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FEATURES ACTION

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' 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.

"Our coming together was rooted in the realization that Pelican Bay 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

Resisting solitary confinement in the 2020's versus ten years ago has shifted drastically, largely due to the sacrifice of imprisoned people in a control unit called the Short Corridor in Pelican Bay State Prison. 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 characteristic of control units. This time they knew connection to outside organizations was essential in raising their demands to effectively pressure prison administrators. In conditions that sow dissension between racial groups, the SCC intentionally forged cross-racial unity in their struggle, drawing representatives from all four major racial or ethnic groups in the state's control units: white prisoners, Black prisoners, and Southern and Northern Latinxs. PHSS supported the SCC, who shaped demands and determined the direction of the fight with restricted communication. Any goals, strategies, tactics, plans, and decisions made by the coalition was done to further the SCC's action in an effort to achieve their five core demands, which were:

1. End group punishment & administrative abuse

2. Abolish the debriefing policy (which coerced prisoners to snitch on affiliates of "security threat groups" or "gangs" in order to get out of solitary)
3. End long-term solitary confinement
4. Provide adequate and nutritious food
5. Create and expand constructive programming

A core HS participant, **Comrade Pops** situates these five demands rooted in a broader political vision: "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 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, BarNone Arcata,** and others. While not yet all abolitionist, 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.

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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 **media** organizing was also two-fold: **shifting the terrain of struggle by generating press coverage and controlling the narrative of the action,** while **creating our own grassroots media** to encourage people to match SCC's courage in action to win the five core demands. **Outreach** worked with the media organizers to **mobilize the grassroots far**



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Photo by Within Color. 2013 PHSS demonstration featuring Indigenous dancers outside a state prison.

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, mobilizing everyone to the state capitol 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 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 PHSS:

- 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 criminal, 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 prisoncrats 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 parole."

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Through PHSS's media, CR flipped the script to expose that **control units are the worst of the worst conditions** of the PIC. Unearthing the history and strategic development of control units as a key tool of political repression and incapacitation, we centralized the collective rather than the individual experience of imprisoned people by maintaining the human rights of all imprisoned people and by exposing the collective impacts of isolation, disrupting individualist narratives of "bad apples" or "worst of the worst" prisoners. Not the plight of a few individuals, this issue affects all of society, as shown by the thousands who would risk their lives to expose it.

"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 prisoncrats 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 parole.'"

When the first action began on July 1, 2011, PHSS knew it had spread widely throughout the prison, despite the department of corrections (DOC) and prison administration insisting roughly a dozen prisoners refused food. Speaking to *The LA Times*, CR pressured a reporter to do his job 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. With this, we broke the press 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 rooms, traveling 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 courage. From writing press releases & op-eds every few days to holding weekly press conferences, we built close contact with reporters and journalists. After *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 family members and former prisoners who survived solitary confinement. The website was an essential tool for mobilizing local, national and even international support, including activating healthcare workers to write a solidarity statement & submit testimony of solitary as torture, drawing the attention of the **United Nations** and **Amnesty International**. This enabled allies in Bolivia, Colombia, Palestine, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to organize solidarity tactics including banner drops, rallies and speak outs. International allies circulated joint statements challenging the proliferation of solitary confinement globally and criticizing



Families fight back with PHSS for their loved ones in solitary confinement, 2013.

the US's PIC 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 participants—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 prisoncrats' 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, or provided services in different prisons. 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 prisons and jails. *"We owe a great deal to the thousands of imprisoned men across the state that supported us. In that support lies our power to affect change. It was the men in the general population who stood in solidarity—their courage and sacrifices, their steadfastness in numbers that gave us voice"* (Comrade Pops). This mass of prisoners united in struggle and shared voice would not have been possible without the countless family members fighting for their loved ones, risking family visits to spread word however they could.

Marie Levin, the sister of a core member of the SCC—**Sitawa Nantambu Jamaa**, representing Black prisoners—was told by her brother to get in touch with PHSS. Reflecting on her experience as a spokesperson, Marie said that CR taught her to advocate not only her brother but for *"all the brothers"* inside. Marie shares, *"CR taught me to go to rallies, to lobby in Sacramento and to speak from my heart, which I wasn't accustomed to doing. Even though I was just becoming a preacher, to stand up and speak from my heart was very challenging for me. I was able to with CR's encouragement. It was empowering, because I had so much support around me and each time it got better and better."*

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 inhumane treatment of prisoners throughout the state, especially those in solitary confinement and administrative units. CFASC joined PHSS and has been an essential vehicle for family members to support their loved ones inside and fight back against the devastating impacts of control units ever since, carrying the fight onward today.

