

the ABOLITIONIST

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“...POWER COMES FROM LYING... LYING BIG AND THE WHOLE DAMN WORLD PLAYING ALONG WITH YOU. ONCE YOU GOT EVERYBODY AGREEING TO WHAT THEY KNOW IN THEIR HEARTS ISN’T TRUE, YOU GOT ‘EM BY THE BALLS.” —Senator Rourke (Sin City)

We live in an age of extremes: fire and brimstone, fear and terror, reaction and retribution. A stark era of patriots and evildoers, where the latter are subjected to smart bombs, imprisonment, isolation and poverty. The ruling class stacks the deck, dealing death as democracy, and occupation as freedom. And the cards fall exactly where they’re supposed to fall. Schwarzenegger’s blatant smear campaign of Prop 66 (defeated November 2004 California ballot initiative to amend “Three Strikes” law that would have permitted limited re-sentencing under new felony definitions and increased punishment for specified sex crimes against children) and the recent clearing of Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez of “leadership failure” at Abu Ghraib are only the more recent hands dealt. Patriots. *Lying big.*

When we speak of “alternatives” and “justice” as abolitionists, we can’t escape the systems of oppression that underpin our global society and how these systems are enforced and reproduced in our daily lives. The political and the personal intersect. People’s relationships to power, privilege and oppression are obviously different, but the baseline of society is unequivocally authoritarian and violent, dehumanizing us all.

To create local, self-determined solutions we must understand and dismantle the overarching systems of white supremacy, patriarchy and imperialism, which have poor communities under siege (*See Why we Focus on the Right*). These systems of oppression create the material conditions in which violence is perpetuated in our communities. We cannot simply prevent violence within our families and communities without also challenging the ways in which state and economic violence are racialized, gendered, and function as a form of class control. We need more than mainstream public safety. That is, law and order. We need food, housing, healthcare, culture, knowledge, wisdom, solidarity, and freedom.

Abolishing interpersonal, institutional, economic, and state violence together is integral to reclaiming our humanity and creating communities that flourish (*See Critical Resistance –Incite! Statement*). Our task as abolitionists is to destroy the culture of imprisonment that has become so common sense in our society by creating and sustaining everyday individual and community practices that build our capacity for self-determination. There is no exact blueprint for this; it has a lot to do with continuously experimenting, assessing successes and failures, taking risks, and moving forward. There are many historical and contemporary examples to draw lessons and inspiration from in this endeavor (*See Heroes Grow on Trees and Resource List*). We should study them with an eye on developing tactics and strategy that account for local economic conditions and political formations.

To take up this struggle and *not play along* is to fall into the proverbial camp of the “evildoers” with its attendant dangers. U.S. political leaders make it crystal clear that: “you’re either with us or against us.” At the recent *Attica to Abu Ghraib* conference, Robert King Wilkerson, of the Angola 3, summed up the situation as such: “the media has got us loving our enemies and hating our own people.” Those in power pursue their interests through a sophisticated system of ideology and force (*See Why We Focus on the Right*). The ruling class knows that it’s good business to first try and convince the public that they’re working in society’s best interests. The most effective way to do this is to play upon people’s fears. For example, the State persuaded the public that the PATRIOT ACT was a necessary compromise between democratic ideals and national security because of the imminent threat of terrorism. We see this again and again in the supposed wars on crime, drugs, and terror. With society’s consent, police and prisons safeguard the extreme disparities of society’s class structure by disappearing those who pose a threat to state and corporate power (*See Bonnie Kerness and Masai Ehosi Interview*). The social construction of “crime” has been masterful for convincing people that the U.S. power structure is protecting them, while relieving guilt around class and race privilege, and further reproducing the property relationships and citizenship privileges of white democracy.

We all know the butchery that passes as law and order in this country. Yet we shouldn’t gloss over the fact that alternatives are often nothing more than the kinder and gentler maintenance of a fundamentally oppressive social order (*See Jerry Miller Interview*). Moreover, when politically and economically useful, the State has done its best to appropriate alternative justice models into its auspices. Community policing and neighborhood watches are seemingly innocuous ways in which the state normalizes social pathologies, mimics empowerment and community control, and restores the capitalist pecking order (*See Making Police Obsolete*).

The question of alternatives brings up basic questions about the appropriate relationship between the individual and the community, and the process of accountability and transformation. In any endeavor to resolve harm and prevent it in the future, there has to be a commitment to safety, healing, and prevention (*See Generation Five Article*). This means building the capacity of individuals and communities to address the violence that takes place in our families and communities, and transforming the social conditions that permit it in the first place. Prisons negate this possibility and ensure the cyclical nature of violence.

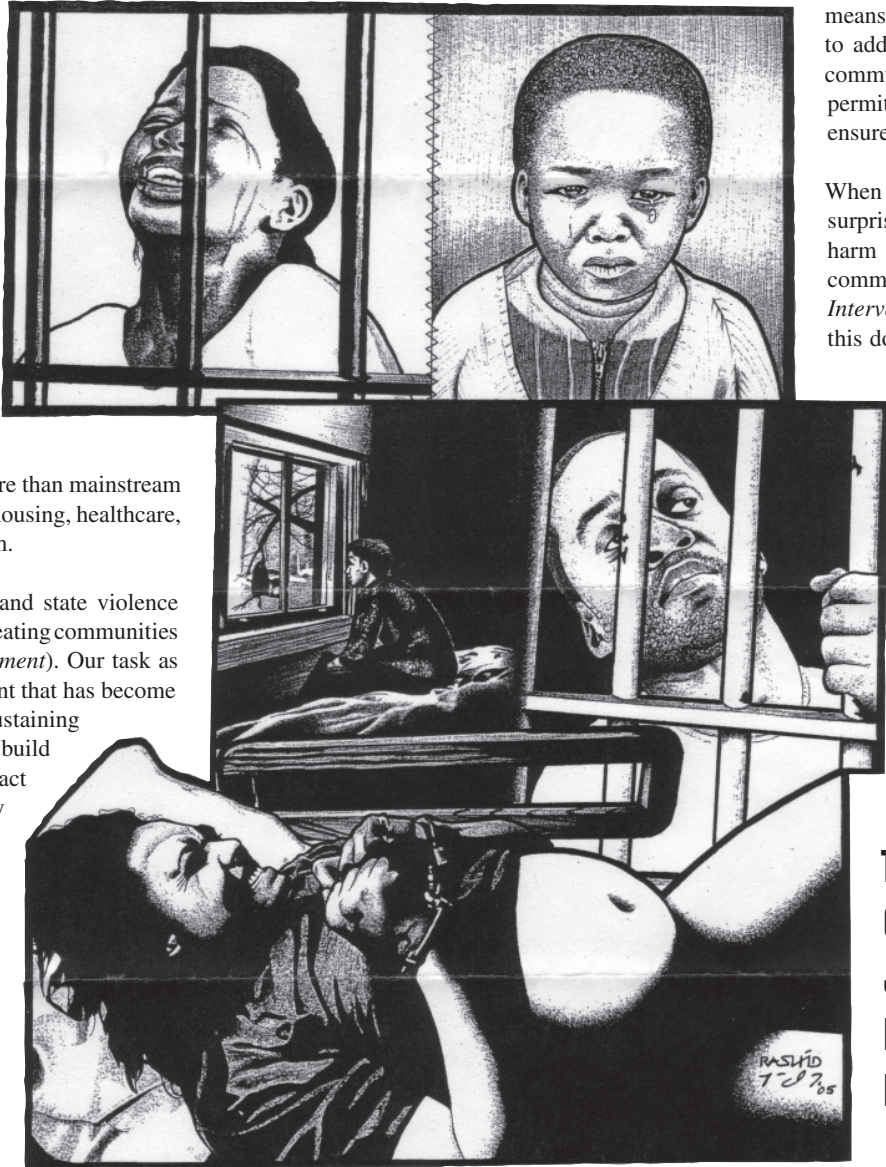
When faced with the terror and injustice of prison, it’s not surprising that people refuse to take responsibility for the harm they commit. Mass imprisonment has not made our communities any safer or healthier (*See Community-Based Interventions to Violence*). There are societal incentives for this double bind. It secures a steady supply of bodies for the prison industrial complex, sows fear and distrust of our own families and friends, and alienates people from uniting for common cause against oppression.

The conservative discourse that reduces the complexity of an individual into the nonentity of the “criminal” has found a foothold in our own minds. This was the other side of Prop 66. We too are quick to divide people into two camps: the deserving and the undeserving, the rehabilitated and incorrigible. If we don’t believe that we can change and become whole, we cannot call ourselves abolitionists. We too have to move beyond our punitive impulses.

“OUR SYSTEM IS ONE OF DETACHMENT: TO KEEP SILENCED PEOPLE FROM ASKING QUESTIONS, TO KEEP THE JUDGED FROM JUDGING, TO KEEP SOLITARY PEOPLE FROM JOINING TOGETHER, AND THE SOUL FROM PUTTING TOGETHER ITS PIECES.”
—Eduardo Galeano “Divorces”

This edition attempts to connect some of the dots between state and interpersonal violence, to move beyond platitudes and look at some of the alternatives that are being put into practice. Many people in our communities are frustrated and feel like there aren’t viable options accessible to them except for the police and legal system. Our difficulty in creating viable options that deal with murder and forms of sexual violence legitimizes repressive forces, creates wedges in the community, and sacrifices long-term solutions for immediate intervention. We must also acknowledge that there are no easy answers or quick-fix alternatives, that difficulties abound, and that we must continue dreaming, building, and striving. Our opposition is formidable and our communities are struggling just to survive.

And yet the articles herein attest to the possibility of *joining together*. We hope that this edition of *The Abolitionist* inspires readers to better conceptualize a world without the PIC and to continue building the political alliances necessary for liberation.



Serving life without parole I struggle daily to maintain the very essence of who I am: a loving mother, daughter, sister and friend. Because this environment constantly pushes you towards becoming a robotic machine, which is not allowed to think or make decisions on its own and obeys its programmer (the master). Which is why I find it amusing when the prison staff is constantly telling us to go “program,” run a good “program,” or you’re a “program failure.” The entire system has “failed.” Prison is a business that the government has made profitable. —Meiko

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an interview with JEROME G. MILLER

Dr. Jerome G. Miller is co-founder and member of the board of the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, based in Baltimore, Maryland and Clinical Director of the Augustus Institute in Alexandria, Virginia. He has a doctorate in psychiatric social work and is recognized as one of the nation’s leading authorities on corrections. He spearheaded the closing of state reform schools while serving as Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services. He is also the author of two books: *Last One Over the Wall* and *Search & Destroy: African Americans in the Criminal Justice System*.

I used to think that by setting up alternatives in the community to the heavy use of the criminal justice system that we could drain people off that system into less repressive options. But as the years have passed, I’ve taken more seriously a bit of advice I was given by David Rothman, a social historian at Columbia, who wrote a book on the discovery of the asylum. One of the things he suggested to me is that although it’s good to close down institutions, one has to be aware of the possibility that in doing so one will bring out the institutional norms and sanctions that will create mini-prisons in society instead of genuine alternatives.

You can see this everywhere, like in the case of the five-year-old girl who was handcuffed at school with the authorities sanctioning it. We would never have thought of doing this even 50 years ago. Unfortunately, I think this would now have a fair amount of support from the public as a whole. This kind of law enforcement mentality is creeping into society across the board.

All of these issues haunt us today. We’re now talking about electronic surveillance devices to track sex offenders. We’ve brought surveillance into the community as well as within institutions. We’re stuck with a 17th century attitude toward those who are marginalized in our society, but now we have 21st century technology to reinforce these 200-year-old ideologies—and that’s very, very dangerous.

If you look back to earlier studies of the law enforcement and correctional system in Germany in the late 1930s, you find a society entirely engulfed in punishment. Sentences became harsher. Minimal programs in prisons were slashed even before these sorts of punishments were directed toward Jews as part of Germany’s ethnic cleansing campaign. They were used on so-called “criminals” and, unfortunately, I believe this is where the US is headed. For example, the so-called restraint chairs that are now routinely used in prisons around the country are completely unnecessary, but have been sold as a way to justify a system that can only control people by using violence.

