people's jobs. How have these issues affected people in AZ?**

JA: I think that the idea of the cost of undocumented migration into AZ and the US attempts to justify the bombardment of anti-immigrant measures, deportation or incarceration. But the argument doesn't hold water when the numbers get looked at. There have been a number of studies by the Immigration Policy Center and some Arizona-based research institutes that look at the cost of migration in the criminal justice system, health system, and education system. They also look at the revenue generated by the state of Arizona's tax and consumer base and found that there's actually a net gain for the state from migration when you put the numbers next to one another. So then it begs the question what is this really about? The heightened rhetoric around migrants being threats has resulted in enormous racial tensions in Arizona whether you're a documented citizen-tourist here from Mexico or a Spanish speaker, when going to grocery stores or speaking Spanish people look at you, and you can feel the culpable tension. People feel like this in churches, within schools, within neighborhoods, within stores. There's this incredibly profound culpable racial tension that is here that was not here at this extreme level prior to SB 1070.

But apart from that, the undocumented families that are in enormous fear. Since last year, people were just holing themselves up in their homes and would at most drive their kids to and from school and maybe go to the grocery store, but that was it. In many ways these policies have been incredibly effective in meeting their own goal and really successfully isolating and marginalizing people to the point that they just want to crawl under a rock and only have fragments of the participation that they used to have in their community.

**AS: Given that legislators should have access to the studies' findings, such as the financial benefits from undocumented people to the state of AZ, what exactly do you think is the real aim of these policies that they're implementing?**

JA: Arizona would be such a different state right now if facts and analysis drove policy maker's decisions. Our legislature currently has more bills than I've ever seen. Essentially these bills are secessionist bills. They're trying to eliminate settler jurisdiction in the state of Arizona. Like many states around the country, through its demographic shift we now have a 40% Latino population, but I think in kindergarten through 3rd grade, many of the classes are majority Latino. So, they feel threatened, insecure, and feel like they're losing power with people of color around, when people are speaking a different language, living a different culture. We hear a lot from the legislature that Spanish speakers need to learn English and need to be more integrated into Arizona and the US, but at the same time the state legislature has completely cut the funding for classes for people to learn English, civics, or citizenship preparation. It's completely mixed messages.

This gets exacerbated by the economic situations in the state with the crash of the housing market, and subsequently the downturn of the service industry. Those are Arizona's bread and butter. I think Arizona is second to the Las Vegas area

as the fastest growing populations in the nation and that's all dependent on those very specific industries of construction and service. The country does really well in economic crisis by taking a population as a scapegoat and sort of kicking the hell out of them.

This has happened historically within the US. The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1913 was after Asian migrants were brought to work on the railroads then later denied citizenship and eventually removed from the country. We constantly have this sort of push and pull with the fluctuations of the economy. In the end all these historic episodes of economic decline and harsh legislation, heightened racism and denigration of migrant populations. In the end, migrant populations resist. Legislation gets overturned, communities organize, build strong alliances and stand up and fight back.

That's precisely the phase we're in right now. We need to have this big picture perspective without getting sucked into the rhetoric that unfortunately tends to dominate, stand up and stand alongside one another and push back on this.

