

## INSIDE-OUTSIDE FISHING LINE:

# Speaking Truth to The People: Building a Mass Movement against the Prison Industrial Complex With Current and Former Political Prisoners

By Lawrence Jenkins & Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin with Garrett Felber

**Editors' Note:** This issue's fishing line brings current political prisoner, Lawrence Jenkins, and former political prisoner, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, together to discuss political education inside and their organizing work while imprisoned. A special thanks to Garrett Felber for facilitating this conversation. Lawrence and his comrades are currently fighting for his freedom. Readers can view Lawrence's art, writings, and learn more about him and the Free Lawrence Movement by visiting the following website: [www.freelawrencemovement.com/](http://www.freelawrencemovement.com/)

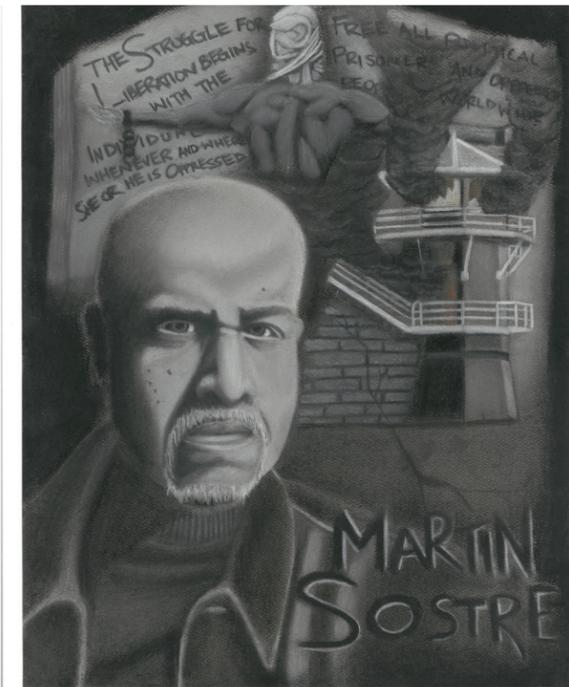
**Garrett: How did you two get into contact?**

**Lorenzo:** Lawrence and I met because I had been looking for years for a sincere revolutionary prisoner who I could influence. I was really unsuccessful for years. I could tell that he didn't himself understand *how* he was railroaded into prison and how the system was doing to him what it was doing to a number of young Black people. I was trying to educate him with what I knew in terms of revolutionary politics, in terms of building a new kind of revolutionary prisoner movement that's based in the communities, instead of these allied separate organizations that claim to support prisoners, and also to give him whatever tools I had learned in terms of the steps to activism. I realize that things change and they always do, but so much of it is still the same except now we have *mass* imprisonment. When I went to prison in 1969, there were about three hundred thousand prisoners. Now we are talking about almost two and a half million prisoners.

Lawrence also is an introvert and is a bit afraid of that, but we need people who have gathered political education and are willing to give it to others. It's one thing to have [the knowledge]—but to have someone you do political education with, me being an older experienced activist having gone through this stuff, and being able to talk to him about things one should avoid, things you should do and so forth—it can be a very necessary and valuable thing. If you convince one person who is sincere, then you may be able to go ahead and build around that person or have that person be a link to the streets and to the prisons and that can fundamentally change a lot of things that need to be changed in this period.

**Lawrence:** Initially when Lorenzo first wrote and introduced himself to me and about who he was and about his background and the organizations that helped him win his freedom, I think my initial thought was like: *Damn, I am connecting with a movement elder that I can really learn from and really get not just an understanding [of] my situation a bit better but really an understanding of who I am as a revolutionary and why I feel so committed and indebted to the movement.* He listened, and he was patient and he was upfront about how I was thinking and moving at that time.

I think one of the first things that really stuck out was his concern about me putting myself in danger. During this time, I was in solitary confinement for a situation where we had to stand up for a brother who was attacked by the guards, and we ended up taking the unit hostage for hours—it made national news and we were being tortured in the hole. In that moment, a lot of the tactics the state was using on us in the prison were things that I didn't know how to defend myself against at all. I didn't understand prison litigation and grievances and I didn't understand why the repression was so deliberate and intentional on me and the brothers that all went to the hole. Lorenzo really helped put all of the



Martin Sostre by Lawrence Jenkins. Art provided by Lawrence Jenkins. "The struggle begins with the individual whenever or where ever she or he is oppressed. Free all political prisoners and oppressed people world wide."

situations I was going through at the time into perspective.