I’ve run four large state agencies over the years, and I’ve been a monitor in the fifth largest jail-overcrowding situation in the United States. There’s no reason in management or correctional theory—or in humanity—for anything like the supermax prison. It’s a sadomasochist’s wet dream. Supermax prisons are demeaning, harmful, and dehumanizing. But they’re all designed by well-educated architects, run by trained professionals, and held together with a rationale of diagnosis and management theory that has been designed to justify these very sick ends.

When I was the Commissioner of Youth Services in Massachusetts during the early ‘70s, I originally hoped to reform those places. Over time I found them unreformable. We did shape a number of them up, and studies done at the Center for Criminal Justice at Harvard Law School have suggested that our programs were quite helpful. But you’re always swimming upriver when reforming institutions. The minute you let up or leave, the prisons retreat to the negative dystopian models from which they were originally designed.

So we decided to try and eliminate them altogether and set up alternatives—spending the same amount of money that it costs to keep a kid in an institution. At that time, the cost was around \$25,000 a year. These days, it approaches \$70,000 a year in most states—a fantastic amount of money spent to destroy a kid. And in prisons, it now costs around \$35,000 per year to incarcerate a person.

What kind of options would you consider for your own kid if you were given \$70,000 and were told to keep him or her out of trouble for a year? Well, my gosh, you could come up with just fantastic options. There are some marvelous programs such as Outward Bound to help keep kids out of the criminal justice system. And of course there are many more options. We’re often spending double that amount to destroy kids from poor families. It’s phenomenal what we will spend to hurt and destroy others. Everyone knows in their hearts the kinds of things we routinely do make matters worse.

It isn’t just a matter of closing institutions. It’s also a matter of getting the money that sustains them. In Massachusetts, for example, we literally emptied the largest and oldest institution for juveniles in the state. Charles Dickens had visited it during his travels in America. As Commissioner, I had the authority to move these kids into a variety of options, which we funded primarily with federal money. As long as I didn’t cut any jobs, and let the administrators run the facility—with no prisoners—there wasn’t a peep from the legislature. It was just fine. And that is really what many of these institutions are about. It’s about contracts with guards’ unions and the people that run them. They have nothing to do with lowering crime or making kids better able to get along. In fact, the average state has more than enough money to provide options for kids.

To switch gears for a moment, the work we do at Augustus Institute deals primarily with sex offenders and violent offenders. First off, in terms of responding to the public’s fears about sex offenders, it’s almost impossible to beat down the misperceptions in the media. I don’t think they are misperceptions any longer. I think they’re almost conscious ideological statements. For example, there is this idea that “once a pedophile, always a pedophile,” that they’re incurable and will repeat the behavior at this fantastic rate. All of that is nonsense. It’s trash. The federal government’s own studies on this—they did a five and ten-year follow-up on some 5,000 sex offenders—found them to be the least likely to repeat their crimes when compared with other inmates. The rate they gave was 5% over a ten-year period.

We have people in treatment. They do very well. Across the board you don’t dare say this anymore because it’s a given in the media that these conditions are untreatable. That’s simply not true. We do a lot of individual and group work, run a lot of programs and monitor them. There are many things that can be done that are very productive. One thing we know that is *not* productive is to simply put people in prison. But it’s very difficult to speak reasonably about these issues in an atmosphere where no one cares to hear it. It’s a lynch atmosphere, and the politicians have really run with it.

I saw a recent series of comments by Dan Abrams, who does the legal thing for MSNBC, in which he said, “of course we all know that sex offenders repeat at this dramatically high level.” And when someone suggested to him that it was a 5% level, he said, “We all know they repeat.” Well the guy said, “They repeat at a 5% rate according to this federal study,” and he said, “We all know that that’s much higher than with the average offender,” and well, of course, it isn’t. With the average offender coming out of our prisons, we can expect a 60-70% recidivism rate. But the country’s in no mood to hear these things. Now, it’s important

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WORDS MATTER

It is very important to understand how power operates through language. Words have unexamined assumptions and an internal logic that shape the ways problems are defined and, therefore, the solutions that are possible. For example, people who support the PIC use the term criminal instead of prisoner to define those who are put in cages. Criminal implies that causing harm is essentially a part of this person and so it becomes logical that prisons are the only solution. Also, within our white supremacist society, criminal and Black are often code words for each other. The term prisoner, on the other hand, means someone kept in a cage against their will by some powerful force (like the state), whether that power is just or not. Talk of crime and criminals usually happens without the critical thinking needed to properly understand the conditions in which many acts of harm take place. How can we understand murder, theft, sexual abuse, police brutality or any crime without understanding the social forces and economic conditions surrounding them? We have to be able to talk about and respond to harm in a way that doesn’t minimize violent acts, yet holds out the possibility of healing and transformation for all parties involved.

The words harm, accountability and self-determination are used throughout this edition. What follows are working definitions that CR uses to inform our organizing:

HARM

We define harm both as something one person does to hurt another—from yelling at your partner to killing another person—and as the effect of oppression or violence carried out by the state. Importantly, these kinds of harm are linked. This means that when one person hurts someone else, that harm can often be linked to the harm the state and economic institutions do in communities of color, poor communities, and other oppressed communities. We define harm this broadly to recognize that current ideas of crime are limited to ways that specifically target the communities that are also the targets of harm from the state. We also do it to challenge the idea that the best ways to address harm in our communities is through punishment and imprisonment.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The idea that if someone does something wrong, they should be accountable is often a driving force behind popular support for the PIC. We use the term differently. True accountability means making sure that responsibilities between people or groups of people are met. It also means that each side’s needs get met. Within the PIC, punishment is commonly thought of as a tool used by the district attorney, the police, and the courts for creating accountability. We suggest that accountability has many parts. First, there is the accountability of people to each other, or individuals acting from a sense of responsibility to each other. There is also the accountability of groups of people to other groups and individuals. In a broader model of accountability, society as a whole should be responsible to see that the basic needs of individuals and groups are met, and should not stand in the way of those needs being met. With this model of accountability, responsibility for harm rests not only on a person who caused the harm, but also on the groups of people around them that respond to it, and, the steps taken to address the harm that meet the needs of everyone involved (not just the state). This model of accountability also seeks to provide support both to the harmed and to the person who caused the harm.

SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-determination is the idea that communities should be able to determine their own dealings without being controlled or restrained by outside or government forces. Community affairs could include economic practices, systems for dealing with harm, housing and education values and policies, political structures, geographic boundaries, and relations with other communities. To exercise self-determination means that members of a community are accountable to each other and have a way to make sure power is shared fairly. Self-determination as a principle was made popular through the struggles of oppressed people for control of resources, power, and land. Many fighters for self-determination see imprisoning entire families as a form of genocide. They also see the media-assisted criminalization of both youth and resistance as low-intensity warfare by the government. They see the police as domestic armies. They see the drug war as a plan to paint people of color as dangerous people who have nothing to contribute to society and, therefore, must be removed. Abolitionist efforts to bring an end to the PIC means supporting oppressed people’s rights to self-determination by seeking to abolish those racist institutions of domination (prisons, police, government armed forces, the CIA and FBI). They also mean bringing our desires, efforts and resources to those communities who are directly affected by the PIC’s most aggressive and punishing institutions.

(Adapted from the CR Abolition Organizing Toolkit)

why we focus on THE RIGHT, THE STATE, AND THE SYSTEM

By Palak Shah, Nikhil Aziz, Ph.D., and Pam Chamberlain

The term “ideology” refers to a set of ideas and principles that various groups consciously adopt (or accept as natural), hold, and seek to propagate, much as people do religious beliefs. Ideologies usually describe power relations, including how power should be allocated, and they provide the rationale for maintaining “social order” through a system. Oppressive ideologies and systems such as authoritarianism, patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, White supremacy, racism, capitalism, and imperialism are embedded in the U.S. criminal justice system. This is because the criminal justice system is a part and product of the State and society we live in, and these ideologies are foundations of that society and State. At the same time, the criminal justice system legitimates and reproduces these ideologies of oppression that in turn help to maintain and expand the power of the Right, the State, and the criminal justice system itself. While the Political Right did not invent oppressive ideologies, it is important to differentiate between those institutions and groups that reflect and reproduce these ideologies, and those that actively seek to sustain them. The modern Political Right remains the single largest force organized in defense of oppressive ideologies—and it is sophisticated enough to reject blatantly oppressive ideas and policies that are no longer culturally acceptable.

An excellent example of how oppressions are interlinked and how they are maintained by related systems is provided by activist and scholar Suzanne Pharr. She notes that sexism is the system through which the ideology of patriarchy (the “enforced belief in male dominance and control”) is maintained, and homophobia, economics, and violence are weapons that sexism uses to maintain itself.^a But as Pharr writes, “we have to look at economics not only as the root cause of sexism but also as the underlying, driving force that keeps all oppressions in place. In the United States, our economic system is shaped like a pyramid, with a few people at the top, primarily white males, being supported by large numbers of unpaid or low-paid workers at the bottom. When we look at this pyramid, we begin to understand the major connection between sexism and racism because those groups at the bottom of the pyramid are women and people of color. We then begin to understand why there is such a fervent effort to keep those oppressive systems (racism and sexism and all the ways they are manifested) in place to maintain the unpaid and low-paid labor.”^b

The intersectionality of different oppressive ideologies and systems occurs not only because the groups being oppressed by each are connected, such as women and people of color but also because, as Pharr observes, “in order for this top-heavy system of economic inequity to maintain itself, the 90 percent on the bottom must keep supplying cheap labor. A very complex, intricate system of institutionalized oppressions is necessary to maintain the status quo so that the vast majority will not demand its fair share of wealth and resources and bring the system down. Every institution—schools, banks, churches, governments, courts, media, etc—as well as individuals must be enlisted in the campaign to maintain such a system of gross inequity.”^c This is true within an individual country as well as between countries, as is reflected in the unequal power relations between economically advanced countries and those in what is called the Third World. It is important for progressives to understand, as Pharr points out, that “there is no hierarchy of oppressions. Each is terrible and destructive. To eliminate one oppression successfully, a movement has to include work to eliminate them all or else success will always be limited and incomplete. To understand the connection among the oppressions, we must examine their common elements. The first is a *defined norm*, a standard of rightness and often righteousness wherein all others are judged in relation to it. This norm must be backed up with institutional power, economic power, and both institutional and individual violence. It is the combination of these three elements that makes complete power and control possible. In the United States, that norm is male, white, heterosexual, Christian, temporarily able-bodied, youthful, and has access to wealth and resources.”^d

Institutional power, i.e., the power over, and control of society’s institutions, and economic power, which enables control of those institutions, Pharr reasons, “requires the use of *violence and the threat of violence*. Institutional violence is sanctioned through the criminal justice system and the threat of the military—for quelling individual or group uprisings.”^e Most institutions, groups, and individuals in our society reflect, in some way, regardless of intent, tendencies of these ideologies that, unconsciously or not, affirm the State’s ultimate power and authority, the “inferiority” of people of color, women and poor people, or the inherent value of strong punishment. Many people support these ideological concepts even when they don’t consciously self-identify as supporters or proponents—and, as a result, these extremely powerful ideologies are invisibilized. The system itself reinforces these beliefs, and some observers or participants in the system see “evidence” of their beliefs played out in the streets, the courts, and the prisons. And the ideologies start to intertwine, reinforcing each other, so that it “makes sense” to hold negative beliefs about “criminals,” whether they be immigrants, people of color, women and/or poor.

Central to the maintenance of the criminal justice system and, in fact, the modern State itself is the idea that the State alone has the legitimate power to maintain law and order within society, and to regulate, detain, and punish those who threaten that law and order. However, while the State might be a neutral player in theory, in reality it is controlled by those with power and privilege. And those who control the State make the laws.

The current criminal justice system is characterized by the desire to maintain total physical, emotional and psychological control over the people under the system’s control. A major ideology that supports this approach to criminal justice is generally known as authoritarianism; and looking at authoritarianism in the context of the criminal justice system enables us to see how an abstract theory plays out in reality. Authoritarianism is an oppressive system that uses force, violence, or the threat of violence, so that those in power are able to maintain social order and control. An authoritarian approach believes that through violence and repression an individual can be forced to conform to a set of behaviors—or face punishment. This is evident in the way our society punishes those who deviate from what the State and society deem as appropriate or moral. The criminalization of homosexuality through codified laws or the climate of hostility engendered through moral codes is a clear example of how those who deviate from what is deemed normal are subject to punishment or violence.



