Resisting Torture: Refusing to Surrender

With Marie Levin and "Comrade Pops" by Molly Porzig

Editors’ Note: Critical Resistance (CR)’s National Communications Manager, Molly Porzig, wrote the following article based on two conversations for The Abolitionist: with Marie Levin, the sister of a leading control unit prisoner, and "Comrade Pops," an alias for an imprisoned comrade of Marie's brother and participant in the 2011 and 2013 actions discussed. Molly was a lead organizer of the media team on behalf of CR that supported the action referenced throughout the article. Marie and Comrade Pops formed a new statewide coalition of freed prisoners called the Short Corridor Collective (SCC) united across prison-manufactured racial divisions and started waves of hunger strikes (HS) that rocked the US prison system for years, sweeping across the entire state from the Security Housing Unit (SHU) in Pelican Bay State Prison. In 2011 and 2013, California had four main overarching goals in joining HS:

- Humanize prisoners, especially prisoners in solitary confinement units (SHUs & AdSeg)
- Amplify resistance to the PIC from inside prisons
- Grow international solidarity inside & outside of prison
- Establish abolition as a practical approach to addressing issues of torture, inhumane treatment and oppressive conditions inside the prison system.

SHIFTING THE TERRAIN OF STRUGGLE

An ongoing challenge to PHSS’s work was the racist, classist, dehumanizing propaganda the PIC uses to legitimize the use of torture chambers. Of course, the near total restriction of communication across control units was a constant threat to our inside-outside organizing. As a PIC abolitionist organization, the narratives mainstream media uses to frame issues is an important component of CR’s struggle. The media is a terrain on which we struggle not only to inform people but influence decision makers, challenge credibility, and shift common sense to combat the dehumanization of oppressed, criminalized communities. As articulated by CR’s definition of the PIC, abolitionists must challenge the “mass media images that keep alive stereotypes of people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, youth, etc as criminals, delinquent or deviant” that serve to legitimize oppression, state violence, war, and torture on our people. According to Comrade Pops, the PIC has “created a narrative that we were monsters without any redeemable qualities, therefore all of the physical and psychological harm meted out by the prisonocrats we deserved. All legal protections like due process were thrown out the window. The writing on the wall with the prisoncrat policy was that in order to gain some relief, either you die, or snitch and parrot.”

Resisting solitary confinement in the 2000s’ verdict has shifted drastically largely due to the sacrifice of imprisoned people in a control unit called the Short Corridor in Pelican Bay. In 2011 and 2013, California prisoners known as the Short Corridor Collective (SCC) united across prison-manufactured racial divisions and started waves of hunger strikes (HS) that rocked the US prison system for years, sweeping across the entire state from the Security Housing Unit (SHU) in Pelican Bay, through the Administrative Segregation (Ad-Seg) into the state’s jails, prisons, and detention centers. While the first two 2011 rounds peaked at nearly 7,000 participants statewide, 2013’s reconvened action surpassed 30,000 prisoners, making it the largest action of its kind in US prison history. Requested by the SCC, Critical Resistance (CR) formed a new statewide coalition with movement partners called Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity (PHSS) to support the action and SCC’s demands. Together, this cross-wall organizing forever changed the landscape of resisting imprisonment in the state and globally.

A COALITION & SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN

Some SCC members attempted similar actions in the early 2000s, but were unable to get out word due to the tight censorship and repression of control units. This time they knew connection was key. Sweden’s Mariestrand prison, known to be one of the most open in the country, passed through prison censorship.

CR established a workgroup structure for PHSS comprising a three-prong strategy—legal, legislative, media, and grassroots mobilization. Outreach. The legal strategy was two-fold: a team of former prisoners and lawyers led the mediation between the SCC, the prison administration and the DOC, while the coalition put pressure on state legislators to force the DOC to make structural changes concerning solitary confinement. The illegal strategies were two-fold: shifting the terrain of struggle by generating press coverage and controlling the narrative of the action, while creating our own grassroots movement. Two forms were used to match SCC’s courage in action to win the five core demands: Outreach worked with the media organizers to mobilize the grassroots far and wide in support of the HS; connecting with organizations, advocates, former prisoners and SHU survivors, family members of HS participants, youth, healthcare professionals, faith-based communities, to encourage the state capital to speak at legislative hearings and press conferences, and to plan local community events, rallies, political education teach-ins, workshops with gang-affected communities, banner drops, film screenings, and more. Rather than any prong outweighing another, CR’s approach for positions each prong to reinforce and propel one another in tandem. In 2011, CR helped lead all three strategies; in 2013, CR carried only media. Both years, CR had four main overarching goals in joining HS:

- Humanize prisoners, especially prisoners in solitary confinement units (SHUs & AdSeg)
- Amplify resistance to the PIC from inside prisons
- Grow international solidarity inside & outside of prison
- Establish abolition as a practical approach to addressing issues of torture, inhumane treatment and oppressive conditions inside the prison system.

