



Barrel action outside Governor's mansion, courtesy of Florida Prisoner Solidarity.

The Abolitionist: *What key elements of power were you trying to shift? What avenues did you take?*

Oloth: Washington state claims to be progressive and to have progressive politics, but it's bullshit. So a lot of times, legislators, policy makers, or power brokers will allow us or people in proximity to us in the room. They say all the right things, but of course end up doing shit that's not conducive to freeing them all. So our thing is to push these "progressive" policymakers.

Lucy: We were advocating for releases because parole hasn't existed in Florida since 1983. There's still like 5,000 prisoners eligible for parole that have been waiting since '83 to get out. Parole is next to impossible. So for a campaign for clemency, we needed the reformists to do that sort of statewide call based on the climate in the state.

In Florida we're in a hellscape. The governor here was adamantly saying he didn't give a fuck about prisoners or releasing anybody. Prisoners were the absolute last priority for getting any sort of necessary health care, including vaccines.

We challenged the governor's power primarily by utilizing direct actions, phone zaps, and those typical tactics. April 15, 2020 was the first uncovered report of two deaths from COVID in Florida prisons at a GEO Group-run private facility. The Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC) tried to cover them up. On April 17, we showed up to the state capitol and did a barrel action outside of the governor's mansion.

We also had a public funeral for all the people that had died up to that point last August. We built up 90 body bags and brought them to Florida's capitol building in Tallahassee. We then carried them over to the FDOC headquarters and had family members of people inside speak.

Mon: There were a lot of different power matrices that we were trying to influence. One was the relationship between public health inside and outside. Making it clear to various communities inside New York City that they need to care about what happened inside jails because it was about public health on a larger scale.

We tried to show that there is an ecosystem of punishment and negligence happening between detention centers, city jails, state prisons, and other kinds of carceral sites.

Underpinning all of this was trying to deepen conversations around what is danger, and what is safety, and challenging the logics of the prison industrial complex (PIC).

The Abolitionist: *We had one of the largest global protest movements in history against policing in 2020. The backdrop of these protests was a wave of mass death happening inside prisons, jails, and detention centers across the world. Can you talk about the relationship between anti-policing and anti-imprisonment work?*

Oloth: During the protests in Seattle, the three main demands were Defund SPD, Reinvest in Black Communities, and Free Them All. However, the masses understood the first two demands and were energized by the first two demands, but when it came to Free Them All, Free Them All meant just freeing the protesters, the folks that are immediately detained, or are arrested due to protests and taking direct actions. We worked to make it clear that Free Them All really means Free Them All.

"We tried to show that there is an ecosystem of punishment and negligence happening between detention centers, city jails, state prisons, and other kinds of carceral sites."

Lucy: That struggle was constantly disconnected in the last year. Through our bail programs, people's family or friends would contact us for help getting their loved one out after they got arrested at a protest. So many people not only did not understand the connection of these struggles, but they also didn't understand that an arrest comes with court. You don't just get out of jail. You face sentencing, you need a lawyer, you need legal defense. It's not just this one time experience — it's an ongoing fight, an ongoing struggle to get rid of this shit.

Mon: At times the uprisings and the protests happening around police violence and different kinds of state violence were not fully incorporating prisons and jails and detention centers into the picture. It was really important for us to create solidarity between all of these protesters who were being incarcerated for one or two days or even a week, and people who are incarcerated for longer terms. In New York there were hundreds and hundreds of protest-related arrests, so one way we tried to tackle this contradiction was through jail support. Not everybody who was getting arrested for protesting and being held for one or two days was politicized towards the conditions and experiences of those facing this kind of circumstance inside indefinitely. There were a lot of efforts to make sure that there was political education around incarceration happening through jail support and other actions.

The Abolitionist: *How have you resisted the persistent categorization of "deserving" vs. "undeserving" prisoners in your organizing?*

Lucy: Most of our inside contacts are serving life sentences. As far as resistance inside, people with life sentences are the people that kind of lead the charge inside in Florida. These folks are fighting for their freedom as people deemed undeserving, and we fight alongside them.

Mon: Because so much is operating on the logic of the carceral state, inevitably there's going to be this deserving/undeserving binary, and I think we had to take a zero-sum approach. We had to make it clear that we believe in freeing them all *and* we couldn't be operating on the terrain of the state where we were agreeing to these useless and arbitrary categorizations of who should be released, *and* we needed to seize the opportunity provided right then. We had to struggle around things like technical violations so that we could actually get people out now, rather than litigating how we could have the most maximum strategy because we were running the risk of not getting anyone out at all.