Authoritarianism plays out in many ways in the current criminal justice system but it is most apparent inside prison walls. The physical conditions that prisoners face are brutal and inhumane. The act of restricting human beings to small cages is only the most obvious form of control. Even the most intimate daily human functions are monitored and controlled in prison. Strip searches, controlled movement, regulated visitors, lockdowns, regulated supplies such as toilet paper and showers all add to an environment of total physical and psychological control. In addition, the explosive growth of the prisoner population has resulted in the practice of double and even triple bunking prisoners in cells too small for even one person. The most extreme form of control occurs in the “supermax” prison, where prisoners spend almost all of their waking and sleeping hours locked in small windowless cells sealed with solid steel doors. In some supermax facilities, because of technological “innovations,” prisoners might go days or weeks without any human contact.

The criminal justice system reproduces and legitimizes various forms of violence and the threat of violence to control both imprisoned and free people. Police forces, F.B.I. and C.I.A. agents, Immigration and Border Patrol personnel, and correctional officers enjoy and actively exercise the State’s legal authority over the use of force. The use of physical violence is rampant, normalized, and rarely questioned. Only the most egregious acts of violence and police brutality—such as the 1991 videotaped beating in Los Angeles of Rodney King, who sped away from police in defiance of a signal to stop, and was beaten 56 times with police batons and sustained 11 skull fractures and brain and kidney damage; the 1997 beating of Abner Louima, an innocent Haitian immigrant in New York City, followed by another beating in the police station in which he was sodomized with a plunger handle; or the 1999 killing of Amadou Diallo, a Senegalese immigrant who was shot with 41 bullets when he reached in his pocket at his apartment for what turned out to be his wallet—surface briefly in media coverage. Sexual abuse is also rampant in prisons, jails, and detention facilities, and rape or the threat of rape is condoned as a way of punishing or controlling prisoners.

The threat of prison and/or violence serves as a way of policing not only behaviors but enforcing the State’s ideology as well. Those who disagree with or challenge the State are met with swift and severe punishment, and in many cases, social or physical death. For example, during the 1950s, communists were persecuted, and, in the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed by the government. In the 1960s, the FBI used COINTELPRO with the aim of sabotaging and destroying the Civil Rights, Black Power and American Indian movements. Even today, despite the U.S. government’s claims to the contrary, more than 200 political prisoners remain behind bars.^f

As Angela Davis observes, “We thus think about imprisonment as a fate reserved for others, a fate reserved for the ‘evildoers,’ to use a term recently popularized by George W. Bush. Because of the persistent power of racism, ‘criminals’ and ‘evildoers’ are, in the collective imagination, fantasized as people of color. The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers. This is the ideological work that the prison performs—it relieves us of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism, and, increasingly, global capitalism.”^g

ENDNOTES

- ^a Pharr, Suzanne. 1988. *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*. (New York City: Chardon Press). Pp. 8-9.
 - ^b *Ibid.*, 10-11.
 - ^c *Ibid.*, 10-11.
 - ^d *Ibid.*, 53.
 - ^e *Ibid.*, 55-56.
 - ^f Cook, Mark. 2001. “Dissent and Punishment: How and why justice is denied for political prisoners like Mumia Abu-Jamal,” *Freedom Socialist* 22(2), (July-September). See www.socialism.com/fsarticles/vol22no2/prisoners.html (November 29, 2004).
 - ^g Davis, Angela. 2003. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press). P. 16.
- From Palak Shah, Nikhil Aziz, and Pam Chamberlain, “Why We Focus on the Right, the State, and the System,” in *Defending Justice: An Activist Resource Kit*, ed. Palak Shah (Somerville, MA: Political Research Associates, 2005), 9-11.

RACIAL SEGREGATION IN CALIFORNIA PRISONS

By Viet Mike Ngo

The United States Supreme Court’s decision on February 23, 2005 held that the burden is on the CDC to prove their unwritten policy of racially segregating new prisoners is not unconstitutional. This decision stems from *Johnson v. California*, et al., case # 543 US (2005). Johnson claims he was continuously celled with black prisoners while in a reception center—Johnson’s race is listed as black.

The Court’s decision sets the initial parameters of what is legal or illegal racial segregation within prisons and the standard of review courts must use in resolving similar cases, like my own: *Ngo v. Woodford*, et al., case # C 04 5070 (PR) RS JF.

I allege San Quentin State Prison (SQ) assigns prisoners to double-cells and restricts prisoners to their cells during lockdowns based solely on their race. I believe these policies are used to keep the prison population divided and thus, more easily controlled. Although my case only challenges the racial segregation policies at SQ, its findings may implicate the same practices throughout California’s thirty-three prisons.

If the courts find my claims (as well as Johnson’s) to be true, SQ and CDC will have to make drastic changes to their policies, which will affect the racial dynamics within California state prisons.

It is my hope that these changes, and the dialogues these changes will stir, raise awareness as to who benefits when prisoners, as a class of people, are divided or united. History shows that class unity is a precursor to political agency. This is significant when California is home to over 160,000 prisoners—one of the largest penal systems in the world.

While the California prison system is currently reeling from allegations of corruption and cover-ups, even labeled as dysfunctional by state politicians, a finding by the courts that its policies are racist could be the blow that brings this behemoth to its knees.

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Miller continued

that we look at these issues and try to understand them, but I don’t even get the impression we’re doing that. All I hear about is monsters and killing them, not things that might ultimately inform proper policy.

In Massachusetts, many of the reforms I helped implement have been undone in the last 5 to 7 years. Although they haven’t reopened the state reform schools, they have reclassified the kids and have tried a number of them as adults. Very often, people who should know better—particularly those associated with the mental health professions—have been part of the criminalization of youth because it gets them clientele. Now you have a lot of kids locked up under mental health auspices. Our institutions for the so-called criminally insane have historically been much more brutal than state penitentiaries. So, there’s no refuge in going to medical professionals.

If I were to re-do my experience in Massachusetts, I would scatter as much money as possible across the state to fund alternatives to incarceration. That ensures some viability and sustainability for the alternative programs. The worst thing you can do, and I’m basing this on my own experience, is to, under a rubric of smoother management, give a lot of money to big organizations, even non-profits who claim to offer a wide variety of services. Forget it. They will claim to do that, but as time goes by they will become re-makes of our institutional prison situation.

The secret is to get as many programs going as possible under as many different auspices as possible: halfway houses, group homes, monitors, advocates, with people assigned to individual kids. There’s no reason much of this couldn’t be done in the adult system as well. We could have many small programs that are run by highly motivated, exciting people who will do good things.

These programs have to be open to examination by a responsible press (whatever that is these days), and the people in those programs have to be able to communicate with their families and others, so that we always know what is happening. It is a bad situation when secrecy comes together with the ability to misuse power in a captive/keeper relationship, and that’s why these institutions have historically been unreformable. The captive/keeper relationship, which frames virtually all of our juvenile and all adult justice systems, uses violence and the threat of violence to maintain order. That is a sick sort of relationship to have in a democratic society.

I always refer to the kids as kids. That sends people in the juvenile justice system up the wall. Oh, “they’re delinquents. They are little thugs.” You don’t do that. And you don’t refer to them as “charges.” You have to be willing to risk some system imbalance in pursuit of an individual’s care. And we stopped using isolation as a method of punishment. If that’s what holds the institution together—the threat of being beaten up or stripped naked and thrown in a place with no toilet and a sewer in the floor—then we ought to close it down.

I’ve generally found that if you treat people decently and above all with respect, you will get respect back from most. And the same holds true in adult prisons. But it’s very hard to get that across these days, because we tend to think in black and white terms, not only racially, which we also tend to do, but also culturally and socially. We have so demonized people that we are in many ways using the criminal justice model across the board in our society.

You would hope that we’d find other means besides policing and prisons to deal with social problems, which are more social than criminal problems. We need to get the community more involved, and I know that’s an old shibboleth, but is in fact quite true. We need community involvement in areas that have become professionalized, be it law enforcement, criminal justice, social work, or counseling. This is very threatening to those who provide these services. As our counseling community becomes more professionalized, it increasingly ties itself to the law enforcement model, simply because that is the source of their funding and existence. And that’s very dangerous.

We’ve kind of ignored this, certainly in terms of funding and providing the kinds of authentic options for most of the folks who are caught in this system. I know that in the Black community in DC there are lots of resources that are untapped, because they’re not recognized as such by the professionals. In the most difficult parts of the inner city there are church ladies, young men, and others who are doing their best to work with troubled folks in their own community and whose work goes unrecognized.

People have their own little soup kitchens. They take in extended family members and bring kids to visit their fathers in prison. These things happen routinely, but are not being supported, particularly by the professionals. And in fact, when professionals are involved, they usually ruin it by bringing in folks from outside that don’t really know the community, nor want to be part of it. They will do their nine-to-five counseling or supervision bits, but are not there after hours as part of their life. We need to be hiring people who live in these communities. We need to be paying them for their services and for wrapping their arms around the kids, and the adults as well. We need a lot less empathy and a great deal more sympathy in this field. And those people who are most affected and capable of doing this work need to be supported, and not have their best impulses supervised out of them by “professionals.”

HOW DO WE CREATE REAL SAFETY?

Cassandra: We need to ask what are prisons really about, what work do they do? They cause people to die prematurely, they break up families and put children in positions where they will likely go into prison as well, they create violence. When we expose this then we all have to really think about what we’re doing continuing to invest in them, because warehousing and damaging black and brown people, and poor white people, does not make any of us safer. And being a prison abolitionist doesn’t mean that we fail to address harm that people do to each other, and there will be a few people who are unable to live freely with everyone else, but the institution of the prison that we’re dealing with today is not designed to address that miniscule number of people who are truly violent. The prison system in this country right now warehouses two million people. We need to unmask the fact that the fear that is driving people to accept the status quo around prisons is really about racism. It’s really about protecting the interests of the rich and powerful. So yes, people need to be accountable to each other for the harm they do, but we can build systems of accountability that are not based on systems of punishment and confinement. We can make people who’ve been harmed whole without destroying other people in the process.

Justin: In confronting violence against women, we need to find ways to make women survivors whole, and at the same time work with men to interrupt cycles of violence in ways that really end that violence rather than just displacing it. If we simply remove men from the community and send them to the violent environment of the prison, then that violence continues, somewhere else. But if we create real accountability and also work with those men to challenge root causes of violence and provide them space to heal, then we can actually end violence. The broader community also needs to take responsibility for changing a culture in which violence against women is promoted and tolerated. Men in particular have a responsibility to work against sexism, homophobia and the imbalances of power in our culture that create the space for interpersonal and state violence against women to occur.

Donna Shultz: As far as once an act is committed, there has got to be another way to make restitution, rather than locking someone up. In my case, I’m here on an arson commitment. Another way of making me pay for my crime would be, maybe to help clean up the mess that was made, and work with that person, and get put into a position where I can make amends for what I did, rather than throwing me away for three years, because that didn’t do anything.

Lakisha: If someone commits something that we consider a crime, then that person is accountable to the community, but then the community is also accountable to the person, making sure they have what they need.

Jane Dorotik: We need to shift toward an underlying culture of partnership and trust and away from a culture of domination. Domination underlies every single relationship, from relationships between parents and children, between governments and citizens, us and nature. In contrast a partnership trust oriented model supports mutually respectful caring relationships. There can be hierarchies as would be necessary in all social structure, but power would be used, not to constrict and control, but to elicit from ourselves and others our highest potential.

Excerpts from Justice Now’s CD *The We that Sets Us Free: Building a World without Prisons*



THE FIRST OF THE CIVIL WAR AMENDMENTS, THE THIRTEENTH AMENDMENT, ABOLISHED SLAVERY EXCEPT FOR CONVICTED PRISONERS. NOWADAYS, THIS LOOPHOLE IS BEING EXPLOITED TO NOT ONLY PROVIDE A SLAVE LABOR FORCE WORKING FOR FREE OR A PITTANCE, BUT ALSO TO TRANSFER BILLIONS OF DOLLARS OF TAX REVENUE TO PROFITEERS OPERATING UNDER THE GUISE OF LAW AND ORDER AND THE POLITICAL SHIBBOLETH OF BEING TOUGH ON CRIME. —Jon, Arizona Prisoner

interview with ROBERT KING WILKERSON

the ABOLITIONIST: Could you say something about yourself?