Like many PHSS and CFASC organizers, Marie often spoke about the multi-layered separation their families experienced due to their loved one's imprisonment and isolation. Marie explains 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 have "any care in the world about separating families"; in fact, family separation is one DOC strategy of repression to further isolate prisoners.** Marie explains her brother's imprisonment impacted their mother:

"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 painful. I remember giving her a letter from my brother once and she flicked it away from me. 'I don't want that letter.' She discouraged me from trying to take my boys to see [Sitawa], because she thought the pain would be unbearable. Her doctor told me unhealed trauma causes dementia. It was traumatic for my mother's only son to be taken from her and never given back. It was traumatic only being able to visit him once a year, to not being able to talk to him on the phone. My brother's continued isolation and imprisonment has left a deadly stain on all of our hearts."

During the HS, Marie spoke to how prolonged isolation impacted Sitawa, as well as the toll of the HS itself: *"Because I personally had gone on fasts before, I was very supportive of him doing what he needed to in order to make change. When he wanted to continue after 60 days, I understood the immense mental and physical toll, and empathized with his determination. There were many besides my brother who wanted to keep going; they had a purpose in mind. Some of them had some health issues, and it wasn't possible for them to continue. For them to accomplish what they did is remarkable."*

In 2019, after being transferred again, Sitawa had a stroke at the age of 61 and was taken to the hospital. Marie and their family were told that he would not be able to speak, not be able to identify objects, or move his limbs. *"They counted him out for dead,"* says Marie. *"They were ready to issue a compassionate release, but I knew that at some point they could send him back to prison."* A couple days later they sent him to a San Diego facility with no notification. *"I was distraught and they wouldn't give me any information—all they said was he wasn't there anymore,"* Marie recalls. Prior to his first stroke, Sitawa already had high blood pressure and thyroid problems. While imprisoned, he also developed diabetes. Marie connects her brother's ongoing health problems to his imprisonment and the many years he endured being tortured in solitary: **"They allow so much processed foods and venders, 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 Stockton. 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 stationary bike and is speaking again. Marie continues to be a spokesperson for her brother and other imprisoned people with CFASC and Essie Justice Group.

VICTORY, SETBACKS, AND DIALECTICS: THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

"There will be tactical defeats and victories. Even in defeats, there are lessons that can be used for consciousness building. Frederick Douglas said power concedes nothing without a demand. I add 'or struggle'" (Comrade Pops). Together the SCC and PHSS's work remains historic with countless victories forged through discipline and struggle: **all five of the core demands were won and solitary confinement made controversial—forever shifting popular perception of solitary confinement not only in CA but around the world.**

In 2012 after the first two waves of HS, the SCC paused, regrouped, and created a historic docu-

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ment called **the Agreement to End Hostilities**, a strategy for uniting the prisoner class across prison-manufactured racial divisions. The Agreement called for an end to any conflict between imprisoned groups that the DOC can use to sow division. To this day, the Agreement is still in place, honored and practiced by countless prisoners statewide. Comrade Pops explains that part of the precedent of the Agreement was the understanding that *“We are each other’s strength, we are each other’s teachers and protectors. The coming together was not based on any principle, unity, or purpose, but shared circumstance of the prisoner class.”*

Marie expounds that Sitawa and the SCC initiated the Agreement because the *“prisoners recognized they were not fighting each other. The DOC pits them against one another. They realized they were all one body. They came together like a mighty fist by creating the Agreement to End All Hostilities, not only for people inside prisons, but also inside the camps, juvenile halls, jails and in the streets—to be used in every community where there’s conflict, especially gang-affected communities.”* Marie adds that the Agreement has posed a challenge to the DOC: *“It hurts job security for anything like this to exist,”* because of the power uniting prisoners generates.