That's why we came up with these broad demands. We wanted to be able to say, these are all strategies that move us towards getting everyone out and to shrink the PIC, but no, they do not get everybody out all at once.

Oloth: In regards to calling for releases, the dynamic of deserving/undeserving is cooked into the sentencing guidelines and all possibilities for release. In Washington state there's no parole or no form of parole. So with sentencing guidelines for what are categorized as "violent crimes," you can only get a tenth off your sentence for good behavior. For adults not tried as youth, the only avenues for release are whether you get to your release date or whether you are able to go in front of the pardons or clemency board. Our call was that — because a lot of Black folks, a lot of Indigenous folks, a lot of folks from communities of color were the "violent offenders," or the folks that had more time — **we must free all our community members, not just the ones that have nonviolent charges or have a short amount of time left.**

If we are about abolition, if we are grounded in the idea of this being a racialized system that disproportionately impacts one population over another — a system that accrues privileges for certain populations through the marginalizations and oppression of others — we simply cannot distinguish between who is undeserving or deserving.♦

"We must free all our community members, not just the ones that have nonviolent charges or have a short amount of time left."

FEATURES ACTION

Closing Cages: The People's Plan for Prison Closure in California

By Mohamed Shehk

Between 1982 and 2005, California embarked on what two state analysts called "the largest prison building program in the history of the world." Within those 23 years, the state averaged one new prison per year, building a total of 23 state prisons. This unprecedented and massive expansion of the state's capacity to cage human beings drove a 500% increase of the state's imprisoned population. The prison construction boom has been a central pillar of the rise of the prison industrial complex (PIC), and has resulted in immeasurable devastation and violence on communities of all stripes, but particularly for Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and working-class groups.

Yet as long as there have been plans to build prisons, there have been communities organizing in resistance. This legacy continues today, stronger than ever. **However, with no new prison construction plans on the horizon, communities are now going on the offensive: We are working to close prisons to get people free.**

Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) is a statewide coalition of which Critical Resistance (CR) has long been a core part. We at CR are working collaboratively with other organizations in CURB on a statewide "Close Prisons and Build Communities" campaign. We believe that just as California built dozens of prisons at a mind-boggling rate, it should be able to close them. Our goal in this campaign



By Sarah Fatallah and Nick DeRenzi of CR Oakland.

is to build a movement that will close 10 state prisons in California by 2025. So far, two state prisons have already been slated for closure — Deuel Vocational Institution is already emptied

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out as of September 2021, and California Correctional Center will be next.

“However, with no new prison construction plans on the horizon, communities are now going on the offensive: We are working to close prisons to get people free.”

Our fight for prison closures is first and foremost a strategy to get people free. We want to shrink the state’s ability to lock people up by shrinking the number of cages it has to do so. Many people have heard the phrase, “if they build it, they will fill it” – and California has certainly lived up to this phrase by rapidly building and filling its state prison system. We are seeking to reverse this process and dismantle these structures of racism and state violence. As is written in CURB’s report titled *The People’s Plan for Prison Closure*:

Over the past decade, Californians have been working diligently at righting the wrongs of the past by changing public safety policies on the ballot and in the legislature, resulting in reduced prison populations with the goal of shifting public safety to center care, not cages. In order to meet the people’s goal of cutting wasteful spending on corrections, the state must continue to work to dramatically increase prison releases – not transfers – and change ‘tough on crime’ laws and policies that drive the incarceration crisis.

In addition to closing and tearing down the cages themselves, this campaign is focused on changing and passing policies to reduce sentencing, expanding existing pathways for people to get out, and reforming penal codes that will make it harder for the state to criminalize people and lock them up. These are all strategies to get people free, and taken together, we believe they can provide a comprehensive and more powerful approach to get significant reductions in the number of people locked up across the state.

Yet, as we are dismantling and changing, we are also seeking to build. We want the state to reinvest the money that it will save through prison closures into resources like community-based, non-punitive reentry programs; affordable, accessible, and quality stable housing; healthcare and mental health services; education; and employment opportunities for imprisoned people coming home. Rather than criminalize and cage people for not having access to these things, which is what California – the third most expensive state in which to live throughout the entire US – has been doing for the last 40 years, we are demanding that communities be allowed to live and thrive with the resources that sustain people.