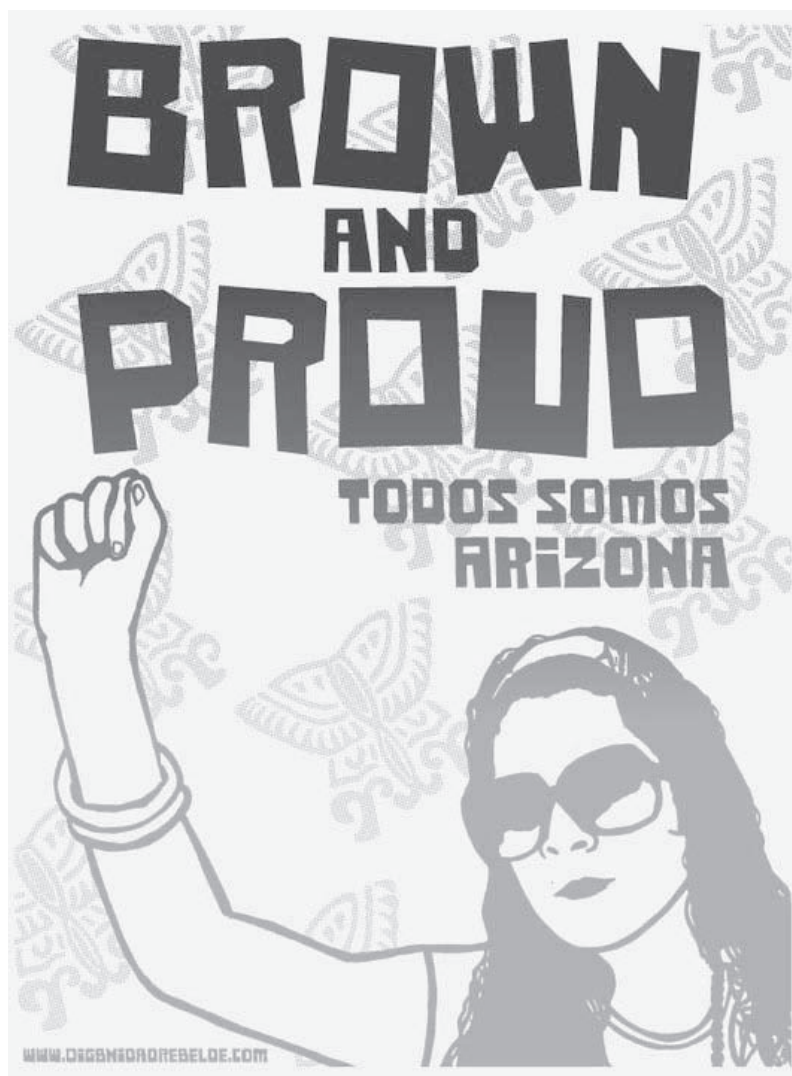


Image by Melanie Cervantes | DignidadRebelde.com

**AS: How have you seen the legislation impact safety and security particularly for Latinos and other people of color in Arizona? When you have this kind of heightened policing apparatus that is steeped in racial profiling, with 40% of the population afraid to leave their homes, how does the overall climate of fear impact communities?**

JA: Well, it's sort of a cliché phrase, but it's the unraveling of the basic social fabric that communities are comprised of that hold people together. That sense of interdependence that you have in the neighborhood or in a community has been frayed and unraveled. If people are cloistered up in their homes and don't trust anyone, then people in general, regardless of their immigration status and whether they're Latino or Spanish speaking, is more marginalized, everybody becomes more isolated. We need to be dependent on one another to a certain degree so when Arizona becomes so fractured and segmented and when people are taking so many steps back in fear, all of us are more insecure.

**AS: How is the approach of immigration policing similar to other policies the government has enacted around socio-economic issues, such as the "war on drugs"?**

JA: I think that it has been a consistent policy to use brute

force to deal with what are socio-economic issues. Using enforcement, using these kinds of one-size fits all, heavy handed deportation or incarceration, rather than looking at the more complex causes, immigration is an economic issue and a socio-economic issue. We need to look at foreign policy and economic policy and how it contributes to the situation. It's a lot easier for policy makers to launch the "war on drugs", to launch the "fuel the border" mantra. It continues to be this choice that's made repeatedly to yell for simplicity and bumper sticker slogans, that don't ever actually address the situation, and in most cases actually make the situation worse resulting in marginalizing low income communities of color all over the country.

**AS: You've talked about how this legislation has been successful in normalizing the dehumanization of Latinos. How could this possibly relate to other populations in the US that are marginalized?**

JA: At the state level, most all of the legislation from SB1070 to the Birthright citizenship and hospital admissions is fought in the realm of an immigration debate. The reality is that these laws are so broad and far reaching that they affect all people of color. They end up impacting all low-income families. All people of color and low income families should be standing up and denouncing them because the net affect is that we all get trapped and strangled. Bills like 1070 blur the lines between local law enforcement and federal enforcement, and now justify this blurring in the name of immigration enforcement. The total effect is increased racial profiling that will impact all communities that can be deemed suspect. If history teaches us anything, it's that if one population is targeted today, it's another population that is targeted tomorrow. The same laws get rehashed according to who is targeted and scapegoated. The laws are being written so broadly that it is undocumented and Latino immigrants now, but it can be other populations next month or next year.

