

# THE ABOLITIONIST

WINTER 2021

FREE TO PEOPLE IN PRISONS, JAILS, AND DETENTION CENTERS • ESPAÑOL AL DORSO

ISSUE 36: Pathways toward Freedom

FEATURES ANALYSIS

## Ripping Out the Roots of Imprisonment Through a Southern Organizing Approach

By Stephanie Guilloud, Rehana Lerandean, and Woods Ervin

When we think of the historical roots of the abolitionist movement and the pathways to freedom used by organizers for centuries, we must begin in the US South. This region can be thought of not only as an epicenter of our opponent—where white supremacist violence has been tested, implemented, and outsourced across the globe since the early 1600s—but also as a stronghold of strategies and tactics for getting—and keeping—people out of cages. The history of the US South can be understood and leveraged by our movements today to adopt a long-haul view of the ebb and flow of our wins and opposition, so we can more effectively fight and win.

In our current context of Southern organizing, we can see that the prison industrial complex (PIC) is incredibly efficient, tactical, and highly interconnected across the 14-state Southern region. Here the roots of oppression run deep. In the same region where we once saw chattel slavery, the Black Codes, and Jim Crow, we are now faced with the current manifestation of the PIC: The sheer numbers of people in cages, the laws and policies that lock people up for long amounts of time, and the efforts to crush resistance movements across the region.

From a pure numbers perspective, **Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Arkansas, and Alabama have imprisonment rates among the top 10 globally**, according to the Prison Policy Initiative. The South also has the highest rates of felony disenfranchisement in the country, as reported by the Sentencing Project. It also has a concentration of punitive policies and laws, like Alabama’s Habitual Offender Act. Florida passed the anti-protest law (HB1) this year, a direct counterattack to the uprisings in the summer of 2020, commissioning cops to charge protesters with a third-degree felony at their discretion, and making tearing down a confederate flag a crime punishable by up to 15 years in prison. The South’s concentration of high-functioning systems of criminalization, arrest, and caging means that the Southern organizing response must be more effective than the gears of the PIC in order to win.

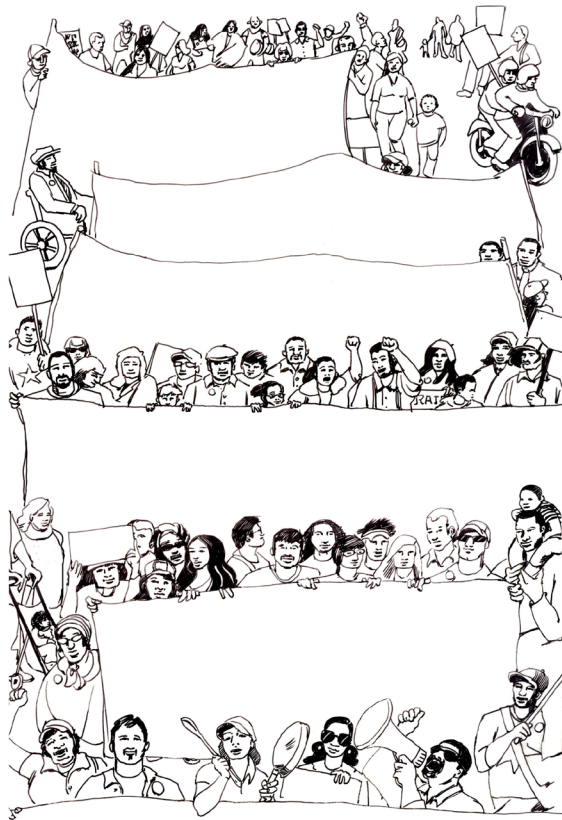
So how has the PIC been able to establish such a stronghold on the South when it comes to caging our people, and how does Southern organizing

respond and fight to establish pathways to freedom? To answer this, we must look at our current context through the framework of the past. Southern organizing is anchored in understanding the 500-year-old root of the modern manifestation of the PIC that we fight today. It seeks to rip out that root, along with its sinister tendrils that replicate throughout history and into our futures.

We know that Southern organizing happens in the belly of the beast and it can illuminate lessons that are useful to our movement across the US. **Southern organizing is rooted in historical analysis**, as seen in the successful fight by The Ordinary People Society (T.O.P.S.) in Alabama, a faith-based national nonprofit founded in 1994, against “laws of moral turpitude”, leveraged for over a century to increase sentencing to imprisonment in the state. **Southern organizing connects the fight against racial capitalism to our fight to close cages**, as seen in the radical organizing that shut down an effort to build a federal prison in an economically depressed region in rural Kentucky. And **Southern organizing connects our fights across frontlines and dismantles silos**, a tactic that leads to successes, as seen in the fight to close the Irwin County Detention Center, an ICE prison in Georgia.

“Southern organizing is anchored in understanding the 500-year-old root of the modern manifestation of the PIC that we fight today. It seeks to rip out that root, along with its sinister tendrils that replicate throughout history and into our futures.”

These are only a few examples of hundreds in the story of the South that we can leverage to establish pathways toward freedom. Movements rise and fall; they gain steam and traction, but face a constant counterattack from our opposition. If we don’t recognize the Southern movement as it rises—and the counter-movement as it attempts to crush—we’re missing important lessons for radical organizing against imprisonment across the country.



“Primero De Mai” by Sanya Hyland, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

### HISTORICAL ANALYSIS IS CRITICAL TO ORGANIZING STRATEGY

The historical analysis that Southern strategy calls is one that leverages multifaceted tactics from the front porch to the courtroom and determines what moves to make by looking at broad swaths of time. One example born out of Alabama-based organizing was the attack on racist sentencing laws that influenced the large-scale imprisonment rates we see in the South today. Pastor Kenneth Glasgow, a formerly imprisoned organizer with T.O.P.S., began the work of organizing folks in his hometown of Dothan, Alabama by asking the question, “Why are so many people in my state being locked up for so long?” The answer lies in the laws of moral turpitude enacted in 1901 and their origins in Jim Crow. During the post-slavery Reconstruction era of the 1870s, new “moral turpitude” statutes across Southern states became a vehicle for former confederate state constitutions to ensure the legal continuation of the disenfranchisement of Black people.

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# Letter from the Editors

Dearest Readers,

Welcome to Issue 36 of *The Abolitionist*, the third and final issue of 2021. Issue 36 features articles on **“Pathways toward Freedom,”** uplifting a set of strategies for getting people out of cages, from **prison closure campaigns** in California to **participatory defense efforts** in Pennsylvania, **cash bail and pre-trial reform efforts** across the US, campaigns for **mass releases** both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in both Iran and the US, and **advocacy work for political prisoners** in the US and Palestine. The issue features a collaboration between Project South and Critical Resistance (CR), exploring how the US South may hold many of the keys for pathways toward freedom in its legacies of abolitionist organizing. We also include a metaphorical and personal reflection on “pathways toward freedom” by Ricardo Vela Jr, who made his debut as an imprisoned contributor to *The Abolitionist* in the Kites to the Editors in Issue 35.