One of the common hurdles that we consistently face is the claim that prisons are “good for their local economies.” Pro-prison politicians and institutions claim that prisons provide jobs and industry for the towns that they are in. However, as far back as the 1990s, study after study has shown that communities have not economically benefited from having a prison in their town. For instance, examining 25 years of economic data on rural communities in New York, Ryan King, Marc Mauer, and Tracy Huling reveal in *Big Prisons, Small Towns: Prison Economics in Rural America*:

Residents of rural counties with one or more prisons did not gain significant employment advantages compared to rural counties without prisons. Unemployment rates moved in the same direction for both groups of counties and were consistent with the overall employment rates for the state as a whole. During the period from 1982 to 2001, these findings are consistent for the three distinct economic periods in the United States, **and in fact, the non-prison counties performed marginally better in two of the timeframes.**

On the contrary, there are mountains of evidence that the prisons have been a drain of funding from the state – funding that could otherwise be used to build schools, hospitals, and create job opportunities. Not to mention that prisons have caused massive devastation to the environments that surround them.

In reality, it is the same people that want prisons closed that care most about strengthening our communities, towns, and society as a whole. Closing prisons means we can have healthier environments, more stable and dignified communities, meaningful jobs, and more resources for the things that genuinely keep our people safe. **If we were to go back to 1982, instead of California building one prison every year for 23 years, what if we built one university a year, one community-based healthcare clinic a year, or one employment training center a year?** We can easily imagine that instead of wasting money locking people up and destroying people’s lives, we could have supported people – their growth, their health, their education, and their quality of living – all while creating vastly more current and future jobs than the 1000 or so jobs that a prison offers. Our future depends on us making this transition.

“If we were to go back to 1982, instead of California building one prison every year for 23 years, what if we built one university a year, one community-based healthcare clinic a year, or one employment training center a year?”

Many people have become more familiar with the idea of an environmental “Just Transition” – a plan for moving us away from industries that are causing climate change and destroying our planet. An environmental Just Transition involves finding environmentally “green” alternatives to burning fossil fuels. Importantly, a Just Transition also ensures that everyone who is currently employed in the fossil fuel industry such as coal miners, oil riggers, and pipeline developers, are guaranteed “green” jobs.

We believe that we can engage in an “Abolitionist Just Transition,” shifting our society from relying on prisons – and all their false promises of public safety and job creation – to one that invests in our communities and our future. We can invest in building up alternatives to imprisonment and the resources that allow us to thrive, while making sure that everyone has a job and training in these healthier industries.

The PIC impacts all of us in various ways and to various degrees, so closing down prisons and abolishing the PIC will benefit all of us. However, in order for us to build a successful movement, it is crucial that we amplify the voices of imprisoned people – the people who are most intensely repressed by this violent system. Part of the function prisons play is to disappear and silence people, so our work in fighting against it must involve breaking through the walls and making sure that imprisoned people’s voices are heard and uplifted.

We hope you join us in this effort to close prisons, as we are working, fighting, and organizing alongside you on the outside of these walls. With this article, we’re including a survey that you can respond to as just one way you can join us in this effort. ♦

Author Bio: Mohamed Shehk is the National Campaigns Director for Critical Resistance (CR). He has supported CR’s campaigns and projects to shrink and end policing programs, fight against new prison and jail construction projects, and close down existing cages. He has also been engaged in amplifying international solidarity with people’s struggles outside of the US., and supporting the Palestinian movement for liberation.

SURVEY

As part of the CA Prison Closure campaign, Critical Resistance Oakland is supporting CURB and other coalition partners to collect testimonials, statements and input from currently imprisoned people across the state of California and beyond. We will use these statements as quotes for media purposes (i.e., articles, press releases, and social media) and when talking to legislators (i.e., during public comments for upcoming hearings in Sacramento in 2022). Whether you are imprisoned in CA or another state, you can write your responses to the following five survey questions using your name or anonymously, and return it to:

Critical Resistance

Attn: CURB Campaign
P.O. Box 22780
Oakland, CA 94609

Please note how you would like your statement to be shared:

- Anonymously
- With my location
- Using this name
- Without my location

1. Have you experienced a prison or yard closure in California or elsewhere? What has the experience been like and can you share any impact it had on you and your loved ones following the announcement or after the closure?
2. Have you experienced a transfer before (out of state or in-state)? As we are fighting to close prisons in California, we want to make sure the state doesn’t respond by increasing out-of-state or in-state transfers, and instead releases imprisoned people. Why do you think California should make sure not to transfer prisoners (out of state or to other in-state prisons that remain open)?
3. Why is it important that California permanently close and decarcerate its prisons?
4. California spends billions of dollars operating its prisons each year. What do you think the state should choose to fund instead? What does California need to prioritize in order to build a state that is safe, secure and sustainable for all people?
5. Any other experience you want to share that could be used in media or talking to legislators?