**AS: How do you see the immigrants' rights movement as integral to the struggle against the prison-industrial complex (PIC) and vice versa?**

JA: We have had countless state laws in the past and things that are also in queue right now that are requiring mandatory jail times that expand the criminal penalties for identity theft, and limit the kinds of lawsuits that undocumented people can file. This is aimed at funneling more and more people into the criminal justice system. The threats and those that benefit from them are one in the same. So they indeed are sort of systems that are intertwined that absolutely warrant linkage between the immigrant rights movement and the movement against the PIC.

**AS: What are some ways people in the anti-PIC struggle can be more supportive and connected in our work to what's going on in the immigrant right's movement? What are some ways that we can support people in Arizona?**

JA: Unfortunately, it's no longer just a struggle in Arizona. There are copycat measures of SB1070 that have popped up all over the country. So in many ways, the fights are really local fights. So, monitoring and pushing back on state legislators is important and feeding them information they should be using to make their decisions, whether it's on those criminal justice, immigrant rights, healthcare or education issues. There has to be much more scrutiny and accountability of what happens at all the state capitols. That's really where things are going down. I think finding out who's there and who's speaking up against what and standing up and supporting one another in the capitol is important. The struggles of holding folks to task at the legislature is a good sort of solidarity piece where we fight locally which then squashes the viral effect of SB1070. ■

To contact BAN: P.O. Box 384, Tucson, AZ 85702 / 520-623-4944 / borderaction.org / ban@borderaction.org

# Eagles in the Iron House

## Supporting Native Prisoners in South Dakota

By Marletta Pacheco with Bettina Escauriza

*There was a time when an Eagle felt that he couldn't live any longer, so he flew to a certain place where Eagles who have given up on life go to die. As he is down there on the ground, the other Eagles fly in with meat and drop it before him in his weakened condition, to encourage him to get up and eat the meat that is brought to him which would give him strength; to fly out of that place of despair and hopelessness.*

There are 562 recognized Native American tribes throughout the US. However, 73% of all federal convictions of Native Americans are prosecuted in Arizona, South Dakota, Montana, and New Mexico. These figures demonstrate how prisons are one institution the US government uses to forcibly remove many native people far away from their lands.

Native people are incarcerated at extremely disproportional rates to the general population, underlining a long history of genocide and struggle for Native American peoples. Based on the 2000 Consensus, American Indians are only 1.5% of the US general population, and 1.7% of the federal prison population. However, of all the juveniles federally incarcerated by the US government, 61% of them are American Indian children. Indian women are twice as likely as white women to be incarcerated. Indian incarceration rates are 38% higher than for the general population.

These disproportional statistics intensify when examined on a state level in South Dakota. South Dakota statistics show Native American women are approximately 45-46% of the South Dakota women's prison population, and the Native men's population is approximately 27-28%, yet Native Americans are only about 8-9% of the total population of South Dakota.

These numbers do not include South Dakota Native Americans who are doing time in federal prisons or elsewhere. Those who commit crimes off the reservations go to State court, those who commit crimes on the reservations go to Tribal court. If it's a felony, you go to federal court.

Because of these statistics, the native voice is very important. We must testify to the impact prisons have on our families and our tribal communities. These disproportionate statistics are our sons and daughters, our brothers, sisters, grandchildren. We can't continue to suffer in silence. We need to recognize that we can speak out from our hearts and be heard.

As a native woman, I know first hand how the system not only disproportionately targets Native Americans, but also how it destroys families. In 1997, my daughter LaVonne was convicted of Conspiracy to Distribute Methamphetamine. She received a 30 year sentence with 5 years supervised release. They sent her 1,400 miles from South Dakota to California, and then 700 miles from her home, children, family, tribe and community to Waseca, Minnesota. She became a grandmother while inside prison and continues to survive the system with hopes she will come home some day.

What happened to my daughter is just one story of many that our community has. On March 17th, 2001, a Native American man, my nephew—Leighton Rich—was found hanging in his cell in the South Dakota State Penitentiary Segregation Unit. We formed the South Dakota Prisoner Support Group in response to the tragedy of his death and a number of other suicides in various South Dakota jails and prisons. All of these realities of the devastation prison has caused our families are an impetus for us to take action.

Through this support group, families of prisoners and other concerned citizens have come together to bring attention to

conditions in prisons and jails.