This issue also includes two feature resources, an excerpt from a toolkit, called “On the Road to Freedom,” that CR published with Community Justice Exchange in the summer of 2021, providing an abolitionist assessment of cash bail and pre-trial reforms, and a set of questions provided by UnCommon Law that prisoners can use to prepare for parole. Mohamed Shehk’s article on the prison closure campaign that CR and Californians United for a Responsible Budget are fighting to close 10 prisons in the next few years includes a survey that we hope you will look over. Please consider sharing your responses with us, whether you are incarcerated in California or another state. In addition to welcoming the return of all of *The Abolitionist’s* columns, we include Stevie Wilson’s column

“9971,” which includes 21 questions for people inside to consider and reflect on. Share your responses to those questions with us as well, and we will make sure Stevie gets them. As usual, see the Call for Content and submission guidelines on page 22 to submit content for future issues. While we can’t guarantee a response to all the mail we receive, unfortunately, we would love to hear from you, and to expand the number of contributions to each issue by people currently locked up.

Next year, *The Abolitionist* Editorial Collective will be scaling down the frequency of the paper to produce two issues per year instead of three. We will be printing Issue 37 on housing in the late Spring of 2022, and Issue 38 on labor in late fall of 2022. We hope that producing two instead of three issues per year will create more room for our editorial collective to struggle more deeply with one another and our readers, work more closely with people inside to generate content, and focus more intently on expanding our distribution and use of the paper inside and outside of cages. If the collective is able to regenerate more capacity to scale back up to three issues per year in the future, we will consider doing so. Our commitment is to improving our accountability to you, our readers, and to making sure that we deliver strong, rigorous, vibrant, and rich abolitionist analysis, action tips, and reflections in each issue that we produce.

We are sending each and every one of you radical love, strength, and resilience. We hope this issue ignites your passion for freedom and will to fight for a better world and thrive.

In struggle,  
Critical Resistance & *The Abolitionist* Editorial Collective ♦



“When I Get My Freedom” by Molly Costello, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

## Announcements & Reminders:

### Two Issues Per Year Starting 2022!

In 2022, *The Abolitionist* Editorial Collective is changing the frequency of the newspaper to only two issues in the year instead of three.

Look out for a late Spring 2022 issue (#37), and a late fall issue (#38).

### Critical Resistance National Office has moved!

In the summer of 2021, we had to move our national office of over a decade from downtown Oakland due to rising rent. Make sure you have our new mailing address :).

WRITE TO US AT:

**Critical Resistance**

Attn: The Abolitionist  
PO Box 22780  
Oakland CA 94609-2301

OR CALL US AT:

**510-444-0484**

## THE ABOLITIONIST

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Critical Resistance (CR) seeks to build an international movement to end the prison industrial complex (PIC) by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe. We believe that basic necessities such as food, shelter, and freedom are what really make our communities secure. As such, our work is part of global struggles against inequality and powerlessness. The success of the movement requires that it reflect communities most affected by the PIC. Because we seek to abolish the PIC, we cannot support any work that extends its life or scope.

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chisement of Black people. “Black codes” and “crimes” of vagrancy enabled the continued oppression of Black folks in the US through the constant threat of being funneled into cages, and the process of criminalizing Black life as “immoral” forced Black people into a subclass where they earned lower wages and struggled with economic security. This significantly predates the rise of the PIC and the reemerging dominance of neoconservative interests as part of global economic management in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The laws fought to ensure the continuation of white supremacy and social control for well over a century, through the Keynesian management period of capitalism after the Great Depression and on into our current context.

If we know our history, we can build a strategy that changes the terrain and fights to win. T.O.P.S. developed a grassroots campaign that sought to chip away at the racist laws of moral turpitude by anchoring its campaign in one key tactic: Attack the *definition* of these laws. Because the laws were vaguely defined, opponents were able to use harsh sentencing as a strategy of oppression on an enormous scale, which no doubt contributed heavily to the massive imprisonment rates in Alabama today. By fighting for a more specific definition, T.O.P.S. sought to limit the reach of the harm and break the pipeline of people moving into imprisonment. Organizers established a multi-tactic approach that included building a base of support in the region, educating folks on the historical root of the present-day fight, setting up systems of mutual aid like reentry housing and soup kitchens, and making visible the present-day victims of the PIC in Alabama. Relationships were built in the church, in the soup kitchen, and the courts to establish a powerful base, and in 2017, the campaign successfully defined the laws of moral turpitude, limiting the laws to less than 50 designations. This will have lasting effects on keeping folks free from imprisonment.

The historical legacy of white supremacy playing out in Dothan, Alabama and the successful fight against it is just one example of why it is so crucial for our movements to strategize and employ tactics grounded in a strong historical analysis. Identifying and targeting the centuries-old roots of our current regional contexts and how they undergird the PIC will inform a way forward that prevents the continued evolution of tools of our oppression.

## SOUTHERN PEOPLE POWER WINS

The South’s role in the history of racial capitalism spans the era of confederate slave labor up to the twenty-first century. Today, prisons are portrayed as (false) solutions to real and imagined problems across the US, in different contexts depending on the region and the manifestation of the PIC in that area. In 2019, the US Penitentiary Letcher County (the prison known as USP Letcher), was being sited on a former toxic strip mine in eastern Kentucky. Designed to uphold racial capitalism in the region, prison plans touted a positive pathway for economic development through job creation. If approved, the \$444 million project would have paved the way for the fourth federal prison in the state and the most expensive prison in the country.

When faced with the argument that the prison would be a good source of local jobs, Ada Smith of the Letcher Governance Project said, as quoted in an article in *The Appeal*:

I do not know anyone who dreams of being a prison guard. The people who have organized against these prisons, we think, ‘I don’t want my kinfolks and my neighbors to have their jobs be dependent on keeping people in cages.’

This small group of scrappy, rural organizers was successful in shutting down the plans for the prison against tremendous odds and using a range of tactics: Raising environmental concerns related to building on an old strip mine; collaborating with inside organizers who put forward successful lawsuits against the plans; exposing the contradictions of arguments around economic growth and prison jobs; and

combating the demonization of folks locked up. The Bureau of Prisons had assumed there would be no resistance because Appalachia has been the target of effective white supremacist strategies to divide and conquer along race and class lines for centuries. Yet a generation of Appalachian organizers challenged the idea of prison jobs as a legitimate solution to lifting a region out of destitution and therefore secured an important victory for PIC abolition.