RKW: Okay. My name is Robert King Wilkerson. I’m the only free member of the Angola Three, and I live here in New Orleans, Louisiana awaiting my next trip.

the ABOLITIONIST: At the Attica to Abu Ghraib conference you said that through the Panthers you changed from being a rebel without a cause to a rebel with a consciousness. Could you talk a bit about what that process looked like for you and what others might learn from your experiences that are in prison now?

RKW: Well, keeping it in the context of what I said at the time, I was a rebel. I think I always felt the discrepancies taking place in society, but I wasn’t conscious of it, I couldn’t articulate it. It was the Panther Party that articulated it for me. So as I grew into consciousness I felt the need to act on this consciousness and the things I felt. When I was eventually sent to prison, I tried my best to work out that ideology in my own personal life and my prison life. And I think it worked for me.

the ABOLITIONIST: Can you say a little bit about what’s the relationship between personal practice and also doing it in solidarity with other folks? Were there ways that you studied together? What were some of the processes of you coming to that?

RKW: Well, as this consciousness emerged, so did the desire to validate the things we really felt. So we got ourselves into getting books and swapping them. We began our own political education classes amongst ourselves and taught other people around us who wanted to learn the principles and ideology of the party.

the ABOLITIONIST: As part of the Angola Panthers organizing efforts to build prisoner unity you attempted to transform the social order of prisoners by protecting new prisoners against rape and sexual slavery, and also to mend the divisions between black and white prisoners that made it easier for the administration to control the general prison population. Could you draw out some important lessons you learned that would help folks trying to continue in this tradition?

RKW: In order to organize against the type of separation and racism that the prison generates and perpetuates I think that prisoners have to acknowledge and focus on their shared status. It doesn’t make a difference these days if you are a white, black, red, or yellow prisoner. You are a prisoner of the state. There is a need for a collective focus on prisons as a new type of slavery. If we are going to abolish a new form of slavery then I imagine we are going to have to go beyond reform.

the ABOLITIONIST: Can you elaborate on this?

RKW: If we believe that prison itself is a form of slavery and we are really going to deal with it like we did chattel slavery then I think the approach of reform might not be the ultimate answer. I think some reform could take place within the laws that hold people in prison and it might free some people. If prison is a form of physical slavery, and it’s written into the constitution, then we have to find a way to un-write it.

the ABOLITIONIST: Could you talk a little bit about the 13th amendment for the folks that might not know the history?

RKW: In part, the 13th amendment states that slavery shouldn’t abound within the shores of America unless one has been duly convicted of a crime. It tells me in one breath that slavery should not exist, and in the next breath it says that it can if you are duly convicted of a crime. When the constitution states someone must be duly convicted of a crime, it means legally convicted, but it doesn’t make it morally right. There is no morality in legality, not when you look at the way it is written in the constitution. The 13th amendment allows slavery to continue if you have been convicted of a crime.



the ABOLITIONIST: We can’t really talk about organizing in prison without talking about repression. You faced the reprisal of about 30 years in solitary confinement for your political commitments. Could you talk a bit about the role of solidarity between prisoners and folks on the outside? What works? What are the shortcomings to building a movement across prison walls?

RKW: Well I think that prisoners need to reach out and let people on the outside know exactly what they want. I think that if they reach out, there are a lot of concerned people throughout society who will give a hand and try to implement some of the things they ask for. I think one thing that is needed is consistent solidarity. People need to learn about individuals and groups in prison who are trying to advocate for change. People need to look at the laws that are always being sneaked in under the table that implicate themselves and their loved ones in prison. If it’s something that we don’t want our tax money to go to then we should vote it down. I think prisoners should unite around a cause that supports their best interests. In order to do that, they need to reach outside.

the ABOLITIONIST: So in saying that, could you talk specifically about what worked in building solidarity for your particular case?

RKW: I think we were lucky in that the Angola 3 case was ripe for discussion. It came to public light at exactly the right time. We also had members of the Black Panther Party that were still active in the community come back to get the few who they had forgotten, to use their quote. It has expanded because people have brought other people in. Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace keep up a good dialogue. When I was there I kept up a good dialogue with people who reached out and touched me, who wanted to write and see how we were doing. I think if we do things from a collective mindset we will see that there are common ideologies centered around prisons. That is, unless someone has become totally institutionalized and sees prison as a way of life. But for those who are really concerned, want change in their lives, and want to bring about some sanity in an otherwise insane situation, they have to unify, they have to get together and see that they have a common goal. I can’t put enough emphasis on that. Prisoners have to realize that they

have a common interest: to be free of prisons. They are still human beings and they need to operate from that mindset.

the ABOLITIONIST: Please talk a little bit about what’s going on with Herman and Albert’s case and the role of international solidarity in keeping pressure on the courts? And where you hope it’s going.

RKW: Herman and Albert’s criminal cases are still in the courts. They’re going for the second time around and our lawyers are filing briefs on their behalf. Unlike a lot of prisoners in Louisiana who are “legally dead,” Herman and Albert are not. “Legally dead” means there is no door open for you to ever get back into either state or federal courts because of procedural laws that have been erected in the last decade or so. Herman and Albert have new evidence that they’re actually innocent. Hopefully we can get a judge who is sympathetic and interested in seeing justice prevail this time based on the fact that they were found guilty on insufficient evidence. With regards to our civil case the ACLU filed on our behalf, it has gone all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The fact that we were kept in solitary confinement for 30 years constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. The magistrate agreed with us and the court also adopted the magistrate’s report. The case is pending. We’re in round two of state appeals and trying to get back to the federal courts. Once that happens it’ll be set for trial on whether or not the state violated our 8th amendment rights against cruel and unusual punishment. This case could impact a lot of other prisoners by deciding whether or not the state can keep a prisoner indefinitely confined in a cell 23 or 24 hours a day. It will set a precedent for people around the country. They would have to curtail isolating prisoners away from society forever.

the ABOLITIONIST: That’s huge. Can you talk about some of the solidarity that y’all have been able to build to free the Angola 3?

RKW: We have people who are interested in places like Amsterdam, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, South Africa, Singapore, and all over America. Those are places that I’ve spoke at to support the drive to free Herman and Albert and all political prisoners. There are people in all of these places that have shown solidarity for Herman and Albert, and have an interest in how the growing prison industrial complex in America could impact their own country.

the ABOLITIONIST: What are some of the stories that you’ve heard on your travels about the fear of their countries importing a model like the US uses right now?

RKW: South Africa is one country that rejected it. Private prison was tried over there. In parts of England, they are concerned that the same types of problems that exist in America eventually existing in England. To some degree it does as a direct result of the linkage between the American and British governments. You know, it seems like it’s one big world, but it’s really small in a sense because so many people can connect in so short a period of time.

the ABOLITIONIST: Is there anything else you’d like to add before we wrap things up? Again, as I said before, this is going inside to about three to four hundred prisoners and also to community members who are trying to organize to end the prison industrial complex and create communities that are safe and just, and where people have the things they need to be what they could be rather than what certain people say they should be.

RKW: Like I said, I would tell a prisoner to get connected with people on the outside in some form or fashion. They can make their voices heard from the inside to bring about these changes. The way things are, especially for older prisoners like my two comrades Herman and Albert, we got to think in terms of getting them out through reform with a long-range strategy of abolishing the need for any prisons period.

DIFFICULTIES IN CHANGE: The task of bringing our consciousness to conformity with the radical changes in the world and achieving new ways of political thinking is highly complicated and often painful. It demands not only great political courage but also certain emotional readiness. It is a task made difficult by many of our traditions and norms. Difficulties arise not only from the fact that there are “visible” political and ideological obstacles, but also “invisible” psychological and emotional barriers. Traditional thinking naturally attempts to exclude painful and traumatizing new information. Psychological defenses permit one to operate with familiar and habitual concepts. They provide protection from rigorous intellectual engagement with the outstanding reality of the nuclear age: **MUTUAL VULNERABILITY.** —Steve Williams

CRITICAL-RESISTANCE INCITE! STATEMENT

GENDER VIOLENCE AND THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

We call social justice movements to develop strategies and analysis that address both state AND interpersonal violence, particularly violence against women. Currently, activists/movements that address state violence (such as anti-prison, anti-police brutality groups) often work in isolation from activists/movements that address domestic and sexual violence. The result is that women of color, who suffer disproportionately from both state and interpersonal violence, have become marginalized within these movements. It is critical that we develop responses to gender violence that do not depend on a sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic criminal justice system. It is also important that we develop strategies that challenge the criminal justice system and that also provide safety for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. To live violence-free lives, we must develop holistic strategies for addressing violence that speak to the intersection of all forms of oppression.

THE ANTI-VIOLENCE MOVEMENT HAS BEEN CRITICALLY IMPORTANT IN BREAKING THE SILENCE AROUND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND PROVIDING MUCH-NEEDED SERVICES TO SURVIVORS. However, the mainstream anti-violence movement has increasingly relied on the criminal justice system as the front-line approach toward ending violence against women of color. It is important to assess the impact of this strategy.

1. Law enforcement approaches to violence against women MAY deter some acts of violence in the short term. However, as an overall strategy for ending violence, criminalization has not worked. In fact, the overall impact of mandatory arrests laws for domestic violence have led to decreases in the number of battered women who kill their partners in self-defense, but they have not led to a decrease in the number of batterers who kill their partners. Thus, the law protects batterers more than it protects survivors.
2. The criminalization approach has also brought many women into conflict with the law, particularly women of color, poor women, lesbians, sex workers, immigrant women, women with disabilities, and other marginalized women. For instance, under mandatory arrest laws, there have been numerous incidents where police officers called to domestic incidents have arrested the woman who is being battered. Many undocumented women have reported cases of sexual and domestic violence, only to find themselves deported. A tough law and order agenda also leads to long punitive sentences for women convicted of killing their batterers. Finally, when public funding is channeled into policing and prisons, budget cuts for social programs, including women’s shelters, welfare and public housing are the inevitable side effect. These cutbacks leave women less able to escape violent relationships.
3. Prisons don’t work. Despite an exponential increase in the number of men in prisons, women are not any safer, and the rates of sexual assault and domestic violence have not decreased. In calling for greater police responses to and harsher sentences for perpetrators of gender violence, the anti-violence movement has fueled the proliferation of prisons which now lock up more people per capita in the U.S. than any other country. During the past fifteen years, the numbers of women, especially women of color in prison has skyrocketed. Prisons also inflict violence on the growing numbers of women behind bars. Slashing, suicide, the proliferation of HIV, strip searches, medical neglect and rape of prisoners has largely been ignored by anti-violence activists. The criminal justice system, an institution of violence, domination, and control, has increased the level of violence in society.
4. The reliance on state funding to support anti-violence programs has increased the professionalization of the anti-violence movement and alienated it from its community-organizing, social justice roots. Such reliance has isolated the anti-violence movement from other social justice movements that seek to eradicate state violence, such that it acts in conflict rather than in collaboration with these movements.
5. The reliance on the criminal justice system has taken power away from women’s ability to organize collectively to stop violence and has invested this power within the state. The result is that women who seek redress in the criminal justice system feel disempowered and alienated. It has also promoted an individualistic approach toward ending violence such that the only way people think they can intervene in stopping violence is to call the police. This reliance has shifted our focus from developing ways communities can collectively respond to violence.

IN RECENT YEARS, THE MAINSTREAM ANTI-PRISON MOVEMENT HAS CALLED IMPORTANT ATTENTION TO THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF CRIMINALIZATION AND THE BUILD-UP OF THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX. Because activists who seek to reverse the tide of mass incarceration and criminalization of poor communities and communities of color have not always centered gender and sexuality in their analysis or organizing, we have not always responded adequately to the needs of survivors of domestic and sexual violence.