Through our work, we have built trusting relationships with people inside. We have attended and supported Native American spiritual conferences and powwows in South Dakota prisons. In addition to spiritual wellbeing, we also know that mail and ongoing communication is very important to building relationships with people inside. We provide a quarterly newsletter free of charge, as well as a postcard project that we send out monthly. We get letters from inside asking questions about the Lakota history, songs and language. It's crucial to have some of our members who can speak the Lakota language available to answer some of the questions. There are some elders who have trouble understanding English so their translations are really helpful.

In addition to building relationships with people in prison, we also do some advocacy work on behalf of our loved ones.

We have brought the voices of our incarcerated loved ones to the table to those that are making decisions that affect their lives. By being at the table, we serve as a conscience. Groups that I have met with on a regular basis include the State/Tribal Relations Committee, the Department of Corrections,

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### Our ancestors lived with Lakota Values: Generosity, Courage, Respect and Wisdom. Embracing our traditions, we need to welcome our warriors and women back with encouragement, prayer and their families present at their homecoming.

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the Chaplains Advisory Committee and the local Reentry Task Force. Often times I am the only Native American attending. This is very uncomfortable for me, but with prayers I find the strength to attend and voice concerns. We have testified to the state legislators and committees about prison issues. We have tried to educate both governmental and Tribal leaders as well as the public about physical and mental health care, outdoor recreation, segregation units, adequate nutrition and other needs. We provide support to prison and jail inmates and their families of all races and ethnic backgrounds.

A while back we were able to get the support of some senators and representatives along with our testimony to the Corrections Commission about the cost of phone calls and commissary items, explaining how hard these costs are on our families. Some costs of commissary items were changed. For instance, we could now send in money to an prisoner phone account and the cost was much less.

The support group also supports the family members of people inside, by encouraging them, helping them navigate the prison system, and assisting them in welcoming their loved ones home once released. We have brought another local non-profit's attention to the people's needs as they come back from prison, and work with this non-profit to provide resources to support re-entry, by assisting with rent, deposits, licenses, work clothes, personal care items and food to those returning to Rapid City, South Dakota.

The support group has also begun to organize a community and family healing circle. The group welcomes those returning from prison and provides activities for families whose loved ones have or are returning, as well as loved ones who are still inside. We have also held tearful memorial walks to honor those we have lost.

Our work is making an impact. We have seen the suicide rate in South Dakota prisons drop. We have seen the development of Tribal Prison Liaisons appointed by their tribes and recognized by the Department of Corrections who can also bring concerns to Tribal officials. We've been able to provide information through the newsletters about

available resources, legislation, poems, stories, and other topics of interest. We have seen families become more open about the prison experience and the effects it has on families. The silence is slowly being broken. The hoop (circle of life) is beginning to mend.

Remembering *our ancestors lived in a society without prisons* guides our work. Our ancestors lived with Lakota Values: Generosity, Courage, Respect and Wisdom. Embracing our traditions, we need to welcome our warriors and women back with encouragement, prayer and their families present at their homecoming. Through the Support Group effort we are beginning this process. We do not believe there is a bad person. Everyone has good and evil in them and everyone makes good and bad choices.

*Would you or could you be there for our fallen brothers and sisters when they feel discouraged, when they face the darkest moments of their lives, when they feel like they can't go on any longer and have totally given up? Would you offer them hope to go on living?*

*Okiciyapo: Help each other. Wasog nazinyo: Stand strong.*

*About the Author:* Marletta Pacheco is an Elder Native American woman, a Lakota, a member of Rosebud Sioux tribe (Sicangu) in South Dakota. She is the president and a founder of the South Dakota Prisoner Support Group, a 501c3 non-profit organization. All their work is done through the volunteer efforts of their members. To contact them:

#### South Dakota Prisoner Support Group

Attn: Marletta Pacheco  
PO Box 3285  
Rapid City, SD 57709  
groups.yahoo.com/group/  
SouthDakotaPrisonerSupportGroup



## ACTION ALERT

**Prisoners in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay State Prison (California) are going on an indefinite hunger strike as of July 1, 2011 to protest the cruel and inhumane conditions of their imprisonment. Their demands are calls for basic human rights such as adequate food as well as an end to the practice of "debriefing" used to gain information about fellow prisoners.**

**To get more info, call the Critical Resistance office at 510-444-0484. You can also visit <http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com>**

COMING HOME:

# Life After Lock-up for Transgender People

*Tips from Grace Lawrence of the Transgender, Gender Variant, & Intersex Justice Project*