The fight against USP Letcher exposed an insidious expression of the ways racial capitalism has continued to function in the South, including



“Power Concedes Nothing without Demand” by Melanie Cervantes, Dignidad Rebelde.

its use in expanding the PIC. It has also brought forth an opportunity for organizers to build space for the community of eastern Kentucky to ask, “what would we use \$444 million for?” The win against USP Letcher and the subsequent #Our444Million campaign makes a bold statement that proves Southern organizers are invested in envisioning a plan for economic development that matches their principles and are committed to closing cages. Organizers must be imaginative in our strategies to chip away at the PIC, as well as in how we envision the world we haven’t built yet, in order to achieve abolition.

## FIGHTING FOR THE FUTURE WE WANT

The fights that those of us in the South take up today aim to abolish entirely the systems that harm and control us. We use a grounded historical analysis in our praxis to identify the roots of the PIC as our targets. We’ve been working for decades to form a cross-movement organizing approach in our 14-state region while employing a broad range of tactics in each state’s unique context. This approach is essential to understanding the landscape of jails, prisons, detention centers, and parole/probation across the region.

One year ago, Project South and its Georgia-based partners succeeded in closing an ICE prison in South Georgia called the Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC). The pathway to that victory and the release of the people held there came from a Southern organizing strategy that can be used as a case study of tactics that can be leveraged in service of our movements. As always, the assessment of conditions began with an analysis of the historical context of the prison, which required linking three so-called wars waged on our people over the past 50 years: The war on drugs, the war on terror, and the war on immigrants. In all three “wars”, our opponents rolled out laws that capitalized on manipulating public fear and panic.

In 2011, the South was hit with some of the worst anti-immigrant bills in the country following mass immigration protests in 2006. A decade after 9/11, the combined efforts of Islamophobic surveillance and preemptive prosecution, the criminalization of migration, and an out-of-control War on Drugs contributed to imprisonment and detention in many forms. Interlocking federal and state agencies opened up new pathways for expansion of the surveillance state, now armed with legislation and technology, and historically rooted in the 1950s-through-1970s era of COINTELPRO infiltration and surveillance tactics. The systems operated from an old playbook of white supremacy and repression that was simply adopting new frontlines. As a result, ICE and Homeland Security emerged as a new

arm of the PIC, and with it, new jails, prisons, and detention centers, like the ICDC in Georgia.

But knowing the origins of the current formation of the PIC enabled organizers to take on campaigns to shut down ICE detention centers across the region. Project South and the Southern Movement Assembly (SMA) investigated conditions of neglect at the ICDC and ICE prisons in the State of Georgia and, in doing so, were able to expose COVID neglect and forced sterilizations that had been happening for decades as part of state-sanctioned violence and genocide. This momentum set the conditions for a whistleblower complaint that went global, and shifted the terrain into a space of truth-telling that resulted in a campaign victory.

Today, the ICDC facility has been shut down, with all immigrant prisoners released or transferred as of September 2021. Southern organizers have transitioned to a plan to close *all* ICE prisons in the region and have begun a visioning process, similar to our comrades in Kentucky, to think through what forms of sustainability we will need for economically depressed and largely Black communities in Georgia, whose residents have been working at these prisons, once the buildings are gone.

Because so much of what we’re up against as we work to chip away at the PIC (along with effective strategies to win) is rooted in Southern history, Southern organizers’ analysis of where our fight needs to go must be taken seriously by the abolitionist movement. Project South has offered a five-point platform that informs our organizing, which has the potential to be both a tool in uniting the abolitionist movement across the US as well as a playbook for state-by-state contexts. The platform encourages us to: **1) Break the Pipeline; 2) Close the Cages; 3) Free the People; 4) Tell the Truth; 5) Repair the Harm.**

As we establish pathways to freedom, ask yourself what the pipeline to cages looks like in your own local context, and how do you disrupt it? Where are people being held in cages, and how do you ensure that your organizing seeks to close them for good, versus move them around? What are your tactics to free the people, and are they informed by an historical analysis? Are you working to tell the truth so that we can expand our message and demands globally? How do you repair the harm of centuries of oppression, using strategies that can move through big questions, like how do you heal from having your uterus taken, or how do you repair a depressed town that has relied on a prison?

To attempt to free people person by person, cage by cage, prison by prison, we’re up against a tidal wave. But if we can understand the successes in the South in relation to any and all abolition successes (and any and all strategic abolitionist steps) then we’re doing better—we’re unifying multiple forces to act from a strategic position, wherever we’re operating, and we will win. ♦

### Author Bios:

**Stephanie Guilloud** is the co-director of the Project South Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide and has a decades long organizing history across the South and the West Coast. Steph was a core team member and co-founder of the Direct Action Network which worked to shut down the World Trade Organization in 1999 and is a co-publisher of “Through the Eyes of the Judged”, a series of autobiographies by formerly and currently imprisoned young men in Washington State. Steph is a long-time friend of Critical Resistance.

**Rehana Lerandeanu** is an Atlanta-based member of Critical Resistance.

**Woods Ervin** (they/them) is a Black, transgender organizer originally from Memphis, Tennessee. Woods has been a member of Critical Resistance, both through the Oakland chapter and at-large, for nearly a decade. In the fall of 2020 Woods was hired by Critical Resistance and is now the organization’s Media and Communications Director.



# Pathways to Freedom Not Always Straight

By Ricardo Vela Jr.

My pathway toward freedom has not been easy. Few things worth having in life come easy, and whatever progress I've made has taken great effort on my part, but at key points along the way I've had real help to "see the light." Like Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, the light can be blinding, and I still struggle to remove the scales from my eyes, still looking for that "street called straight."

Although the struggle is in many respects a universal one, our experiences are all unique and essentially serve as filters through which we receive the universe, informing our core beliefs, attitudes, and approaches to life. This is important because, as Professor Angela Y. Davis points out, "People struggle to understand the basic process of acquiring knowledge because it is subordinate to future earning potential, the capacity to make money in the future, material riches rather than the true riches of living the examined life." So, as I'm learning through my study of *The Abolitionist* newspaper and other material sent to me by Critical Resistance, "abolishing the prison industrial complex means changing the way we think and relate to each other." It's essential to gain a clear understanding of how, "the PIC has infiltrated every aspect of our lives: the way we learn, the way we communicate, what we believe and how we process information." It's that serious. The stakes are really that high. That's why I keep my mind open to new information and analyses, and I make myself available to others, seeking ongoing dialogue, making positive and healthy connections, learning "new strategies" and finding new ways "to move forward with clarity and power!"

There is nothing mystical or esoteric about any of this. It's available to all who choose to open their minds. It's critical. It's logical. The choice is as clear as day from night. I realize now that my life is a testament to this fact, reflected in the choices I've made, the good and the bad. It's empowering to know that nothing is ever predetermined, and nobody's fate is ever sealed. I'm not travelling through life along a channel carved into a rock through which I am forced to flow!