1. Prison and police accountability activists have generally organized around and conceptualized men of color as the primary victims of state violence. Women prisoners and victims of police brutality have been made invisible by a focus on the war on our brothers and sons. It has failed to consider how women are affected as severely by state violence as men. The plight of women who are raped by INS officers or prison guards, for instance, has not received sufficient attention. In addition, women carry the burden of caring for extended family when family and community members are criminalized and warehoused. Several organizations have been established to advocate for women prisoners; however, these groups have been frequently marginalized within the mainstream anti-prison movement.
2. The anti-prison movement has not addressed strategies for addressing the rampant forms of violence women face in their everyday lives, including street harassment, sexual harassment at work, rape, and intimate partner abuse. Until these strategies are developed, many women will feel shortchanged by the movement. In addition, by not seeking alliances with the anti-violence movement, the anti-prison movement has sent the message that it is possible to liberate communities without seeking the well-being and safety of women.
3. The anti-prison movement has failed to sufficiently organize around the forms of state violence faced by LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, and Intersex) communities. LGBTI street youth and trans people in general are particularly vulnerable to police brutality and criminalization. LGBTI prisoners are denied basic human rights such as family visits from same sex partners, and same sex consensual relationships in prison are policed and punished.
4. While prison abolitionists have correctly pointed out that rapists and serial murderers comprise a small number of the prison population, we have not answered the question of how these cases should be addressed. The inability to answer the question is interpreted by many anti-violence activists as a lack of concern for the safety of women
5. The various alternatives to incarceration that have been developed by anti-prison activists have generally failed to provide sufficient mechanism for safety and accountability for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. These alternatives often rely on a romanticized notion of communities, which have yet to demonstrate their commitment and ability to keep women and children safe or seriously address the sexism and homophobia that is deeply embedded within them.

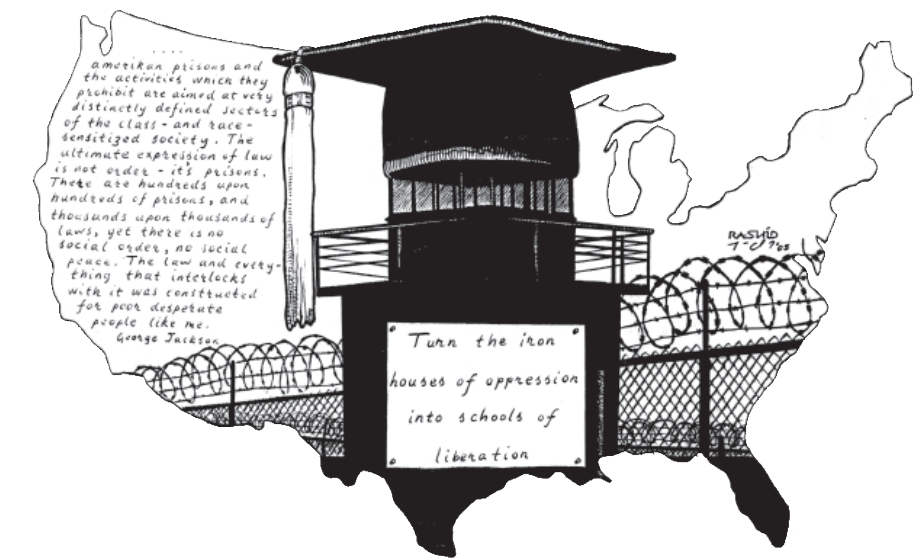
WE SEEK TO BUILD MOVEMENTS THAT NOT ONLY END VIOLENCE, BUT THAT CREATE A SOCIETY BASED ON RADICAL FREEDOM, MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY, AND PASSIONATE RECIPROCITY. IN THIS SOCIETY, SAFETY AND SECURITY WILL NOT BE PREMISED ON VIOLENCE OR THE THREAT OF VIOLENCE; IT WILL BE BASED ON A COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT TO GUARANTEEING THE SURVIVAL AND CARE OF ALL PEOPLES.

WE CALL ON SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS CONCERNED WITH ENDING VIOLENCE IN ALL ITS FORMS TO:

1. Develop community-based responses to violence that do not rely on the criminal justice system AND which have mechanisms that ensure safety and accountability for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. Transformative practices emerging from local communities should be documented and disseminated to promote collective responses to violence.
2. Critically assess the impact of state funding on social justice organizations and develop alternative fundraising strategies to support these organizations. Develop collective fundraising and organizing strategies for anti-prison and anti-violence organizations. Develop strategies and analysis that specifically target state forms of sexual violence.
3. Make connections between interpersonal violence, the violence inflicted by domestic state institutions (such as prisons, detention centers, mental hospitals, and child protective services), and international violence (such as war, military base prostitution, and nuclear testing).
4. Develop an analysis and strategies to end violence that do not isolate individual acts of violence (either committed by the state or individuals) from their larger contexts. These strategies must address how entire communities of all genders are affected in multiple ways by both state violence and interpersonal gender violence. Battered women prisoners represent an intersection of state and interpersonal violence and as such provide and opportunity for both movements to build coalitions and joint struggles.
5. Put poor/working class women of color in the center of their analysis, organizing practices, and leadership development. Recognize the role of economic oppression, welfare “reform,” and attacks on women workers’ rights in increasing women’s vulnerability to all forms of violence and locate anti-violence and anti-prison activism alongside efforts to transform the capitalist economic system.
6. Center stories of state violence committed against women of color in our organizing efforts.
7. Oppose legislative change that promotes prison expansion, criminalization of poor communities and communities of color and thus state violence against women of color, even if these changes also incorporate measure to support victims of interpersonal gender violence.
8. Promote holistic political education at the everyday level within our communities, specifically how sexual violence helps reproduce the colonial, racist, capitalist, heterosexist, and patriarchal society we live in as well as how state violence produces interpersonal violence within communities.
9. Develop strategies for mobilizing against sexism and homophobia WITHIN our communities in order to keep women safe.
10. Challenge men of color and all men in social justice movements to take particular responsibility to address and organize around gender violence in their communities as a primary strategy for addressing violence and colonialism. We challenge men to address how their own histories of victimization have hindered their ability to establish gender justice in their communities.
11. Link struggles for personal transformation and healing with struggles for social justice.

Over time, the PIC has interwoven itself into the communities of the US by establishing itself as a needed entity. As a result, and even in the smaller and more tightly knit lower class communities, people who otherwise would be inherently distrustful of government and/or law enforcement are quick to dial 911 on their next door neighbor...Politics, and the separation of class designs therein, have turned this from the exception into the norm. The effect on the community—that is the fabric of the US—is devastating. It vitiates any reconciliatory thought processes or the progression thereof. Ironically, the effect on the community (of now being distrustful and disbelieving of one another, while simultaneously finding truth in force-fed “Public Safety” rhetoric and the once distrusted public servant prostituting this rhetoric to their desired ends) is that it aides and abets in expanding governmental control, incarceration of its own daughters and sons, and of the PIC.

The guards union—the CCPOA—a labor union no less, is influencing social dynamics in California, which if not restrained or turned back altogether, will continue to advance a further separation of class. This cannot be allowed. It’s simple: contractually there is one prison guard for every six prisoners, six new prisoners, one more additional guard. The more prisoners, the more backroom legislation that secures prisoners for longer sentences and the more guards, money, and power of influence for their union. And with over a twenty-year history of “keeping” legislators, Sacramento is now stale with career politicians who are of two molds; the obsequiously grateful for the union’s lavish campaign contributions or those who are petrified at even the thought of any of the discomfort associated with opposition. It’s as simple as that. Yet for some unknown reason, instead of addressing the problem, “we” bicker about our own personal circumstances: the food, the clothing, and the length of our parole. But all the while knowing what is at the root of the problem, we fail to put our personal problems (being only important to ourselves, really) and allow the CCPOA to forge ahead unabated. A labor union? Allowed to freely dictate the way we as a freethinking and allegedly progressive society governs ourselves? California is allowing the CCPOA to legislate, and to do so for its own economic advantage. As a society we are permitting this labor union to further the already gross separation of classes, which will soon enough have far more disastrous impacts on the next generation. If an individual doesn’t head directly for the Peace Officer’s Academy straight out of high school, it’s for certain he or she will head for the most recently opened prison. And, unfortunately, if we continue to focus solely on our own dilemmas, then we (and the generation that follows) will remain serfs, nothing more than fodder for a state labor union, which disguises itself as Peace Officers, and the PIC they cling to for life. Be brave and heed Virgil’s words to Dante, “Here must you put by all division of spirit and gather your soul against all cowardice.” Dante gave away the security of the familiar and known, and tried something new. Yes, by all means, continue to challenge the Board of Prison Terms, and everything else along the way, but take someone else’s problems up with yours. Give “yourself” away and you’ll achieve more than you can imagine! —T. Ralbovsky, CSP



community-based interventions to violence: ALTERNATIVES TO CRIMINALIZATION

By Mimi Kim

I’ve worked in the anti-violence movement for over 15 years and witnessed the evolution of its position in relationship to the criminal justice system change from one of challenge to one of partnership. The reasons are many. As the movement has become more successful at attacking and “getting inside” the system, advocates have been invited to write legislation, give trainings, and “ride along” during domestic violence arrests. In 1994, the Violence Against Women Act, the first federal legislation regarding domestic violence, was passed as a part of the Crime Bill. This symbolized the movement’s willingness to embrace criminalization as a pragmatic strategy, for some, and a natural partnership, for others. Since that time, federal money has increased for domestic violence programs—often specifically requiring that these programs create formal partnerships with criminal justice institutions or engage in “pro-arrest policies.” I refer to this as the anti-violence movement’s “embeddedness” within criminal justice institutions across the country.

While many anti-violence advocates have resisted the pressure to succumb to wholesale cooptation by the state and the criminal justice system, many have stopped short of challenging criminalization of violent offenses, especially against women and children. Some believe that people, usually men, who violate women and children are too easily excused by the community, and that an end to violence can only come about through the criminal justice system, a system which would similarly excuse violence without the pressure of anti-violence advocates. Others understand the ineffectiveness and discrimination of the system, but believe that despite these imperfections their concern for the safety of women and children can be served best through state force. The bottom line is that many of us cannot even imagine that community members could bring about an effective end to violence. Alternatives are desirable in concept but impossible in the real world. Sound familiar?

The fact is that those of us looking for alternatives with respect to domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, or child abuse have found few examples of alternatives. Those of us creating our own alternatives have realized how difficult sustainable solutions to violence can be. What is needed is a collective, coordinated strategy towards solutions to violence that do not recreate oppressive conditions and do not rely upon victims/survivors of violence to just putting up with it.

The joint Critical Resistance-Incite! Statement offered an historic coming together of two often adversarial movements—the anti-violence movement and the anti-PIC or abolitionist movement. It’s no surprise that Incite! as a woman of color-led organization prioritized this alliance as one which could challenge state violence and interpersonal violence as a unified movement—one which needs to support the struggle against all of these forms of violence without sacrificing one to the other.

The next step is what many of us are now undertaking—creating concrete institutional support for the creation of alternative interventions to violence. Without concrete alternatives, women will continue calling the police—even if they feel that it is ineffective or offensive—because they find no other options. Otherwise, women and children will continue to be beaten, harassed, abused, raped, and killed because as a community we have failed to create realistic solutions.

Creative Interventions is one of the organizations committed to advancing our movement towards the creation of alternative options and the widespread distribution of these options to communities. The National Story Collecting Project is currently collecting successful stories of community-based interventions to interpersonal forms of violence. The Project is currently piloting with Bay Area interviewers and is set for a national launch this summer. Generation FIVE and DataCenter are collaborative partners. Other organizations such as Justice Now, Free Battered Women, Asian Women’s Shelter, and Shimtuh (Korean Domestic Violence Program) are all participating organizations, training staff and members as interviewers, and collecting stories among members of their communities.

Personally, I had been searching for these stories. The handful that I’ve heard, make me certain that alternatives are possible. By putting these stories together we’ll have powerful information to help us understand what folks have done on-the-ground in real situations of violence that makes interventions successful or not, and giving all of us concrete evidence that these alternatives are possible. These stories will feed our efforts to create alternative options and institutions to support them. Making interventions to violence an everyday practice accessible to everyday people will take the power away from the state. It will convince those who care about the safety of women and children that communities have the capacity and the courage to prioritize and provide this safety.

If you’re interested in becoming a participant or being involved in the Project, please contact Creative Interventions at stories@creative-interventions.org, write to 1904 Franklin St., Suite 200, Oakland, CA 94612, or call 510-593-5330.