“O our coming together was rooted in the resistance in the Pelican was to become our final resting place. We knew from the moment we were sent to that dungeon we were going to die. We were only willing to do so while fighting for change, ‘til our last breath.”

- Comrade Pops

CR was instrumental in initiating the coalition’s structure and strategy alongside Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (LSPC), All of Us or None, Prison Activist Resource Center (PARC), the Campaign to End the Death Penalty, California Prison Focus, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Freedom Archives, Kersplebedeb, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the Prison Art Project, Bar None Arcata, and others. While not all organizations and partners brought their own political persuasions and expertise yet remained united in a shared principle of moving with urgency in radical solidarity with imprisoned people.

"As always, our goal was and still is to reach the people. We are up against the mass psychology of the police state. Our overall objective is not to reform the prison industrial complex (PIC), but to create a different way of doing restorative justice. There can never be true justice when we live in a punitive society. Struggle takes on different forms. Our ultimate goal was towards abolitionist horizons, an ongoing call for the dismantling of all repressive institutions.”

CR’s courage in action matched SCC’s in 2011 and 2013 actions discussed. Molly was a lead organizer of the media team on behalf of CR that supported the action referenced throughout the article. Comrade Pops’ contributions are italicized to be more identifiable. Some names and details have been omitted or made implicit to aid this issue passing through prison censorship.
“The PIC has created a narrative that we were monsters without any redeemable qualities, all of the physical and psychological harm meted out by the prisoners we despised. All legal protections like due process were thrown out the window. The writing on the wall with the prison policy was that in order to gain some relief, either you die, or nitpick and parole.”

When the first action began on July 1, 2011, PHSS knew it had spread widely throughout the prison. PHSS works to sustain a collective strategy of aggression (protests, strikes, and prison administration insisting roughly a dozen prisoners refused food. Speaking to The LA Times, Marie said, “I was afraid to do anything and not get off the phone with the DOC until they gave him an exact count of meals refused—forcing the DOC to confirm not one dozen but over 1,000 prisoners participating. Our media strategy also coerced the DOC to admit that some 3,000 people were caged in long term solitary confinement, a fact they had long kept secret. I broke the silence in broadcasting control unit conditions, stirring the media frenzy needed to herald the SCC’s five core demands to an international stage.

Our media strategy aimed to organize mainstream outlets to support the HS through consistent coverage, exposing the DOC’s violent conditions and tactics of prolonged solitary confinement, gang validation and debriefing policy, and humanizing prisoners instead. We worked tirelessly for months—sometimes sleeping in our office, waking before dawn to wake up the press, drive to a community prison across the state to meet with families to share their loved ones’ stories—all to disrupt and subvert the DOC’s narrative and match the SCC’s course. From writing press releases to holding daily and weekly press conferences, we built close contact with reporters and journalists. The San Jose Mercury News reprinted a PHSS press release, family members of a core SCC representative responded to advocate for their loved one and became a PHSS spokesperson. As more became involved, CR trained family members to speak on behalf of prisoners to the press, to legislators, and the public about the impacts of solitary confinement in all its forms, the five core demands of the SCC and the thousands of participants starving themselves in solidarity.

PHSS’s grassroots media was also robust, involving a website with daily posts & insider updates, as well as short video interviews and statements from the three former prisoners who survived solitary confinement. The website was an essential tool for mobilizing local, national and international support includ- ing activating healthcare workers to write a soli- darity statement & submit testimony of solitary as torture, drawing the attention of the United Nations Committee Against Torture. This enabled allies in Bolivia, Colombia, Palestine, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to organize solidarity actions and protests for the release of prisoners and to speak out. International allies circulated joint statements challenging the proliferation of solitary confinement globally and criticizing the US’s PPI as a model for control units around the world.