On the other hand, I do believe, as the good Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously articulated, that there is a definite "moral arc" to the universe, a real and dynamic positive force that can gently nudge us forward – or, as the need may be, slightly pull back on the reins – and those of us who are sensitive to this prompting will progress to a better place further down the pathway to freedom; those who resist – although it's futile to resist Truth and Justice, but those who *attempt* to resist – are dragged along the path kicking and screaming, bloodied and bruised. I'm not positing a theory here. I've personally experienced both realities. So, I'm here to say that although life is not predetermined and we are in fact free moral agents, free to make our own choices and even stumble around in the dark if we choose, Truth is inevitable and Justice unavoidable. This knowledge fuels my fire, is the drum-beat that keeps me marching forward, and is the sword I wield in battle even in the midst of my enemies. FROM THIS CAGE INSIDE THE MACHINE, I RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE!

The real irony in all this is that I took my first steps on the pathway to freedom when George W. Bush's neo-fascist political regime, which controlled the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) in 1995, threw me into a 6x10 ft sensory deprivation chamber in the infamous "12 Building" at what's now called Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas – the same "12 Building" which currently houses Texas's Death Row.

In the mid-1990s, the burgeoning prison industrial complex (PIC) and all of the groups who support and profit from it were actively engaged in a widespread effort to discourage and under-

mine any kind of investment in humane or holistic approaches to so-called criminal justice. The passage of time and the "normalization" of it all make it easy to forget that what happened to me took place against the backdrop of the infamous 1994 Crime Bill, shepherded through congress by the current President Joe Biden, along with strong support from police unions and the PIC as a whole.

I haven't forgotten. I can't forget. The neo-fascist state placed me in a 6 x 10ft concrete box, a sensory deprivation chamber smaller than some people's closets, because they didn't want my seeds to fall on fertile ground. Strong-willed and independent-minded young people are not encouraged to think their own thoughts and reach their full potential inside TDCJ's gulags. Although I am a survivor, nobody goes through this and emerges unscathed.

I started to pay close attention to what was going on around me. In the media, they called us "organized criminal gangs": high-level, sophisticated, the worst-of-the-worst. It slowly dawned on me that the real reason the state "disappeared me" was to contain me and break my will. They badly miscalculated and underestimated me. I began to gravitate toward the "writ-writer" Jailhouse-Lawyer types who encouraged me to read and learn about history, politics, and the law. Once the system saw that I was able to understand complex legal concepts, to press formal grievances and litigation, and to speak up for myself and new associates, they began calling me a radical and an anarchist.

**"People struggle to understand the basic process of acquiring knowledge because it is subordinate to future earning potential, the capacity to make money in the future, material riches rather than the true riches of living the examined life."**

I stepped out into the so-called free world on September 13, 2002, convinced that it was never their aim to "reform criminals;" – if that were the case, they should look in the mirror and reform themselves and finally put a stop to hundreds of years of butchery, enslavement, genocide, financial high crimes, illegal land grabs, occupations, and colonialism. Their true aim was to force compliance, to strip me of my humanity and dignity, to snuff out any thoughts of self-determination or independence.

**"The PIC has infiltrated every aspect of our lives: the way we learn, the way we communicate, what we believe and how we process information."**

It is impossible to overstate how the managers of Texas's neo-fascist state will stop at nothing to demonize and discredit anyone capable of orga-



"Still We Reach For One Another," by Kate Morales.

nizing prisoners and helping them to focus their anger on the real enemy: The PIC. These reactionaries are many things – many foul, corrupt things – but they are not stupid. They are well aware of history, well aware that prisons have been incubators of radical and revolutionary movements for positive social change, so it should come as no surprise to learn they engage in the worst kind of dirty tricks to sow division and hatred among us. It is their aim to keep us divided, and idle, and frustrated. It is their worst fear to see a prisoner-led movement that encourages other prisoners to think for themselves, to think critically, to formulate plans and strategies for real growth and success, and to develop our own community-based economies and markets – a value-oriented restructuring of our society that would threaten not only the PIC but global capitalism itself!

Some may scoff at this, but the managers of the PIC and all those in the dark corridors of wealth and power who support and benefit from the PIC understand all too well the validity and accuracy of this analysis. That's why they are so obsessed with building walls to keep us divided and cages to keep us isolated. They will never willingly loosen their grip on power and control or grant us anything like true freedom. That's why we must liberate ourselves by dismantling the PIC, change how we think and learn and communicate, and build our communities in healthy ways to move forward in power! ♦

**Author Bio & Editors' Note:** Ricardo Vela Jr. is imprisoned in Texas. A new subscriber and writer of *The Abolitionist*, Ricardo submitted his first piece as a Kite to the Editors published in Issue 35. "Pathways to Freedom Not Always Straight" is his second submission to the newspaper. We loved Ricardo's take on the "pathways to freedom" being a personal reflection of his struggle and vision of abolition so much that we wanted to print this piece as a feature reflection for the issue. Thanks, Ricardo! Keep up the good work.

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# Hypocrisy or Hope: A Deeper Look at Iran's Mass Prison Releases

By Hamid Yazdan Panah

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the regime in Tehran made headlines when it announced that it would be releasing 85,000 prisoners. This policy was contrasted with the inaction by many US states with respect to carceral releases. Yet a closer examination of Iranian prison policies reveals a very different picture, one that warrants an analysis that is not simply used to critique Western policies.

On the US left, the political discourse on Iran is often juxtaposed with the West and analyzed within the framework of US imperialism. This kind of analysis will often contrast policies by the Iranian regime with those of its US counterpart, with the intent of rehabilitating a perceived image of Iran. This perspective leaves little room for a complete understanding of the reality on the ground, and reinforces a simplistic narrative that leaves Iranians as little more than objects of Western analysis. This is particularly true of discussions related to human rights and Iran's penal system.

While Iran has a long and storied history, the current regime can and should be described as a theocratic dictatorship run by an unelected Supreme Leader with an estimated wealth in the tens of billions of dollars. Despite its international posturing and supposed revolutionary roots, the regime is one of the most reactionary and repressive in the world.

## MASS IMPRISONMENT AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IN IRAN

Iran is home to one of the harshest penal systems in the world, operating as an enforcement mechanism for state power and often used to crush dissent. Reports have placed Iran's prison population at well over 240,000 people imprisoned in some 253 facilities, despite the officially declared capacity of 85,000.

Iran reportedly had a 333% increase in prison population between 1985 and 2017. These statistics coincide with an increase in criminalized behavior related to poverty and economic exclusion, with judiciary officials estimating that a high number of prisoners are serving time related to drugs or robbery.