GENERATION five

PREPARING FOR COMMUNITY-BASED JUSTICE RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Generation Five (g5) cannot envision a world without prisons unless we address the question of what we do about people who sexually abuse children. Likewise, we cannot end child sexual abuse (CSA) without developing community justice alternatives to state violence.

The sensationalizing of those who have sexually abused children has fueled public fear and public policy that violates human and civil rights. Evoking public imaginations of “men who sodomize children”, the criminal legal system has passed policies, like DNA testing, that are eventually broadly applied. In New York City, I’ve witnessed discussions on extending DNA testing to those arrested for drug use and even jumping subway turnstiles with claims that these populations are a pool in which sex offenders might be found. Combined with other attempts to criminalize poor communities and communities of color, policies around CSA have opened the door for increased public surveillance, invasiveness, repression and incarceration.

We strongly align with the abolitionist movement in seeking community-based justice alternatives to incarceration and challenging the exploitation and racism of the prison industrial complex (PIC) and the criminal legal and public systems that feed it. We are against the violation of rights experienced by those who perpetrate CSA in prisons and their communities, and understand that the manipulation of people’s fear around CSA that fuels the PIC does not make our communities safer.

However, g5 also struggles with two specific challenges in organizing alternative justice approaches to CSA. The first is the contradiction between people’s political commitments and their emotional responses to CSA (“I want to abolish prisons but I’ll castrate anyone who violates my child”). During a presentation to a committed abolitionist organization on CSA and alternative justice, several activists approached me at a break, one shared that if someone ever violated her little sister that she would want them killed. Another shared that she would think about calling the police or child protective services. These are reasonable and common responses when faced with the horrifying possibility of someone sexually violating a child that you love. Nonetheless, it is a weakness in our goals and movements that our only options seem to be vigilantism or relying on the systems of policing and imprisonment that we know only continue the cycle of violence.

The second challenge is an unintentional minimization of CSA for the political goal of not demonizing those who perpetrate it. In conversations with our comrades in the PIC abolitionist movement we have been challenged to build effective forms of accountability for people who have sexually abused children. There is sometimes an avoidance of the nature of the violation involved in CSA in an attempt to humanize those who perpetrate CSA. Instead, g5 holds out the possibility of facing the reality of the abuse while maintaining the humanity of those who sexually abuse children. In order to align our emotions and political commitments we must build accountability processes that address the specific incidences of CSA and the broader dynamics of power that CSA reflects.

This involves navigating a tension between the anti-PIC movement and the mainstream anti-violence movement. While the second wave feminist movement of the 1960’s and 70’s gained important ground, most of the benefit was experienced by white, middle class women. Many of the experiences and leadership of working class women and women of color, as well as socialist and communist women, were compromised and eventually silenced in the illusion of “mainstream” gains. As a result, a core organizing strategy of this movement was to develop laws and a public legal system that could administer, fund and partner with community-based violence prevention programs that feed those who had harmed others into the PIC, offering no alternatives to addressing violence outside of this system.

The reality is that “child protective” and criminal legal systems most intensely impact poor communities of color. Within these systems, women and children are often not believed and blamed for their experiences of violence. As people consistently share with g5, their experiences within the system are often as traumatic as the abuse itself. As a result, community-based organizations

emerged to raise awareness and provide crisis intervention that focused on the survivor, limiting the scope of action to survivor safety and healing. While this is a critical priority, community-based accountability must also focus on transforming the behavior of the person who is violent (not just on the capacity of the survivor “to leave”—something that is not often desired or possible for both adult or child survivors of intimate and community violence).

Some of the more progressive programs within the domestic and sexual violence movements, particularly those led by women of color in culturally diverse communities, are designed to empower survivors by shifting power back to them in the process of stopping the violence. Although there is an intention to shift broader community power inequity and abuses that this violence reflects, it does not often translate into concrete programs, campaigns and organizing. Rather than challenging systemic state and economic violence and exploitation, even the most progressive of sexual and domestic violence programs remain in relationship with public systems to varying degrees, most notably through funding.

Against this backdrop, g5 is seeking to create community justice alternatives that respond to and prevent CSA. G5’s vision is to end CSA over the next five generations. We understand CSA as a form of violence that intersects with multiple forms of family, community, economic and state oppression. Our principles and organizing practices reflect this reality.

Because most CSA happens in our family and community networks, we see this movement as necessarily being grounded in local communities. At a local level, g5 organizes towards *building individual and community capacity* to respond to and prevent CSA, without relying on the criminal justice and child welfare systems, or individualizing CSA as simply a mental health issue. We seek partnerships with activists, community organizers, organizations and institutions committed to finding justice alternatives in place of public system responses to intimate violence. In particular, we are building with movements that integrate anti-violence work within broader liberation struggles to end racism, poverty, sexism, heterosexism, adultism, economic exploitation and other forms of oppression.

G5 seeks to further these goals through a transformative justice framework that secures individual justice in cases of CSA while transforming the social conditions that perpetuate CSA. This community-based, transformative justice model promotes the safety and healing of survivors, accountability and transformation for those who have sexually abused children, and safety and responsibility for bystanders and the community.

G5 is building frameworks, developing community dialogue tools, training organizers and partnering with other movements and organizations to creatively experiment with alternative forms of community-based justice that consciously seek to dismantle power inequities and transform both interpersonal and state violence. Through our Community Response Project, we have trained over 120 community activists and organizers in building the capacity of their networks, communities, professions, and movements to prevent and respond to CSA without relying on public systems.

Transformative justice (TJ) is a long-term project in response to this need. We are struggling to balance the urgent need for us to experiment with alternative justice approaches in partnership with our trained organizers and the responsibility to be truly prepared to support our organizers in developing sustainable and effective TJ responses that do not reinforce existing power inequalities and abuses or create new ones.

For example, we were recently asked to support a family in holding a member of their family accountable for his sexual

abuse of several children in the family. This person is also a pastor at a local church. As the family came together to discuss a strategy for confrontation, it became clear that this person had also sexually abused several people in the church. The members of the family that he is most invested in are willing to hold him accountable and support him in this process. Initially, some members of the family wanted to “kick his ass” and “send his ass to jail,” but through the leadership of a family member coached by g5, the family is moving to hold him accountable and demand that he gets into therapy.

The family will also need support in holding the church accountable (collusion is likely given his status and that this has been happening with various church members’ suspicions). It’s likely that the church will call for punishment when collusion and denial are no longer an option. The family is in a unique position as bystanders to organize for a different outcome, which holds the person responsible for the sexual abuse and his church accountable without engaging the criminal legal system.

From this example we can see how important the role of bystanders is in transformative justice. Bystanders are the people that surround those immediately experiencing or perpetrating violence and, therefore, are in the best position to leverage those relationships to make a difference. We focus on mobilizing bystanders for several reasons. First, we do not want the responsibility for responding to and preventing CSA to lie on the shoulders of children. Furthermore, it is not the responsibility of adult survivors, even though they often play a critical role in the justice and violence prevention process. Secondly, because CSA is a form of violence that reflects other systems of oppression, we believe that the behavior of the entire community needs to shift in order to respond to CSA with a commitment to justice and prevention.

It is critical that the grassroots, radical anti-violence movement and the anti-PIC/abolitionist movement come together to experiment with alternative and replicable approaches to respond to and prevent CSA and other forms of intimate violence. Our ability to mobilize our communities towards collective action depends on our ability to stop the violence that disables so many from individual and collective resistance. Without addressing the sexism, racism and economic exploitation that reinforces intimate and community violence, we cannot effectively prevent it.

For us, the process of creating alternative justice that challenges other forms of domination and oppression that affect our communities is a long-term process that we hope to begin the work of in this generation. We need to have activists and organizers that are prepared to build alternative forms of accountability and transformative justice in their communities and the larger social justice movement. Without this commitment to collective accountability and addressing the root cause of violence, we will surely reinforce the power inequities that perpetuate CSA. This means organizing liberation struggles that understand the connections between interpersonal, state, and corporate violence.

We look forward to working in solidarity with you.



HEROES GROW ON TREES

The major problem facing us, as a collective entity, has to do with an embracing of limited knowledge. It is this propensity which spawns the wrong thinking characterizing the multitude of social ills plaguing our homeland. And, as we are all victims of the conditioning put in place by the gray men (what all people are doomed to become when losing the compassion, gratitude and oneness humans thrive on), it may be wise to look outside the norm, when pursuing avenues leading to healing the hearts, minds and spirits of the disenfranchised.

In the spirit of sharing, here are a few words concerning an alternative to institutionalization: I learned of this concept from my great grandmother, as a child in the ‘50s. She was in her late 80s at the time and given to infrequent periods of speech. I guess old folks spend a lot of time looking back over the years upon which their lives now rest. As she was the product of Indian people fleeing relocation of Andrew Jackson’s Indian policy of the 1830s. She grew up in the secluded bayou country of South Louisiana where the urban squalor surrounding her at my house must have been very difficult.

At any rate, she told me of the way our relations used to deal with those having committed offenses against the People. She told me that in the past, before Jackson’s time, there was no need for jails or mental hospitals. This was due to the concept of sanctuary. It was based on sacred principles aimed at maintaining harmony, individually and collectively. Though this way of thinking was common amongst all the People, the duty of maintaining the relevant teachings fell to our holy people (both women and men). These caretakers lived in what were known as White or Peace Villages. And it is from this limited knowledge the gray men coined the term Peace Chief: relative to the indigenous peoples of the Southeast.

Any time someone broke the peace, the family and friends would come together and give that person their help. This support generally led to a stay in the Peace Village. The thing here is all actions are a result of the thoughts we carry around: negative patterns of thought give way to actions resulting in conflict. So, it was the business of these sanctuaries to remove the illusion of wrong thinking and to restore clarity of mind.

This was done via diet, movement (physical exercise), meditation, purification rituals (what is incorrectly called sweating or the sweat lodge), community celebrations and other means designed to cultivate right relationship with others. This generally took about 1 year and then the person was successfully reintegrated into his/her community. By the way, this was extended to other races, if the need was great enough.

I was also taught that we are all twigs, leaves, branches and roots of the same tree: the Tree of Life. That we begin deep in the Earth and progress upwards. At some point, each of us realizes a completion, a connection to all living things, don’t cha know. And in this realization, we become champions of the people...heroes, you might say. So, you see, heroes do grow on trees. But, the gray men would have us think otherwise, eh?

All my Relations,
Chula (The Fox), Soledad



HOW ARE PRISONS PART OF A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE?

Elaine: We have to look at the amount of violence that permeates this country in general. It was begun with violence. The theft of this land and the murder of the indigenous people, almost genocide, and then it grew on violence. The violence of 250 years, of a full people, the African-American people enslaved brutally in this country as chattel. So that we have a violent history and a violent culture, so what we have to do is to understand the ambiance in which this kind of violence is bred.

Alice: The violence ingrained in this culture is magnified in the institutions that make up our criminal justice system --- the police, the courts, child protective services, and the new department of homeland security, which includes the INS, border patrol, and military detention centers.

Ruthie: The US is a country that has always been at war, as long as it has existed. One of the kinds of key cultural beliefs that all Americans embrace, but few think about, is the notion that the key to safety is aggression. So we have a country that’s culture is based in aggression as the norm, and the US has proposed that the insecurity that people feel in their everyday lives can be solved through domestic aggression, which would be putting people into prison, criminalizing them, and putting them into prison.

Alice: The way we use language in public discourse creates a dichotomy between us and them, which is then used to justify violating and dehumanizing the “other.” I mean in this country this framework has made it possible or prisons to become such a pervasive mechanism of oppression and alienation. As someone from a country in the ‘global south’, I also see this framework used on a global scale to oppress people in other countries.

Elaine: Well I think the first thing we have to do is define what is crime, and I say that because crime is a political question; it is not a social question or a moral question. When we go into Iraq and we murder a bunch of people in the name of so-called freedom or in fact oil, we don’t say that the US has committed mass murder but in fact it is mass murder. When we go into Somalia with this theory that we’re going to deliver the children food but we have black hawk helicopters there to kill the people for their oil, we don’t say we’re there as thieves and murderers, we say we’re there to help the little children. So we have to know what crime is in the first place.