All of this media centralized the actual voices of imprisoned people—both current and former prisoners, SCC members and wider HS partici- pants—as well as their families. We brought prisoners into the press as experts as well as to the legislature through submitting public comment and testimony. As Comrade Pops says, “My story is to speak about what we endure, to speak about the brutality of Pelican Bay and the prison efforts’ efforts to break our minds and bodies and spirits. In our work of recruiting, we must take into account the people we are trying to educate. To liberate.”

FAMILIES FIGHT BACK

To connect with more prisoners’ families, we reached out to partner organizations who supported prisoners’ families, visited prisoners, and administered. We carved out creative ways for sharing the news without calling it exactly what it was including in The Abolitionist newspaper. By its third week, the action spread from one of the most remote prisons in the northernmost state border 850 miles south to the state’s southernmost pris- ons and jails. “We were great to that the PIC United Nations San Diego facility with no notification. “I was distraught and they wouldn’t give me any infor- mation—all they said was he wasn’t there any- more,” Marie recalled. Prior to his first stroke, Sitawa already had high blood pressure and thy- roid problems. While imprisoned, he also devel- oped diabetes. Marie contacts her brother’s on- going health problems to his imprisonment and the many years he endured being tortured in solitary. They allow so much processed foods and vendors, it’s no surprise one of the five core demands was adequate food. Too many prisoners develop severe medical issues due to their confined diets.

In 2020, Sitawa had another stroke and was placed on medical parole in a facility in Stock- ton. Finally, he has been able to get some care and physical therapy to recover after multiple strokes. He can now move his legs on a station- ary bike and is able to walk. Before his first stroke, Sitawa had a brain aneurysm and was taken to the hospi- tal. Marie and their family were told that he would not be able to speak, not be able to identi- fy objects, or move his limbs. “They counted him dying every day,” Marie said. “Eventually they made controversial—forever shifting popu- lation—all they said was he wasn’t there any- more.” Marie recalled. During his first stroke, Sitawa had already had high blood pressure and thy- riod problems. While imprisoned, he also devel- oped diabetes. Marie contacts her brother’s on- going health problems to his imprisonment and the many years he endured being tortured in solitary. They allow so much processed foods and vendors, it’s no surprise one of the five core demands was adequate food. Too many prisoners develop severe medical issues due to their confined diets.

The HS grew a new organization: California Families to Abolish Solitary Confinement (CFASC). Dolores Canales, a former prisoner herself who has had multiple family members locked up including her son, started CFASC with the mission to stop the inhuman treatment of prisoners throughout the state, especially those in solitary confinement and administrative control units. CFASC joined PHSS and has been an es- sential vehicle for family members to support their loved ones inside and fight back against the DOC’s narrative and IOP strategy of control units ever since, carrying the fight onward today.

Like many PHSS and CFASC organizers, Marie often spoke about the multi-layered separation families experienced due to their loved one’s imprisonment. Marie speaks of how she learned that Sitawa’s imprisonment harmed their family not only because he was in solitary for so long, but also due to the extreme distance to visit the prison—nearly 400 miles (and twice as far for families in the south). The DOC doesn’t do any family care in the world about separat- ing families”; in fact, family separation is one DOC strategy of repression to further isolate prisoners. Marie explains her brother’s impris- onment impacted their family: "My mother’s health declined with dementia; she was so hurt the DOC was not allowing my brother to come home, and she had gotten to a place where reading his letters was too pain- ful. I remember saying to CR’s lawyer, ‘I will not let you take my brother once and she flicked it away from me. ‘I don’t want that letter.’ She discouraged me from trying to speak to him by phone, because she thought the pain would be unbearable.

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The PIC makes an agreement to shed light on the divisions within the prison system. These divisions make clear the ways that the prison system confines and oppresses individuals. The agreement helps to save lives, but conflicts still prevail; gang divisions and disunity exist. Despite the DOC’s effective repression, and despite the PIC’s enduring opposition, gang divisions and disunity continue. The DOC pits them against one another. They realize that if they work together, they can create a mighty force against the system. The coming together was not based on any principle, unity, or purpose, but rather on the recognition of the need for collective action. The Agreement called for an end to any confinement of the prisoner class, a strategy for uniting the prisoner class to the end of the state’s solitary confinement population. The DOC’s effective repression, and despite the PIC’s enduring opposition, gang divisions and disunity continue. The Agreement was adopted because the “prisoners recognized they were not fighting each other.” The PIC ratifies that they are working together, not against each other. They realize that if they work together, they can create a mighty force against the system. The coming together was not based on any principle, unity, or purpose, but rather on the recognition of the need for collective action.

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