Dissidents and human rights groups have noted that judicial proceedings in Iran occur with little or no due process. Trials are often deeply politicized and flawed, and prisoners are often not allowed access to legal counsel and are denied the procedural remedies of appeal. Political prisoners who are sentenced to death usually see their fates sealed in court proceedings that occur in a matter of minutes.

These executions, often carried out by public hanging, hold a special political significance beyond the administration of supposed justice. They are in essence an abstraction of the political and judicial climate in Iran, in which a population is controlled through sheer violence and terror. For much of the last decade, Iran has led the world in per capita executions. Many of these executions are related to either drug or political charges, including "waging war against God," a charge often used against dissidents organizing against the regime.

Those executed are often individuals who are marginalized in Iranian society. This includes undocumented migrants and refugees from neighboring Afghanistan, as well as ethnic and religious minorities who face disenfranchisement in Iran. In 2014, Iran hanged an Afghan juvenile, 17-year-old Jannat Mir, for an alleged drug offense, despite the fact that he was a minor. Iran remains one of the only countries in the world to execute juvenile offenders.

The irony is that the regime's blood-soaked policy on drugs and capital punishment has been bankrolled by the United Nations. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has given Iran more than \$15 million since 1998 in order to fight the "war on drugs." Most of this money comes from European nations, despite their own opposition to the death penalty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the horrific nature of Iran's penal system. The regime's response to the COVID-19 outbreak is a case study in cruelty and hypocrisy.

At the outset of the pandemic, the regime announced its plans to conduct mass releases, and this announcement was coupled with additional questionable claims, including that prisons would be taking "precautionary measures" to combat the virus, and that "security-related prisoners," otherwise known as political prisoners, would be included in the releases only if their sentences were for less than five years. Activists have noted that many who were eligible for release, or furloughs, as they are often termed in Iran, did not have the financial means to pay for the high bail amounts given. While welcoming the news of the release, Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, issued a statement in October of 2020, calling for additional releases and noting concerns that some categories of prisoners were disproportionately excluded, including political prisoners, protesters, lawyers and human rights defenders.

As the virus spread throughout the country, many who remained in prison continued to voice concern over the dismal conditions they faced. Some of those detained in prison resorted to escape attempts to save their lives. Local media reported that a major prison break occurred on March 27 in the Saqqez prison in Western Kurdistan province, with as many as 74 prisoners escaping conditions at the prison's medical center.

By the summer of 2020, Iran had increased the number of releases to nearly 100,000. However, these releases did nothing to improve the brutal reality for those still trapped inside Iran's prisons. In July of 2020, France 24 reported that Iran had seen riots in at least 10 prisons over a 10-week period, with those inside calling for basic hygienic supplies like soap and water. In July of 2020, Amnesty International published leaked letters documenting pleas from senior officials responsible for prison management, requesting additional resources to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 among prisoners. The disclosures included one original letter and four follow-up letters requesting protective gear and disinfectant products, with subsequent letters repeating requests and noting the absence of any governmental response. In the latest letter obtained by Amnesty International, dated July 5, 2020, a senior official at the Prisons Organization states that they had received no response from the Ministry of Health and asks for an urgent meeting.

## REPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

The situation had not improved by early 2021. In April, Amnesty International reported that thousands of prisoners in at least eight prisons had staged protests over fears of contracting COVID-19, resulting in a deadly crackdown by security forces, including members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and paramilitary Basij force. This included the use of tear gas and live ammunition, killing at least 21 prisoners, with some reports placing the number as high as 36.

On March 30 and 31, 2021, security forces, including members of Iran's revolutionary guards, suppressed protests in Sepidar prison in the Khuzestan province of Iran. The protests had started after authorities had reneged on their promise to release prisoners as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Pris-



"Free Them All" by Mon Mohapatra.

oners and their families had organized hunger strikes and demonstrations around demands for releases, testing, and adequate sanitary products and facilities. The attack against the prisoners resulted in at least 15 deaths and the transfer of several activists to other prisons where they were held incommunicado. One family reported to Amnesty that they had been ordered to collect the body of their loved one and were told that they had died from a drug overdose, despite the fact that they had never used drugs.

A prisoner released from Sepidar prison provided the following quote to France 24:

The other advice people give most for avoiding COVID-19 is social distancing. But that's not possible either because both the prisons in Ahvaz are overcrowded. They were built for 2,000 [prisoners], but there are about 4,000 people at Sepidar and 5,000 in Sheiban. There are sometimes 20 people in a single cell. Many people have to sleep on the floor.

Danial Zeinolabedini, charged as a minor and held on death row, reportedly died under torture. Danial had been taking part in protests in Mahabad prison when he was transferred to Mindob prison, and called his family to report that he had been severely beaten by guards and pleaded for help. Three days later authorities called his family to collect his body, claiming that he had committed suicide. His family dispute the circumstances of death and reported that his body bore signs of torture.

Despite the dire circumstances, activists in jail have continued to organize with their families and other members of Iranian civil society. In August of 2020 and May of 2021, Nasrin Sotoudeh, a prominent Iranian lawyer and human rights activist, launched hunger strikes to protest the failure of authorities to grant temporary releases and furloughs and apply the release mandate to political prisoners.

Sotoudeh is serving a 38-year prison sentence for her human rights work, having been charged with offenses including "encouraging prostitution" for advocating against the compulsory veiling of women. Sotoudeh's most recent hunger strike, which reportedly lasted several weeks, was coordinated with other activists to pressure the judiciary to take action on releases.

Sotoudeh's husband, Reza Khandan, was critical of the regime's policies in the wake of the pandemic and pointed out the hypocrisy of the regime, stating, "Even in such an extraordinary situation, the government conducted a 'sensational' release of thousands of prisoners, but has still refrained from freeing all political prisoners."

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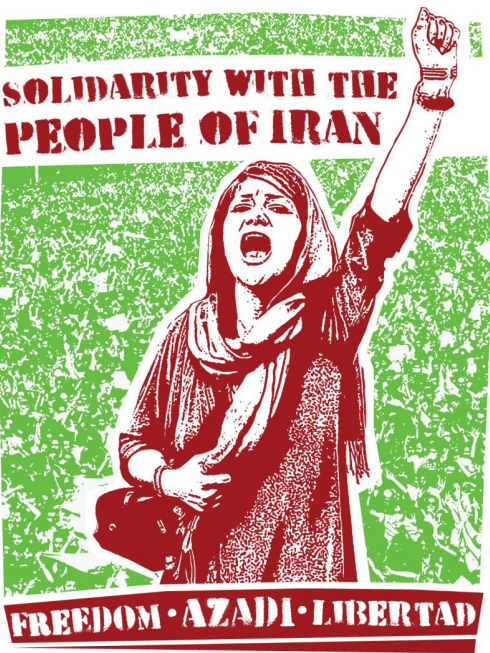
SEEKING JUSTICE AT HOME AND ABROAD

In all, Iran was reported to have released as many as 128,000 prisoners on furlough, and pardoned another 10,000 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet these numbers belie the reality that the regime has for years been incarcerating almost twice the total number of individuals it has capacity to hold, and largely ignoring calls to grant clemency to prisoners of conscience.