I shared more about my case, being involved in an officer-involved shooting where I defended myself after being targeted by racist police officers. He gave me confidence to really understand the reality that I defended myself against state violence, and I was still fighting and resisting against that. It really took away a lot of fear that I was having around concerns that I made the situation worse for myself or those that I'm organizing with. By speaking about it and by standing up, I was resisting what the prison and the state wants us to be—silent about the injustices that are being perpetuated on us. Up until that point I was being silent, and I really wasn't resisting to the level that was needed for me to come out against the system that threw me away for thirty years. The education around the history of political prisoners like myself, learning about Martin Sostre and Lorenzo's connection with him, and Garrett sending me literature, really helped. Examples of how Lorenzo and Martin were organizing back in the sixties and seventies helped me frame my situation a little better.

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From there, we started taking political education seriously as soon as we started to see how effective the tools were. **Our allies and comrades in the community started taking us and our situation more seriously, beyond just writing us letters or getting us to speak about our stories or situations on panels here and there. They started seeing it for what we see it is—it's a war.** The more I was able to come to terms with that through conversations with Lorenzo and study of political education and the history of how the state has designed the prison industrial complex to carry this thing out helped me to solidify my stance as a political activist inside and as a leader inside of prison with a lot of influence.

**Garrett: You brought up Martin Sostre, who connects all three of us. Lorenzo, when you talked about finding one person to impart this knowledge upon who can then form a link in the chain, I was thinking about how Martin did that with you; at the time you met Martin you were half his age. How do you see the connection between Martin's relationship with you during fall of 1969?**

**Lorenzo:** First of all, Martin Sostre stands as a really important historical figure at that moment. The prisoners were just building up in terms of population and they had no rights. They also knew, having looked at the years of reporting on the civil rights movement and the Black power movement, they knew that there was a movement in the streets that was representing a real threat to the way the system was being run back in the day. He had been trying to reach prisoners on the inside with political education. His ability to file writs of habeas corpus and other legal actions against prison officials, as well as civil rights lawsuits, forced changes inside the New York state prison system. When I met him, he was telling me and young people that he was winning the lawsuits to change the conditions for prisoners, and he wanted other people to file similar cases all over the country in order to have a national application for what he was doing legally.

Sostre wanted the prison movement to become as much of a central radical movement as any of the other movements of the day. He succeeded at that—a living example of someone who was challenging the system in that setting but not as some type of savior/hero, rather inviting others to work with him in whatever capacity they could. It was really important to me and changed my life, and it changed the lives of others.

**Garrett: You mentioned earlier a lot of things have changed in the last 40, 50 years, but some remained the same. Can you elaborate on some of the changes you've noticed while talking to Lawrence?**

**Lorenzo:** We are dealing with a different stage of history, and a different kind of social organization of people who are in the system. We are talking about mass imprisonment now—the largest prison population in the world, the longest prison sentences in the world, and the account of fascist obedience from the population at large to accept the idea of imprisonment due to there supposedly being no alternative.

They are building a fascist police state, which has always been used against Black people. When you look at history, and specifically at the creation of prisons in the country ever since the destruction of chattel slavery, you are looking at a tool, a weapon, against Black and poor people in the US particularly. They have already brainwashed people to accept the existence of prison. We have to talk about the wholesale destruction of, and of course organize, a mass movement against the prison, and all these abolitionists and so forth have to come together in some form of radicalized street movement. For me, the most important change in prisons is the scale and scope of prisons in terms of the level of oppression, for instance the so-called "behavioral modification" in prisons, where they are using psychotropic drugs, solitary confinement, and long-term solitary confinement. There has not been a mass movement to fight this tooth and nail.

The state has also taken over the agenda and subverted the movement in this period; everybody thinks it's just got to be legal action and legal reaction, and the strategy done by attorneys or politicians and some in the elitist forces. The strategy must be done by the communities that

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the prisoners are from, and it's got to be done by the prisoners themselves and their allies. That's who it's gotta be done by. It's the same thing I used to say when I was in prison as an organizer and activist and when I was getting out of prison—if you are going to have a prison movement, it has to be community-based. It has to deal with racism and it has to deal with the material conditions that people are forced to live in that cause them to commit so-called "crimes." I think that until we wake up to that realization, this is where the movement itself needs political education.