Also in 2012, the SCC and PHSS intensified the legal strategy by filing a class action lawsuit against the DOC. In 2013, the struggle moved further into the courts, which resulted in a **2015 landmark settlement, Ashker v Governor of California** in collaboration with the **Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR)**. Because of the HS, the 2015 settlement significantly changed DOC regulations, including (1) dramatically reducing the state’s solitary confinement population; (2) prohibiting solitary placement based on gang affiliation; (3) capping the length of time a prisoner could spend in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay; and (4) providing a non-solitary alternative unit for prisoners who face a threat to their safety in the general prison population.

In 2015, SCC members and other long-term solitary prisoners statewide were transferred to general population, many being released from isolation for the first time in decades. Even though the HS was over, SCC members continued the struggle. Sitawa was first released from Pelican Bay to Tehachapi. According to Marie, the DOC lied about having a “step-down” program, where prisoners are able to un-affiliate with a security threat group. *“Sitawa corrected that situation there then went to Salinas Valley also in 2015. With each transfer, his name preceded him. In every prison, he would get situated and then get other prisoners on board with the Agreement to End Hostilities. On each yard before he got there, there were killings and stabbings, people dying left and right, and by getting everyone on board with the Agreement, he was making changes from yard to yard. At one, a program was implemented where the SCC brothers could meet with youth to hear from the brothers. Hearing stories of my brother at the head of the circle of kids so he could see everybody, he was like their grandfather. He was instrumental in making the agreement come to life in prison.”*

Despite the tireless work of prisoners like Sitawa, the dialectics of resistance and repression have taken their toll on the movement against solitary confinement. In **late August 2023, the Ninth Circuit court nullified the historic 2015 Ashker settlement.** Throughout the HS, the DOC used ruthless measures to deter resistance, including the supplemental torture practice of forced feeding, alongside continuous transfers to separate and break the SCC, and countless methods to sow division among prisoners. Comrade Pops argues that because of the DOC’s effective repression, and despite the Agreement to End Hostilities, *“the prison movement today lies in ruin. Racial divisions still prevail; gang divisions and disunity exist. The agreement helps to save lives, but conflicts still arise from the violent individualist culture the PIC maintains. These divisions make*

peace between prisoners fragile. We must use a materialist dialectical approach in analyzing where we are at this moment. It’s like one step forward, three steps backward. Absent politics to shape and guide our work, there is no change, no development or growth.”

The Ninth Circuit ruling demonstrates a grim limitation to legal strategies for prisoner resistance, since **Clinton’s 1996 Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA)** is still in place. The PLRA makes it harder for imprisoned people to use federal courts to protect prisoners’ rights and easier for prisons and jails to escape oversight. According to **Prison Policy Initiative**, *“For two-and-a-half decades, the legislation has created a double standard that limits [imprisoned] people’s access to the courts at all stages,”* requiring courts to dismiss civil rights cases from prisoners for minor technical reasons, requiring prisoners to pay filing fees that low-income people outside are exempt from, making it hard to find representation by sharply capping attorney fees, creating high barriers to settlement, and weakening the ability of courts to order changes to prison and jail policies. Because of the PLRA, **settlements concerning prison conditions nationally must be renewed every two years, greatly undermining their efficacy despite compliance monitoring.** Arguably, the litigation process might be another repressive strategy for the PIC—focusing on the battle in the courts, most if not all momentum was swept into the “good faith” of the state.

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Since 2015, the CCR renewed the settlement conditions three times through extension rulings on the basis that long-term solitary confinement and the practices of gang validation and debriefing are unconstitutional according to the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments prohibiting cruel and unusual punishment and ensuring states abide due process. Recently, more about the DOC’s practices has come to light. As reported in *Truthout*, prison officials gave parole boards alleged evidence of gang affiliation without acknowledging that its previous system for validating affiliation had been unreliable and violated due process. Additionally, prison officials placed certain people, including settlement plaintiff Todd Ashker, isolated in the restricted custody general population units without reasoning or meaningful periodic reviews. *“It’s a reasonable fear that CDCR will backslide in a number of ways without that oversight,”* CCR attorney CJ Sandley told *Truthout*. Former indefinite SHU prisoners,