Thousands of political prisoners still remain in custody, and those who dare to organize or protest the regime are quick to join them. Their families have appealed to the authorities to release them on furlough at least until the health crisis is under control, but the regime continues to view dissent as the ultimate crime, and its punitive authority as a core foundation. The failures of Iranian authorities with respect to prisons is further heightened by their callous propaganda on the matter, with the head of the judiciary at one point claiming that prisoners experienced “better standards of health care and sanitation than they would in society.”

Despite this bleak situation, Iranian activists have struck back at the regime.

In August of 2021, Swedish prosecutors brought a landmark case against an Iranian official accused of participating in the 1988 massacre of political prisoners in Iran. The case, which relies on the concept of universal jurisdiction for certain crimes against humanity, is supplemented by thousands of pages of evidence compiled by various Iranian activists. The 1988 massacre has for decades been a taboo subject in Iran, with au-



“Iran Solidarity” by Jesus Barraza, Dignidad Rebelde.

thorities refusing to acknowledge the summary execution of thousands of political prisoners in the summer of that year.

That same month, a group of hackers launched an audacious attack against one of Iran’s most notorious prisons, releasing video footage directly from Evin prison in Tehran. The hackers shared footage they obtained through the prison’s video surveillance and computer network with journalists. The hacking incident elicited a rare apology from the Iranian regime officials, with Prisons Organisation Chief Mohammad

Mehdi Haj-Mohammadi taking responsibility for unacceptable behavior.

The footage not only included direct recordings from the prison’s own surveillance system showing guards beating prisoners and individuals kept in solitary confinement; it also showed the moment when hackers revealed to authorities that they had breached their system. The hackers sent a direct message to prison authorities on their own internal monitors, including flashing the message “General protest until the freedom of political prisoners” on their screens.

While COVID-19 rages through the country, the pandemic has also laid bare the outrageous hypocrisy and brutal reality of Iran’s penal system. This reality requires a deeper analysis than simply contrasting Iran’s policies with those of the US, as well as a heralding of the grassroots resistance and heroic actions of those fighting for their freedom and their lives.

Such an analysis does not require some high level of cultural literacy to understand, but it does require us to listen to the universal acts of defiance and hope that we should recognize and support in every prison in the world. Following the hacking of Evin prison’s computers, the activists behind the operation shared the following message to the world: “We want the world to hear our voice for freedom of all political prisoners.” It is time that we listen.♦

**Author Bio:** *Hamid Yazdan Panah is an Iranian refugee residing in the US. Hamid is the Advocacy Director for Immigrant Defense Advocates, a California-based project focused on immigration detention.*

FEATURES ACTION

# #FreeThemAll4PublicHealth: us Organizing for Mass Release during COVID-19

with Free Them All for Pulic Health NY, Free Them All Washington, and Florida Prisoner Solidarity

By Rory Elliott

As COVID turned from epidemic to pandemic in early 2020, the struggle against imprisonment adopted a new level of urgency. Many organizations, coalitions, and networks sprung into action under the banner of “Free Them All” by working across walls to demand mass release of people from jails, prisons, and detention centers; the ending of bail and court operations; and better conditions for those still inside. Some of these connections have still remained nearly two years later, others have tapered off, and many have evolved. **Rory Elliott** of Critical Resistance Portland and *The Abolitionist* Editorial Collective conducted interviews between **Mon**, a propagandist and writer from India, working on issues of abolitionist moratoriums and decarceration of all carceral structures with *Free Them All for Public Health NY*; **Oloth**, who is son of a refugee single mother from Laos, a youth advocate, student, educator, and abolitionist with *Free Them All Washington*; and **Lucy**, an abolitionist organizer currently residing in Gainesville, Florida, and member of *Florida Prisoner Solidarity*.

**The Abolitionist:** *When and why did your group take up the call to Free Them All?*

**Oloth - Free Them All Washington:** I am an organizer with *Free Them All WA* (FTAW), which is a community collective of system-impacted community members and families advocating the abolition of all state-systems that harm Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Just for a little bit of context, I’ve always been about “free them all” and abolitionist work because I’m formerly incarcerated. I just got out like a couple years ago after spending most of my life in prison. In prison, when we organized with our collectives we never thought about changing the system. We



Photo of court mobilization, courtesy of Free Them All WA.

thought about just getting rid of this shit because that’s the only way a lot of us would get free. **A lot of my comrades that are still left behind are doing life sentences or sentences with ridiculous amounts of years. So we didn’t think a “change” in the system would actually get those folks out. No, abolition of the system would get folks out.**



Political funeral action at Florida Capitol, courtesy of Florida Prisoner Solidarity.

In regards to community work, since being on the outside and with *Free Them All WA* more specifically, folks were concerned about their family members, community members, and the treatment that the Washington Department of Corrections (WDOC) was providing for folks inside. As COVID hit, it just got scarier for the families of incarcerated folks and community members that we’re in a relationship with. So we just thought that if not now, when? When is a better time to free them all?

**Mon - Free Them All for Public Health NY:** As soon as we got the news about COVID, many of our inside contacts inside New York City jails and state prisons rightfully feared that this crisis was going to be really terrible inside jails, detention centers, and prisons. People on the outside started packaging soap, hand sanitizers, other personal protective equipment (PPE), and really anything that was allowed to be sent in. During one of the soap distributions, someone stressed that there must be more advocacy for releases and clemency. Folks were like: “So why don’t we just do it?” That was the beginning of *Free Them All for Public Health*. After that, a group of organizations and organizers came together to start talking about the situation. *Free Them All for Public Health* became a campaign in NYC to demand releases at city, state, and national levels as part of challenging the punitive and carceral response to COVID-19.

**“A lot of my comrades that are still left behind are doing life sentences or sentences with ridiculous amounts of years. So we didn’t think a “change” in the system would actually get those folks out. No, abolition of the system would get folks out.”**

**Lucy - Florida Prisoner Solidarity:** *Florida Prisoner Solidarity* is at its core what was formerly Gainesville Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC). We are a carceral abolitionist collective with membership expanding across the state, both inside and outside prisons. In the typical abolitionists’ form, we saw COVID as an opportunity to gain more public awareness and support than is usually available to us and our movement. We started moving as soon as COVID reached the US. Our work took a direct action approach.

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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?