**Lawrence:** I like to think about abolition as an action. It clearly means to do away with something, in this case to do away with the prison industrial complex (PIC). To me these are things that call for action. In my experience with the PIC and state violence, I have no other option than to see this for what it really is: domestic warfare being carried out on me and my community and those of us locked up inside. The reality is we have to treat this situation as such, and not leave it to be something that we simply theorize around, or talk about, or imagine. We got to really treat this situation as a real attack and to resist it as such. When we are doing political education with the movement and the community, they need to understand with sincere commitment what a struggle like this entails and how serious it is when prisoners accept allies and comrades in struggle from the community to share this struggle with us. There is a lot of history to it and a lot of resources that the state has put into maintaining conditions that suppress resistance—to perpetrate genocide, to displace, and to dispose of Black and oppressed and poor communities. We can't tiptoe or be passive about that. It does call for more radical organizing, more sacrifice, more sincere commitment, and more active solidarity. That's something that I hope we can be more successful with in our political education in building a mass movement along those lines.

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**Garrett:** *What message would you want to share with readers of The Abolitionist both inside and out about what you both have learned through each other and this relationship?*

**Lorenzo:** I think we need to understand one thing: we don't need a hero. What we really need is a movement, a systematic movement in the streets, in the communities, and in the prisons as well. We deal in the streets, deal among

poor people themselves. We put poor people in control of the movement. We have to unite prisoners, the families of prisoners, and their communities along with abolitionist activists to build a mass movement on the outside while we build our prisoner movements with political education and organization on the inside. That's what I tell Lawrence when I talk to him, and anybody else for that matter, in terms of dealing with prisoners' issues and not to continue to allow people who have no concern with prisoners or our communities as a whole to take over the agenda—to hijack the agenda and collaborate with the state. We can't allow that.

**Lawrence:** With that, it's important for us to really leverage our collective power, our knowledge, our abilities, our skills, and learn how to effectively use these tools to leverage resources outside of government control. As an artist, I try to utilize art to raise awareness and political consciousness and also to bring in more resources to help with mutual aid. Getting the community to understand that we don't need the state's permission, nor will the state fund the revolutionary activity that this action calls for. To end imprisonment and to get people out, we can't be afraid to collectively create new processes and new tactics. We are at that point where we have to figure out alternative means to advance our struggle to abolish the PIC, to help us survive genocide in cages, and not only to help us ultimately *get* free but to *stay* free.

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When you're talking about the PIC, and all of its appendages and mechanisms of oppression that are dependent on us to come crawling to it for some kind of relief, aid, or help, the community has to provide alternatives for prisoners in particular not only for when we are inside but for when we get out. **That's why our work is developing political education programs and organizing trainings and developing leaders for the struggle for liberation and for the freedom movement: We can get out and easily transition not only to a secure situation after imprisonment but also continue our work in the movement.** It's a prolonged, multi-generational struggle that's going to have many stages of development. In turn, we are going to have to have these conversations at multiple points and strategize and re-devise tactics as the material conditions change and we're changing around them. Our work will be met with repres-

sion. They will try to suppress us, they will try to do things to counter what we are doing, because that is what the PIC is designed to do. We got to be able to endure those attacks and sustain our movement and our progress going forward.

**Lorenzo:** As we fight back and build a movement, we've got to have some practical demands concerning defunding the prison system and using that money for the people. We have to have some practical demands, and we have to think about it in terms of building a mass movement to pressure the people in power right now, so that they are forced to take funds and see that those funds go to poor communities instead of the prison system. Right now, they don't have incentive to do away with prisons. They don't have any pressure on them to do away with them until we build a movement strong enough to force them to do that. We need to win some demands, first of all, that educate the masses of people and also push those in power.

**Lawrence:** We also need to combat the contradictions that mass media put out about what the PIC is designed for, by putting our political education and our narrative out there so the people can align and put energy behind those demands. We need to expose how the PIC is torturing people, through various different ways of doing that, putting that truth out and speaking that truth to the people. As Lorenzo always says, "not speaking truth to the power establishment, but speaking truth to the people" about the reality in here, which will help them make more informed and conscious decisions about how they align themselves with the necessary actions that are needed right now.