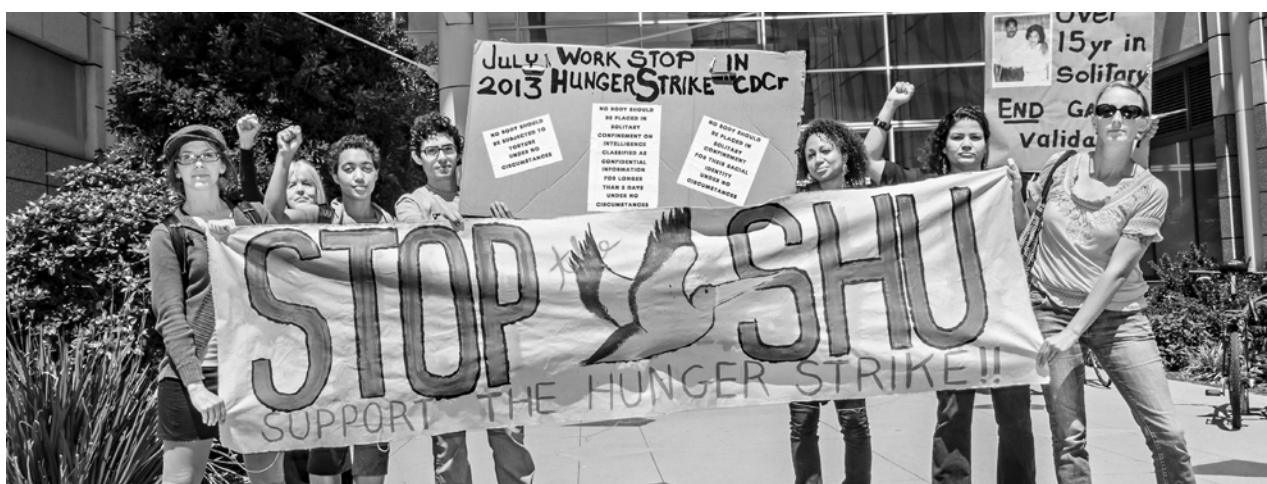
along with their families, now fear being sent back to solitary confinement.

When discussing the ending to the Ashker settlement, Comrade Pops asserted: *“The courts serve power. In movement, there is always negation. This is the very nature of contradiction, opposites, and development and growth. The relief ask was for the end to solitary confinement, indeterminate SHU terms. While we understand the limitation of institutional power, as it relates to the overall objective of PIC abolition, we used that form for the planting of liberation seeds in the landscape of people’s minds. It’s part of doing organizational work.”*

While this court decision ended the past eight years of legal monitoring of the state’s solitary confinement regulations won by the historic HS, it does not erase all the advances of prisoner-led people power that was built, particularly the re-emergence of a unifying “prisoner-class”, and more specifically the SCC’s historic Agreement to End Hostilities. As **Arturo Castellanos**, one of the core SCC members representing a group of Latinx prisoners, who was a plaintiff of the settlement said in response to the recent court decision: *“The Agreement to End Hostilities isn’t going to change even if this case is over. That’s our decision. The court [and DOC] have nothing to do with it. It was the prisoner-class that decided on the Agreement to End Hostilities, and we are continuing to support it. They are going to continue to try to divide us. We succeeded in a lot of ways in this case.”* Similarly, **Sitawa** remarked: *“This is a closed road with all of us in [the DOC]. We can’t allow [the DOC] to divide and fragment us. That’s an old song and dance they’ve been doing for years. [...] We have to show that we are not divided—we are one, as we started in the beginning. We are with a centralized focus going forward in dealing with the many voices of the democratic way. With ya’lls help, we can be more successful in galvanizing the people. This is our future and future generations of people.”*

Reinforcing the power of prisoners coming together, the fearless and bold solidarity from family members outside is an undeniable victory of the HS. Marie agrees: *“Family connection is so valuable for prisoners, standing together no matter what. That connection may be the only lifeline someone inside has, helping them stay grounded, reminding them of who they are (not what the system tells them). It keeps them connected to their humanity. Family members must actively love their imprisoned loved ones, beyond what they can see, feel, and hear, unconditionally. If we love them, we can love them to wholeness. Through love that any family member can show to another family member, to know they are not fighting alone, that is where we find our humanity and can have the courage and power to right our wrongs. We can right all of our wrongs if we are still living.”*

Imprisoned people, advocates, family members, and community and legal organizations refuse to surrender. They have already appealed the Ninth Circuit ruling and continue pressing lawmakers to pass the Mandela Act, which limits isolation to no more than 15 days. To echo Comrade Pops, we press on *toward abolitionist horizons*, dismantling all control units and repressive institutions. ♦



Students and community members rallying for the SCC and HS participants. 2013.