# Bringing the Community Together: Participatory Defense and the Philly Youth Hub



Interview with My Le of Philly Participatory Defense Youth Hub by Critical Resistance's Susana Draper

Susana Draper, from *The Abolitionist* Editorial Collective, interviewed My Le to learn about the work of the Philly Youth Hub. My Le is a youth organizer with the Youth Art and Self-Empowerment Project (YASP) and acts as facilitator for the Philly Youth Hub and the Healing Futures Restorative Justice Diversion Program. When she was charged at 17 and sent to an adult jail, My got connected with YASP and joined the organization as a staff member after her release. She is currently editing an anthology of poetry and art by YASP members.

Run by young people who have gone through the system, the Philly Youth Hub is the first participatory defense hub in the country that focuses on young people. It gives the youth tools to navigate their cases, learn about the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline, and make their voices part of the struggle to end the incarceration of all people. The Silicon Valley De-Bug, crucial in training people to run hubs across the country, defines participatory defense as “a community organizing model for people facing charges, their families, and communities to impact the outcomes of cases and transform the landscape of power in the court system.” Another unique aspect of the Philly Youth Hub is that their work to end incarceration does not stop once someone is released from prison. Many times, young people who have been released have no homes or jobs to return to, so YASP provides training to help navigate the process of applying for jobs, resources for housing and employment, and even some fellowships for part-time jobs.

**Can you tell us about the history of the Philly Youth Hub?**

**My:** We launched the Philly Youth Hub in 2019, which is a hub where young people and their families can come get support with their cases through participatory defense. We mainly focus on three components: 1) We support young people in any way we can, from getting in contact with their lawyer, setting up meetings if they find it difficult to with their lawyer themselves, to helping young people navigate the court process and what each court date is for. 2) We do court support, showing up at each person's court dates, making sure they get enough support. Before the pandemic happened, we used to pack the whole courtroom with all our supporters to show judges, demonstrating “this young person got all these people behind them.” It shows a lot of character for a judge, demonstrating “Oh yeah, this person has all these people here, that's impressive.” Now, with the pandemic, not a lot of people

can be in a courtroom, so we always try to have at least one or two people there to support them. 3) We also work together to do a social video and package to advocate for release. We create a video, put together with the family, friends and whoever the defendant wants to be there to talk about who they are as a person. When you come in front of a judge, they judge you based on your charges. We present the video to the judge to show them who a person really is – a young person who helps their mom around the house, or an athlete or football player, or someone passionate and committed to helping their community.

**Has participatory defense been a successful strategy so far? What are some challenges that you have faced throughout time?**

**My:** We've had a couple successful cases where we had so much support for young defendants that they kind of got a good outcome. I think of a young person who was working with his case with the Hub, and his case was dropped, completely, so he didn't have to do any time. Sometimes the case might not be dismissed, but they get an outcome that is better than what they had already been dealing with, like with, my co-worker's case. He went through the Youth Hub, and we supported his case to the point where he was sentenced to two years of house arrest instead of incarceration. As for some challenges, working with hired private lawyers sometimes it's hard because we usually work with public defenders, and we have a connection and relationship with them. So, when a young person comes to us and they have a public defender, it's easy to communicate with the office. But when you have a private lawyer, sometimes they tend not to talk to other people outside of the client, and the communication is hard. But most of the time we always try to overcome the challenges.

**What do you think that someone who is currently reading this in prison need to know about using participatory defense and make it most effective to win their freedom?**

**My:** When I was locked up, the Youth Hub wasn't around, and I didn't get that much help. But now, there currently are around six or seven hubs in the city. I'm not sure exactly how many, but it's a lot, and it's a lot of people involved. People can support in a lot of different ways. For example, if it is a young person, we personally can help them because we mainly focus on young people. If it is an adult, then there are other hubs that they can turn to. For someone incarcerated, if they want to join a hub, either a family or a friend can come to the hub and they can talk about what's going on in the case, what kind of support they need, and then, the whole hub will help them go through it, either using the resources we got or

putting them in contact with a person whom we know could be helpful to reach out to. We're not lawyers, but we are able to offer that kind of support to make sure they get a good outcome. If you're incarcerated, have anybody close to come represent you, who knows about the case. We just started meeting in-person for the hub again every week. We do in-person and virtual meetings, so whoever is comfortable with being in-person, they're more than welcome to come to the space, to our office, to be around us. We always make sure there is food there. Then we also do virtual meetings for the people who are more comfortable not being in-person, because of the pandemic.

**Are there particular learnings from working with youth, which is the focus of the specific work you are all doing?**

**My:** YASP had already done work around young people in different ways and fighting for them to come home and not be incarcerated. That's how we got connected in opening and launching a youth hub; we were kind of already doing the work. The participatory defense hub added something for us to empower our work. For us, it is important to help youth stay out of the system and to inform folks about the school-to-prison pipeline, or how imprisonment impacts and targets youth. Also, most of the time, we hire young people who have been incarcerated before. If they were a part of the youth hub, we try to offer them a job. We have this program called “Youth Fellowship,” where youth can start working with us and can also work their way up toward other positions once they receive trainings. But we also try to help young people in any kind of support they want. If they want to do other jobs in other areas, we try to find resources for them. We basically plant a seed for young people and if they want to grow and sprout in other ways, we're here to help. We're here to plant that seed, so they can grow.

