

interview with BONNIE KERNES & 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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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