*With Toshio Meronek*

Activists such as Angela Davis and Miss Major have emphasized that transgender people are among those most severely mistreated by the prison industrial complex. As many as 65 % have experienced some amount of time behind bars, and oppressive gender norms of the outside world are replicated inside prison walls, with discrimination on the outside translating into poor treatment within. Some of these issues include: sexual abuse by staff and prisoners at far higher rates than non-trans prisoners and a higher likelihood to be separated from other prisoners in psychologically damaging solitary confinement (justified as “for their own good”). Society at large treats transgender people violently, and this violence is mirrored inside; criminalization and ill-treatment has become normalized. Transgender people are roped into the system at higher rates than non-trans people due to various forms of oppression—from economic discrimination (it’s more difficult for trans people to get non-illegal work) to harassment by police simply because of who they are.

The prison industrial complex uses these tactics of oppression cyclically, with many gender variant people ending up back in prison soon after release. Therefore it is important to focus on ways to close the revolving door between prison and outside by opening up opportunities for employment, housing, health care and other basic human rights, and working to end policing and criminalization of certain occupations, such as sex work. When recognizing the ways individual people and particular groups are targeted by the prison industrial complex, we must keep in mind our overall objective is not to help our communities better survive under capitalism within the prison industrial complex, but it is to strengthen our communities’ agency so we can build genuine people power to truly create the world we want to live in. In other words, while we support each other in obtaining our basic needs for survival, we must also struggle against the systems that strip us of those basic needs in the first place.

Grace Lawrence works as a counselor with the Transgender, Gender Variant, & Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP) in San Francisco, which aims to help transgender people who are both in and out of prison. Recognizing that recidivism is a huge way the PIC monster grows, we asked her to share her advice for reentering--and staying in--the outside world with *The Abolitionist*.

**B**efore you leave prison, contact TGIJP (address below). “We have a pen pal system, where we get to know the person before they’re paroled, personally, so we can know how to empower them,” says Grace. TGIJP communicates with trans prisoners in any state, helping mentor them so they can be better prepared for leaving lockup. For example, a counselor might direct you on how to get your work papers, or assist with finding local organizations that can help with legal matters. (They may also be able to advocate for you while you’re still inside: “We get people calling from places like Nevada or Texas, and we’ve contacted prison staff or the inspector general’s office, just to make sure that person is being treated fairly.”)

**I**f you can work it out within your probation or parole terms, consider moving to a community that has more services for transgender people—a bigger city like Atlanta, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Portland, or Seattle. While she was imprisoned in central California, Grace’s lawyer was able to convince the judge on her case to transfer the case to San Francisco, where she’d found a community of trans people several years before, and resources for gender variant people are more readily available.

**I**f you’ve had a drug or alcohol issue in the past, locate a residential program that addresses these issues. “There’s a lot of discrimination within the jails that can really lower a person’s self-esteem” and lead to substance abuse, says Grace. She herself was a client of a program at Walden House, in San Francisco. During her year there, she received therapy and “just focused on Grace, you know?” The organization helped get her papers in order (a Social Security card, for example) which eventually led to her being able to apply for jobs.

**D**on’t give up on finding legal work, if you want it. It’s true, transgender people “have a harder time getting hired,” says Grace. “If a non-trans person goes out for the

*While seeking work, abolitionists must remember that corporations support and benefit from the prison industrial complex—everything from selling cement for prison walls, to using free prison labor to make their products (for example, while American Airlines has a trans-friendly hiring policy, they have used prisoners to crew their phone reservation lines).]*

same job, the transgender person won’t get it.” In fact, trans people are often unemployed at twice the rate of non-trans people. But certain employers such as Apple and Nike do include terms like “gender” and “gender identity” in their company non-discrimination policies (while also requiring that suppliers do not use prison labor), and in 2010, Goodwill opened a new San Francisco store where seven out of ten employees were trans. (Grace herself worked at Goodwill, where she used her knowledge of fashion to price clothing, and soon became a manager.) Visit the web sites of the Transgender Economic Empowerment Initiative (<http://www.teeisf.org>) and Transgender at Work (<http://www.tgender.net/taw/>) to learn more about the job search.

**O**nce you’re back on your feet, remember to support your community by helping others who are going through what you went through. Grace’s original advisor, Miss Major, helped her get past some tough times, which caused Grace to want to give back to other trans people seeking help. Grace—who is from Liberia, where being trans is illegal—is now helping to develop a program that will aid trans people from other countries to seek asylum in the U.S. “I want to be like Miss Major when I grow up—and you can tell her that!”