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ORGANIZATIONS

American Friends Service Committee

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Center for Community Alternatives

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Community Holistic Circle Healing

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interview with BONNIE KERNESS & MASAI EHEHOSI

The Abolitionist interviewed Bonnie Kerness and Masai Ehehosi of the American Friends Service Committee’s Prison Watch Program about successes and pitfalls in creating alternatives to the prison industrial complex (PIC).

Masai Ehehosi is a former prisoner and member of the Black Liberation Army, who has been involved in struggles around independence of the New Afrikan Nation for the last 30 years. He works with the International Committee in support of Imam Jamil Al-Amin, and is on the National Organizing Body for Critical Resistance.

Bonnie Kerness has been a community organizer and an advocate working on human rights issues since the 1960s. She came out of the southern Civil Rights Movement after working with the NAACP and the Highlander Institute. Since the 1970s she has been working on behalf of prisoners and their families.

THIS ISSUE IS ABOUT CREATING ALTERNATIVES TO THE CURRENT SYSTEM THAT WE HAVE NOW. HOW CAN WE CREATE ALTERNATIVES IN THE MIDST OF THIS ECONOMIC SYSTEM, WHICH, IN MANY WAYS, CONTROLS US?

BK: I think we start, then, with our own neighborhoods, because on a national level, what you’re asking for becomes overwhelming. But on a local level, it becomes extremely doable in terms of any problems I might have with my neighbor.

ME: I agree with working on the neighborhood level. I think people really need to do it, for one thing, to help deal with some of the contradictions among people in those communities as opposed to throwing out the assumptions that everyone’s thinking and desiring the same thing. At some point they may, but not now. I also think that on a local level it’s much easier for us to actually work on ways of providing real safety.

YOU’VE SPOKEN REALLY WELL ABOUT HOW THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM WORKS TO DISAPPEAR CERTAIN TYPES OF PEOPLE. CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT YOU MEAN BY THAT AND TALK ABOUT WHY YOU THINK THE UNITED STATES HAS AN INTEREST IN DISAPPEARING CERTAIN TYPES OF PEOPLE?

ME: Some folks they need to disappear, because of their ability to put forward positions the people can relate to and their ability to motivate folks to act on them is such that the US feels like it’s better to just get rid of them if they can’t outright kill them, and they’re not above that, then you put them away in units where no one will see them for many, many years. Or if they do, the contact is so limited it’s not that effective. In other cases, and I think we have a whole lot more of those now, there’s the disappearance of those who may not even be that conscious, but they have that potential to be. They’re not coming back out here to the neighborhoods; the US doesn’t want them out here.

BK: I think the genesis of control units, was a pretty interesting thing to watch. When those young radicals of my generation, you know the American Indian Movement, the Puerto Rican Independentistas, Black Liberation Army formations, Black Panthers, white radicals, were arrested and put into prisons, many of them found themselves in isolation. This was an experiment in behavior modification. In some ways, it didn’t work, because many of those youngsters today still hold firm to those beliefs some 30 years later. In some ways it did work. It kept them from teaching. It kept them from imparting information. It kept them from imparting any kind of revolutionary attitude. And that end of it worked so well that it became replicated to the point where most of the prisons being built now are isolation unit prisons. Originally it was the political prisoners, and then we saw Islamic militants in the isolation units. Jailhouse lawyers, prisoner activists, and now huge populations of the mentally ill are in those prisons. We’re getting testimonies from children being put in isolation. The juvenile facilities are so overcrowded that they will take the younger ones, the 12, 13, and 14-year-olds, and keep them in isolation so they have nothing to do with the older youngsters. And this is what we know. I think that there’s a lot that we don’t know about people being disappeared.

ME: You have to kill that part of the group that desires even to separate. And in the case of people of African descent here, those people who have advocated for self-determination have basically always been the target. It’s genocide, you know, and when institutions talk about red, black and green as gang colors, when they talk about organizing around certain issues as a gang issue, then they’re talking about genocide, because everything relating to anything with our people is considered to be gang activity.

IN THE ‘60S AND ‘70S, WHEN THERE WERE MUCH FEWER PEOPLE IN CAGES IN THIS COUNTRY, PEOPLE WERE BEGINNING TO PUT ALTERNATIVES IN PLACE. IF YOU CAN, TALK ABOUT HOW SOME OF THOSE ALTERNATIVE MODELS WORKED, OR DIDN’T WORK, AND IF YOU THINK THERE’S SOME WAY OF REPLICATING PARTS OF THEM TODAY.

BK: Well, I think that the current criminal justice system works exactly as it’s designed to work. They don’t want any alternatives. This is custody and control and keeps as many people incapacitated for purposes of social control as possible. There are many alternatives that work. A huge number of people who are in prisons are mentally ill. Well, there are incredibly obvious alternatives to treating the mentally ill than prisons.

A huge amount [of those in prison] are youngsters. There’s better schooling, stronger communities—these are alternatives. Jobs for young people are alternatives. I think our education system is a feeder system for juveniles and we need to begin taking a look at different kinds of educational systems.

Decriminalization was an alternative that worked very well. Halfway houses were alternatives that worked very well. There were many things available in the ‘60s and ‘70s prior to this politicization of prisons. I also think politicians realized that to keep people in prison made money. Those bodies are a money maker just like it was in chattel slavery. This is what we’ve done with what the government considers an extraneous population. The 15-year-old who I might have to provide extra education for or extra community resources for can make money. Once put in the criminal justice system, that child generates \$30,000 a year. The guard gets paid, the administrator gets paid, the food company gets paid, and the medical company gets paid. So I think that the state of mind of the department of corrections that takes over would have to very much be changed for those alternatives to be able to emerge. Drug courts are an alternative. Training the police is an alternative. The police determine who gets arrested and who doesn’t get arrested. Most of the arrests that take place should not. There are other ways to handle troublesome people.

ME: I also have a problem with a lot of folks now over-relying on the legal system. I think that’s where the human rights thing comes in. If in fact we have a human right, we struggle for that. If in fact the law catches up, that’s cool, but it don’t mean we stop struggling then. It’s ridiculous for me, for us, to sit there and watch people starving to death in the streets. To see people starving, to see people without decent medical care, and then to be talking about how we going to wait for 90 years for the legal system to work. No. We do what we have to do. Again, if they want to save face, they change the legal system.

When I think about some of the models of the ‘60s and ‘70s, I think about the breakfast program, I think about the housing I worked in. I also think about the response of the state and the fact that we weren’t really that prepared. To follow those models now, I think we really, really need to learn that it’s a war. We’ve said that before, but then it was like we started being real careful, so we’re not passing on what people passed on in real wars. It don’t mean we all walked around armed all day but without that mentality, I think we’re going to keep repeating the same thing, you know?

And I think organizers and activists really have a responsibility to study much more than some do. You know, if we’re going to talk about organizing now, there’s no reason in the world why folks aren’t really into something like COINTELPRO. Not just something that they heard about or they read a few things and went by. They really need to look at it so we don’t repeat it. Older folks is going to remember some of those eras and they’re not going to get involved in certain things like they did before. It don’t mean that they’re not interested, but they’re not going to go out there and do something crazy.

When I first got out of the military and I was looking for something to be involved in. I was in Brooklyn and I was working with this Third World group, and they suggested I go to a place called Ocean Hill Brownsville Tenants Association. We took over a building and it was supposed to go to a community group, but the community group was violating their standards.

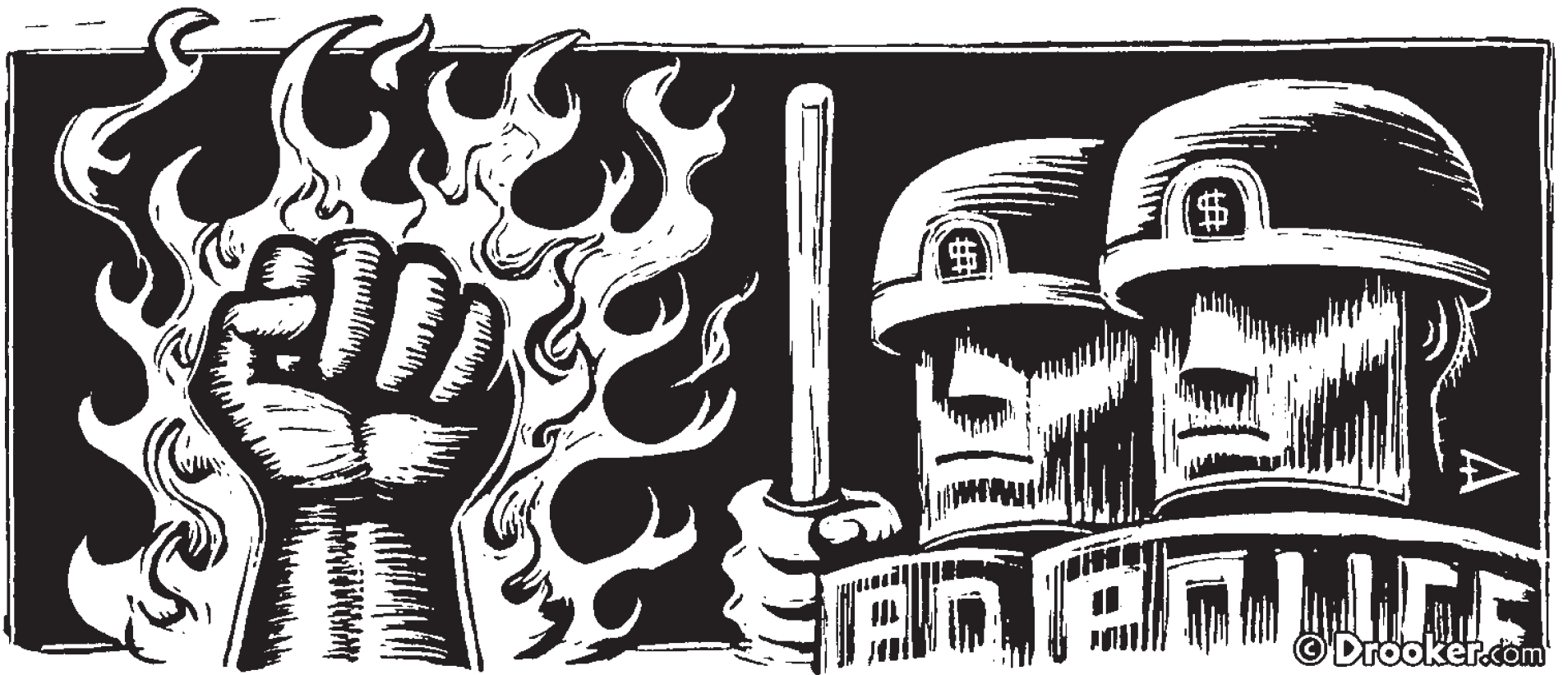
So we took over the building, we brought in a revolutionary electrician, some of us borrowed power from outside sources, which we didn’t have, but a lesson I learned from that was that when people struggle for something, and they really thought it was theirs, they wasn’t giving it back. But it was actually the people working together that I think developed more unity and a positive political atmosphere as opposed to the slogans. When you came in the building it was clear which way people went. You know, you’d see Che, Malcolm, or whatever, but it wasn’t a lot of sloganeering. It was like stuff people could work towards.

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MAKING POLICE OBSOLETE

POLICING IN THE US HAS CONSISTENTLY TARGETED SPECIFIC COMMUNITIES WITHIN SOCIETY FOR SOCIAL CONTROL. HISTORICALLY, THE TARGET COMMUNITIES ARE MADE UP OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO ARE SYSTEMATICALLY DENIED ACCESS TO THE POWER AND PROTECTION MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE STATE, AND WHO HAVE POSED THE MOST DIRECT CHALLENGES TO THE POWER STRUCTURE. THE PRACTICE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT MAINTAINS AND SOLIDIFIES ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL POWER DIFFERENCES THAT ARE OVERWHELMINGLY BASED ON RACE, ETHNICITY, NATIONALITY AND GENDER.



There are countless examples from the slavery period to the present that illustrate the way law enforcement has made poor people and people of color's lives as disorganized and unstable as possible. From the Black Codes and Chinese Exclusion Act to the Gang Violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Act (Prop 21) and Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA), policing has been successful in stifling community empowerment through surveillance, infiltration, intimidation, threats, physical violence, and murder.