**About the Authors:**

**Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin** is a writer, activist, and Black anarchist. He is a former member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Party, and Concerned Citizens for Justice. Following an attempt to frame him on weapons charges and for threatening the life of a Ku Klux Klan leader, Ervin hijacked a plane to Cuba in February 1969. While in Cuba, and later Czechoslovakia, Ervin grew disillusioned with the authoritarianism of state socialism. Captured by the CIA in Eastern Europe, he was extradited to the US, put on trial, and sentenced to life in prison in 1970. He was introduced to anarchism whilst in prison, inspiring him to write *Anarchism* and *The Black Revolution* in 1979. Released after 15 years, Ervin remains politically active.

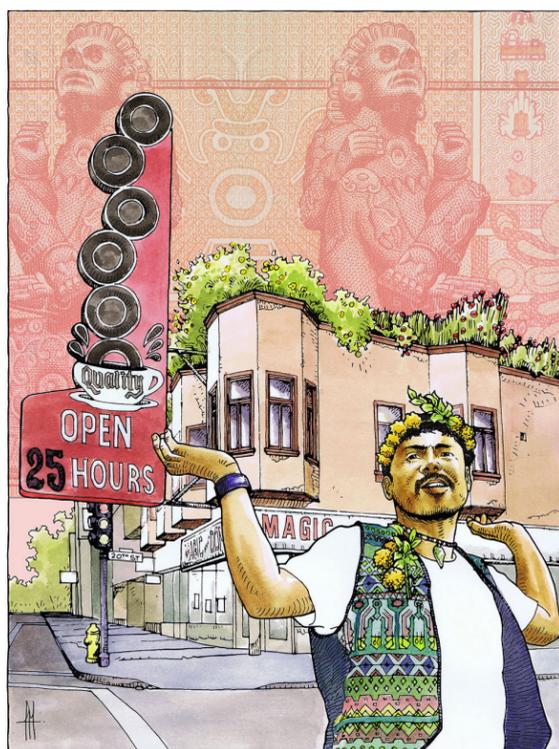
**Lawrence Jenkins** is a political prisoner, agroecologist, educator, artist, organizer, and activist. He co-directs *Liberation Media Northwest*, a prisoner-led online platform for incarcerated/non incarcerated writers, artists, and organizers centering prison abolition. He also helps to organize books to prisoners to facilitate political education in solidarity with *Study and Struggle*, *Seattle Mutual Aid Books*, and *Noname Book Club*. Lawrence is currently planning and developing a self-help legal defense program, prisoners' lobby, and legal clinic for prisoners in Washington state. ♦

**KITES TO THE EDITORS**

**Critical Resistance,**

Thank you so much for your summer edition of *The Abolitionist*. Very well put together and inspiring to have gotten and finally read. I live in a Jim Crow-era commonwealth state, [Virginia], that doesn't like abolitionists and activists, and I am surprised to have been able to receive such a gift as *The Abolitionist* newspaper in a place where they often deny it.

Lots of work has been happening on the East Coast with criminal legal reforms taking shape. Some new laws passed last year along with an overhaul of [Virginia's] government where we have a democratic senate, house, and governor who are all champions of new legislation. We are making headway in shaping up and reforming our judicial system and "correctional" centers, and passing new laws based on second chances.



"Futuros Fugaces - Xochipilli Magic" by Fernando Marti. Justseeds Artists' Cooperative

Virginia is a state that abolished parole in 1995 and has an 85 percent sentence-to-serve in prison rate. No drug rehab centers and only two state mental health facilities. Prisons are the new institutions that house everyone together, always treating everyone equally: Harshly, inhumanely, and oppressively!

But, lo and behold, we are finally changing all of this. Years of hard work by us human rights activists and advocates, our friends, families, and communities that have powered countless hours and funds into bringing about meaningful change in a state that used to be last in nationwide legislation and new-era beliefs and freedoms. We are continuing to partner with one another and build coalitions together to bring about change and directional focus in abolishing the prison industrial complex. We are learning about each other through word of mouth and social media platforms that focus on like-minded views.

It's been a long time in the making, but we are finally formulating coalitions that are advocating for change immensely! I am cofounder and

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