Grace Lawrence lives in San Francisco, where she works with TGIJP and performs at Divas Nightclub. She is currently working on a book, *The Boys Are the Most Beautiful Girls in the World*.

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## Tunisia

On January 14, protestors in Tunisia successfully overthrew President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali after weeks of widespread revolt. His temporary replacement, Prime Minister Mohammad Ghannouchi, was in turn forced to resign on February 27 in the face of continuous agitation for the election of a new government without ties to Ben Ali's regime. The protests in Tunisia were partially ignited by the release of a WikiLeaks cable in December that exposed corruption and material excess of President Ben Ali amidst widespread unemployment, poverty, and rising food prices nationwide.

## Egypt

Inspired by the successful uprising in Tunisia, massive, ongoing demonstrations centered in Cairo's Tahrir Square overthrew Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on February 11. The US supported Mubarak's 30-year dictatorship with \$1.3 of military funding annually, issued cautious statements about the unrest until his departure was imminent. Egypt under Mubarak's control was the key Arab state that supported U.S. and Israeli imperial interests in the strategic, energy-rich region. Egyptian leadership has enabled Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza despite the Egyptian populace's overwhelming support for Palestinian freedom. Since the uprising, the military has temporarily managed the functioning of the government while, protestors stormed state security offices seizing and releasing documents that exposed government corruption, phone-tapping, and torture. People rallied again in Tahrir Square, demanding that secret police forces be disbanded entirely.

## Bahrain

Protesters occupied the Pearl Roundabout area in Bahrain, where repression has fostered increasing opposition to the monarchy's rule. In a concession, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa offered about \$2,600, for each family, and promised a wave of new government hires. Monetary handouts and promised jobs failed to quell the demonstrations. The U.S., which controls a large naval base in the country, continues to support the king in his vague plans for dialogue with the opposition. Meanwhile, human rights activists have expressed concern over the torture of Bahraini prisoners and the brutality of government forces.

## Yemen

Thousands of protestors continue to demand the ouster of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh who has maintained power through the heavily armed military and groups of government loyalists that have attacked the protestors. Saleh, an ally to the U.S. against Al Qaeda in the War on Terror, has offered to step down after his term expires in 2013 but Yemenis continue to agitate for his immediate removal.

## Libya

In Libya, rebel forces control much of the country including the cities of Benghazi, Misrata, and Zawiyah, where on March 6 they repelled at least two attacks by government forces. While President Muammar Qaddafi has pledged to remain in office indefinitely, demonstrators calling for his removal have swept the country and undermined his authority. Opposition forces are rallying outside of Tripoli,

preparing for a confrontation with Qaddafi's militia. The U.S. and NATO have responded to this state of civil war with airstrikes across the country aiming to break Qaddafi's stronghold on the government.

## Oman

The government of Oman has faced rising opposition by announcing the second cabinet-level reshuffle of power in a week, in addition to promises of welfare payments to the unemployed, increased salaries, higher state payments for students and the deposition of six cabinet members. Protestors continue to demand a more democratic leadership, increased minimum wage, and an end to government corruption.

## Youngstown Prison Victory

On January 15, five prisoners on death row in Youngstown, Ohio won concessions to their demands for basic rights including monthly visitation, phone privileges, better food, and outdoor recreation hours. Three of the prisoners, known as the Youngstown Five, began a hunger strike on January 3, and rallied support from the local religious and political community as well as activists nationwide. After twelve days, Ohio State Penitentiary Warden David Bobby issued a letter responding to the strikers by conceding to most of their most immediate demands, despite having said that he would not respond to public pressure. The striking prisoners were being held under highly restrictive conditions in retaliation for involvement in an uprising at Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville, Ohio in 1993.

## Prison Strike and Retaliation in Georgia

The largest prison strike in U.S. history was carried out in prisons, jails, and detention centers throughout Georgia from December 9-16, 2010, calling for a living wage for work, educational opportunities, decent health care and living conditions, an end to cruel and unusual punishment, nutritious food, visitation rights, access to vocational training, and more reasonable parole considerations. After the strike, many states made increased efforts to ban cell phones from prisons because they had been instrumental organizing tools in Georgia. State prison officials admitted to identifying dozens of key organizers in the state and singling them out for retaliation, including isolation, beating, and transfer to other institutions.