The recent trend toward different types of community policing is another way that policing targets the communities it hopes to repress. In the early 1970s, the National Sheriffs' Association began the National Neighborhood Watch Program, based directly on racist sociological studies that talked about communities of color and poor communities as unstable and pathological. Using white, suburban neighborhoods as the ideal model, neighborhood watch programs make neighbors an extension of the local police force by encouraging them to report any suspicious activities to the police. Black and brown people, poor people, homeless people, and unsupervised young people are most often those reported as being suspect. In exchange for this information, the city gives the neighborhood funds to do "community improvement" projects.

The neighborhood watch model co-opts programs that were originally set up by the Black Panther Party, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Movement, and the Women's Rights Movement to deal with problems within the community as part of their struggle for self-determination. Taken out of this context, neighborhood watch models further infuse already powerful communities (white suburbanites) with additional entitlement and suspicion, reaffirming the knowledge that policing works in their service. This model of neighborhood watching plays different communities against each other while reinforcing the state's common sense about who and what is criminal.

On the other hand, communities that are most commonly targeted by policing are offered a different kind of community policing. Residents are offered additional beat cops and are lured into policing their own communities with a promise of financial stability and an opportunity to "do better" for their neighborhoods. The very nature of policing, however, leads to pressure to act even more brutally toward one's own communities to prove loyalty to the police force of which they have become part.

However, the social control exerted through policing has always been met with resistance. The greater the level of self-determination within a community, the better situated the community is to make police obsolete. Community organizers and freedom fighters have a dual task when it comes to policing: to create practices that deal with harm and conflict in the community and to actively resist the repressive methods police use to economically and politically disempower poor communities and communities of color. Examples of these efforts include: neighborhood police monitors organized by political and street organizations, concerned mothers, or neighbors tired of the repressive presence of police forces on their blocks, independent community councils that mediate conflicts between neighbors, networks of neighbors and community safe houses that intervene in instances of intimate violence, and homeless advocates who reclaim unused housing and transform it into housing for the poor. Kristian Williams' book *Enemies in Blue* historicizes the development of modern policing, helping us to understand its evolving relationship with US capitalism and laying bare its main duty as the maintenance of profit through the policing of racial, gender and class inequities. The book also chronicles the history of resistance to police violence and provides strategies we might draw on to further our goals of abolition. The following excerpts come from the final chapter of the book:

MAKING POLICE OBSOLETE

The assumption that the police represent a social inevitability ignores rules of logic: If we accept that police forces arose at a particular point in history to address specific social conditions, then it follows that social change could also eliminate the institution.

It is a bad habit of mind, a form of power-worship, to assume that things must be as they are, that they will continue to be as they have been. It soothes the conscience of the privileged, dulls the will of the oppressed. The first step toward change is the understanding that things can be different. This is my principal recommendation then: We must recognize the possibility of a world without police.

There is a question that haunts every critic of police—namely, the question of crime, and what to do about it. This is a real concern, and it deserves to be taken seriously. The fact is, the police *do* provide an important community service—offering protection against crime. They do not do this job well, or fairly, and it is not their chief function, but they do it, and this brings them legitimacy. Even people who dislike and fear them often feel that they need the cops. Maybe we can do without omnipresent surveillance, racial profiling, and institutionalized violence, but most people have been willing to accept these features of policing, if somewhat grudgingly, because they have been packaged together with things we cannot do without—crime control, security, and public safety. It is not enough, then, to relate to police power only in terms of repression; we must also remember the promise of protection, since this legitimates the institution.

Because the state uses this protective function to justify its own violence, the replacement of the police institution is not only a goal of social change, but also a means of achieving it. The challenge is to create another system that can protect us from crime, and can do so better, more justly, with the respect for human rights, and with a minimum of bullying. What is really needed, in short is a shift in the responsibility for public safety, away from the state and toward the community.

COMMUNITY DEFENSE

Luckily, history does not leave us without guidance. The obvious place to look for community defense models is in the places where distrust of the police, and active resistance to police power, has been most acute. There is a close connection between resistance to police power and the need to develop alternative means of securing public safety.

In the United States, the police have faced resistance mainly from two sources: workers and people of color, especially African Americans. This is unsurprising given the class-control and racist functions that cops have fulfilled since their beginning. The job of controlling poor people and people of color has brought the cops into continual conflict with these parts of society. It has bred resistance, sometimes in form of outright combat—riots, shoot-outs, sniper attacks. At other times resistance has led to political efforts to curtail police power, or direct attempts to replace policing with other means of preserving order.

The role of the police in breaking strikes did not escape the attention of workers on the picketline. In the early twentieth century, labor unions worked strenuously to oppose the creation of the state police and to dissolve them where they existed. These efforts led, for a time, to restrictions on the use of state cops against strikers, but this victory has been practically forgotten today. More

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Kerness & Ehehosi continued

BK: I’d love to put in a plug for some of the materials that were developed during that time by the revolutionary and progressive thinkers and that are still around. It’s amazing. There’s probably a collection of 200 historical pamphlets that were developed during that time that some of us have access to. And I know that when I began as an organizer, I was mentored. I was trained. I had to read. There were certain things that were expected of me as I was handed from four or five different sets of organizers. I think that the young organizers of today have so much to layer over what the older generation of organizers has done.

HAVE YOU SEEN EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE STARTING TO CREATE ALTERNATIVES TO THE PIC WHILE INSIDE PRISONS? HOW CAN WE START QUICKLY BUILDING TO THAT CRITICAL POINT WHEN PEOPLE REALLY START BOTH UNDERSTANDING AND RESISTING THESE SYSTEMS?

BK: I think that wherever prisoners can get away with it, there is organizing going on. There is teaching going on. They are passing along political philosophies. They are passing along a new understanding of human rights. A lot of the letters and telephone calls that we get speak to this, so that we know it’s going on. I think that it’s in a very much less organized way and in a more secret way because of the issue of isolation. It’s much more difficult. I am seeing pockets of family members organizing as advocates throughout the country and calling us for technical assistance. I’m seeing a different level of interest from the media.

ME: Like Bonnie said, we get a lot of those letters from prisoners who want to organize, and their families too, and I’m thinking that a lot of times it’s, like, harder for prisoners to organize than it was before. It’s kind of good when they realize it, and know where and how they can. Because if they are going to organize, it does have to be a little bit quieter. I think it’s very important for people on the outside to know, because a lot of times they keep making suggestions for people to organize, but again, we ain’t really seeing a lot of folks out here organizing to stop those isolation units when they [prisoners] are put in there. They [people on the outside] are not putting pressure on the state.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO USE REFORM TOWARDS THE LARGER GOAL OF A REVOLUTION? WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR IDEAS AND THOUGHTS ABOUT THAT BECAUSE IT SEEMS TO BE A WAR?

BK: Non-violence in the South was a strategy. I didn’t know too many non-violent people in the southern Civil Rights Movement, you know, but that was a strategy. As long as the over all goal is clear and the over all philosophy is clear (I know where I’m going, I know where I want to get to). How we get there, or the different levels of strategies which are used at different times in history depends upon your support, depends upon your forces above ground and underground. So you may just have different levels. So you may have a strategy: I’m going to do legislative stuff for the next six months, even though you know that’s 1/10 of where I’m going in a year.

Obsolete continued

significant, for the purposes of this discussion, are the unions’ efforts to keep order when class warfare displaced the usual authorities.

The classic example is the Seattle General Strike of 1919. Coming to the aid of a shipbuilders’ strike, 110 union locals declared a citywide sympathy strike and 100,000 workers participated. Almost at once the city’s economy halted and the strike committee found itself holding more power than the city government.

The strike faced three major challenges: starvation, state repression, and the squeamishness of union leaders. Against the first, the strikers themselves set about insuring that the basic needs of the populations were met. Recognizing that conditions could quickly degenerate into panic, and not wanting to rely on the police, the Labor War Veteran’s Guard was created to keep the peace and discourage disorder. Its instructions were written on a blackboard at its headquarters: The purpose of this organization is to preserve law and order without the use of force. No volunteer will have any police power or be allowed to carry weapons of any sort, but to use persuasion only.

While the strike did not end in victory, it did demonstrate the possibility of working-class power, the power to shut down the city, and also the power to run it for the benefit of the people rather than for company profit.

As early as 1957, Robert Williams armed the NAACP chapter in Monroe, North Carolina, and successfully repelled attacks from the Ku Klux Klan and the police. Soon other self-defense groups appeared in Black Communities throughout the South. The largest of these was the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Williams and the Deacons influenced what became the most developed program of the period: the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. The Panthers, most famously, “patrolled pigs.” Visibly carrying guns, they followed police through the Black ghetto with the explicit aim of preventing police brutality and informing citizens of their rights.

The Panthers also sought to meet the community’s needs in other ways—providing medical care, giving away shoes and clothing, federal school children breakfast, setting up housing cooperatives, transporting the families of prisoners for visitation days, and offering classes during the summer at “Liberation Schools.” These “survival programs” sought to meet the need that the state and capitalist economy were neglecting, at the same time aligning the community with the Party and drawing both into opposition with the existing power structure. The Panthers also took seriously the threat of crime, and sought to address the fears of the community they served. With this in mind, they organized the Seniors Against a Fearful Environment (SAFE), an escort and bussing service in which young Blacks escorted the elderly on their business around the city.

THE BIG PICTURE

Modest demands can be the seeds of major upheaval.

The demands for human rights, community control, for an end to harassment and brutality—the basic requirements of justice—ultimately pit us against the ideology, structure, interests, and ambitions of the police. The modern police institution is at its base racist, elitist, undemocratic, authoritarian, and violent. These are the institution’s major features, and it did not acquire them by mistake.

The order that the police preserve is the order of the state, the order of capitalism, the order of White supremacy. These are the forces that require police protection. These are the forces that created the police, that support them, sustain them, and guide them. These are the ends the police serve. They are among the most powerful influences in American society, and some of the most deeply rooted.

In this sense, our society cannot exist without police. But this needn’t be the end of the story. A different society is possible.

Excerpted from *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America*, by Kristian Williams (Soft Skull Press, 2004).

The next edition of the ABOLITIONIST

will explore the relationship between labor, globalization and the PIC

SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Have you ever worked for a prison industry? What was your experience? What do you think about how prisons make and spend their money? What do you think about the relationship between prison industries and industries in free world settings? How do maquiladoras resemble prison industries? How are they different? What do you think about private prisons run for profit and corporations whose products and services are made more profitable by exploiting prisoner labor (e.g. telemarketing, apparel, and computers)? What lessons should we learn from prisoners’ past attempts to unionize? What economic factors do you think lead to imprisonment and immigrant detention? What do think about the US exporting its prison system internationally?

DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE IS: SEPTEMBER 7, 2005

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES FOR THE ABOLITIONIST

the ABOLITIONIST accepts:

- Reproducible artwork (desperately needed!)
- Letters (250 words)
- Short Articles (250-750 words)
- Questions you have about abolition
- Strategies for coming home (jailhouse lawyering or other)
- Useful resources with contact information and description
- Important legal and administrative news
- International, national, and local organizing efforts and prison news

Note that we WILL edit your piece for content, length and clarity unless you tell us not to! If you do not want your piece edited, write a note on your submission indicating that no changes should be made. In this case, however, it might not be used. Also clearly note if you want us to print your full name and address, just your initials and city, or to simply have it remain anonymous. Unfortunately, we will not be able to respond to or publish every submission we receive and will be unable to return them unless prior arrangements are made. What we can promise is that we will read everything that comes in and use it to inform our overall work.

Once again, the DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE IS: SEPTEMBER 7, 2005. Please let us know if you would like to be involved in producing the paper, OR if you have questions about what to write for the paper. Also, please forward family members and friends’ mailing and email (this option is cheaper for us) addresses who you want to receive the newspaper or who might want to get directly involved in working on it. We are still in the process of securing funding for this project. If you would like to contribute, please send money or stamps to: CRITICAL RESISTANCE/JUSTICE NOW, 1904 FRANKLIN STREET, SUITE 504, OAKLAND, CA 94612.

In solidarity,
The Abolitionist Editorial Collective

Currently CR does not have the capacity to provide legal services, job placement, or housing placement