In February, at least 37 strikers were missing in the state, but by February 19 Ajamu Baraka, a member of the Concerned Coalition to Protect Prisoners' Rights, reported to San Francisco Bay View that they had been located and were not hospitalized. Eugene Thomas and Willie Mosley, two key organizers at Reidsville, were locked in isolation on allegations of killing another prisoner. Prison officials have held them in isolation for months without filing formal charges, indicating that they are being punished in retaliation for their involvement in the strike.

## Hunger Strikes Demands Changes for Greek Prisoners and Immigrants

In Greece, more than 9,000 prisoners participated in a strike by refusing to eat prison food, including over 1,200 who were still on strike by December 10. Their demands included: an end to the abuse of pretrial detention, lowering the ceiling limits for maximum continuous imprisonment, the abolition of the anti-terrorism law and abuse of political prisoners, abolition of devastating sentencing and probation/limited release, the immediate release of prisoners with chronic illness or special needs, the closure of underage prisons, and more decent conditions including food, medical care, exercise, visitation, and opportunities to work.

In January, 300 immigrants in Greece began a hunger strike for legalization. As of March 7, 98 of these strikers have been hospitalized, but the strike continues. Youssef Bahi, a immigrant organizer, said, "They are asking for their legalization, not just for 300 people who make hunger strike, but also they are making this hunger strike for all of immigrants who work and live in Greece."

## Paramilitary Training Camp Planned for U.S.-Mexican Border

The rural town of Octillo, California, located near the Mexican



Image by Melanie Cervantes | DignidadRebelde.com

border, approved the construction of a paramilitary training base to be opened and operated by a private company called the Wind Zero Group Inc., despite community opposition. The garrison will train in the operation of unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, intended for use in the drug war in Mexico and on the border.

## Political Prisoners Escape in Chaibasa

Three Maoist rebels imprisoned at Chaibasa Divisional Jail in India escaped on January 17, allegedly with the help of prison officials. The prisoners were being held on charges in connection with rebel attacks at Bitekelsoya and Baliba in Saranda forest in 2001 and 2002, which including the killing of dozens of security forces. Police investigations found it overwhelmingly likely that prison guards or other officials facilitated the jailbreak.

## Thousands Rally for Right to Organize in Wisconsin

By proposing to abolish the right to unionize for public sector workers, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker inadvertently set off a wave of virulent protests in the state's capitol, with solidarity actions happening across the country. Protesters, who included union members, activists, and public sector workers, occupied the state capitol building for 13 days and nights. On March 5, after ending the occupation on a judge's order, 15,000 people rallied in Madison. Governor Walker's proposal has inspired similar efforts to ban public sector unions in Indiana and Ohio under the pretense of settling state deficits, but it has also ignited pro-union activism nationwide.

## PA Judge Accepts Kickbacks

Former judge Mark Ciavarella of Scranton, Pennsylvania, was convicted of accepting a \$1 million kickback from Robert Mericle, owner and operator of private prison facilities for youth in the area. Ciavarella was notorious for imposing long sentences on juveniles and convicting them without regard for their constitutional rights, and courts now have determined that he accepted bribes from the jail-builder in return for sending kids to his youth prisons in New York and Western Pennsylvania.

## New Jersey 4 Update

Renata Hill was released from Albion State Correctional Facility April 14th, 2010, although she will continue to be on probation for five years. Renata had been sent back to complete an additional year and a half after she accepted a plea bargain last year. In 2008, the Appellate Court granted her a retrial and she was out on bail for six months, but she decided against the retrial because she would have had the same judge who originally sentenced her to eight years. Patreese Johnson is still being held at Albion, and is sentenced to remain in prison until 2015. The civil case against the New Jersey 4, who are being held for defending themselves against a violent attack in the West Village in 2006, is still pending.

## Leonard Peltier Awaits Transfer

In worsening health, Leonard Peltier was ordered by a physician to undergo a biopsy and seek more intensive medical care. Supporters continue to rally and write to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, demanding that Peltier be transferred to either CI-Oxford in Wisconsin or FMC-Rochester in Minnesota for health reasons. Peltier, a leader of the American Indian Movement and active member of the Lakota tribe, is being held in Lewisberg, Pennsylvania in a prison without adequate medical facilities. ■