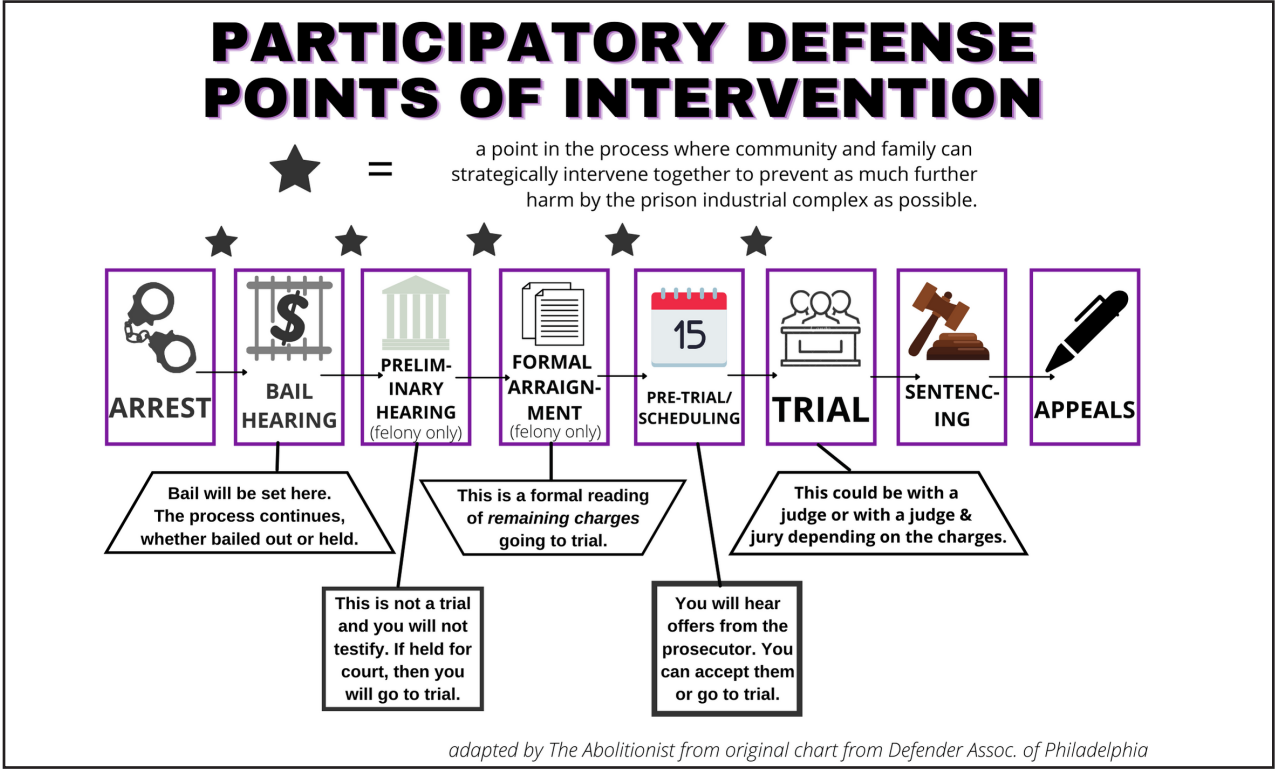
**Does the work you do every week in the hub have an impact on the community? Has it helped to create another sense of community related to ending incarceration?**

**My:** Yeah, I feel like it brings the community together. A lot of family members that came to us, they needed help with their young person, with their case, because a lot of times family members don't know what's going on with their kids' cases, so they always try to come get support with us. We can't promise the outcome that the family is looking for, but we make sure they get the answer and resources to anything they need. We're there to support the community. We always try to make sure that they understand everything that's going on with their court process, to make sure they know that there's other options besides what the District Attorney said. The Hub brings everybody together, because, in the Hub, we're all like a family, we all know each other. When new people come in, we welcome them and make sure like they are family, make them feel they're comfortable in this space so they can always come back. We want everyone to feel like: “this is the place I want to go to get the support I need for my family.” You know, literally, a few people that were getting help with their kid's cases, after their kid's cases were already done with, they continued coming and volunteering and supporting every single Tuesday with us. That's the vibe we want to give out to the community, to let the people know we're here for them, and that's how we bring the community together.

The Philly Youth Hub (YASP) meets every Tuesday, 4:30-6:30pm, virtually and in-person at 924 Cherry Street 5<sup>th</sup> floor, Philadelphia, PA.

Contact Email: [info@yaspproject.com](mailto:info@yaspproject.com)

**Write to Critical Resistance** if you would like to get a list of Participatory Defense Hubs across the country. ♦



Designed by Billy Ray Boyer



# Toward Abolition: The Movement-Made Strategy of Ending Money Bail

By Sharlyn Grace

**Editors' Note:** *This piece builds on and adapts themes originally explored in "Organizers Change What's Possible" in Inquest.*

Earlier this year, Illinois passed a bill that will abolish money bail and ensure more people are released instead of jailed while awaiting trial. It is the first legislative victory of its kind in the country. This monumental achievement was the result of over five years of concerted organizing and was enabled by the broader Black Lives Matter movement. The successful campaign by the Coalition to End Money Bond and the Illinois Network for Pretrial Justice was anchored in part by the Chicago Community Bond Fund (CCBF) and its abolitionist vision. This article tells one part of the story of how this movement victory was won.

When CCBF launched in 2015, we had two goals: (1) to operate a community bail fund that would free people immediately, and (2) to end money bail. The founding members of CCBF had been actively supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. We were a mix of organizers and impacted people, abolitionists and not, anarchists and progressives.

Initially, we focused on getting the bail fund up and running because the goal of ending money bail felt further away and harder to achieve. The first year we were in operation, CCBF paid \$300,000 to free 45 people. Every year, we paid more bonds to free more people until last year, in 2020, when CCBF paid over \$2.5 million to free more than 300 people. Those numbers are significant, but they represent only a tiny fraction of the people impacted by money bail and pretrial jailing. As we kept fundraising for and paying more bonds, around 70,000 people were being admitted to Cook County Jail each year. Across Illinois, over 250,000 people were being admitted to 92 county jails; 90% of them were awaiting trial, and the majority were jailed because they couldn't afford to pay money bail.

Given the scale of the problem, it became clear to us that operating a bail fund was not a solution to the crisis of pretrial incarceration. While people were grateful that we had paid their bail, they had almost always already suffered immensely by the time we secured their freedom, including losing their jobs, housing, and sometimes custody of their children.

Bailing someone out could be transformative in their life and the lives of their loved ones, and we wouldn't stop operating the bail fund. But we became much more focused on the systems change work needed to prevent people from being booked into Cook County Jail in the first place.

As we strategized around the policy changes needed, CCBF members learned from the expertise that people in the system graciously shared with us and from our own experiences paying bail, resolving issues people had after they got out, and supporting people through their cases. Most of all, people just wanted to be free from pretrial punishment—whether in the form of jail, surveillance, or “programming.”

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE COALITION TO END MONEY BOND

In 2016, CCBF served as a co-convener and anchor organization for the formation of the Coalition to End Money Bond, which brought together community organizing, policy advocacy, and faith-based groups. The organizations in the coalition came from a variety of progressive political positions and strategies, taking up the cause of ending money bail and reducing pretrial jailing as part of their existing campaigns against

mass incarceration and as part of their commitment to racial and economic justice.

During this time, CCBF also began to be in touch with other bail funds around the country. There were just three other formal bail funds when we launched in 2015, but more formed every year. The National Bail Fund Network formed in 2016 to support this new strategy and push would-be charities toward organizing instead. Alongside these new community bail funds and our local movement partners, CCBF members deepened our abolitionist analysis and commitments. **We began to understand our goal not just as ending money bail but as ending pretrial imprisonment.** We began to talk more explicitly about reducing pretrial jailing as a way to take away power from the state and help prevent more people from being sent further into the system, since people who were locked up pretrial were more likely to be convicted and received longer sentences than people who were free awaiting trial. We learned from people in the system that pretrial jailing and house arrest with electronic monitoring were coercive, providing leverage that prosecutors used to force pleas.

**“Bailing someone out could be transformative in their life and the lives of their loved ones, and we wouldn't stop operating the bail fund. But we became much more focused on the systems change work needed to prevent people from being booked into Cook County Jail in the first place.”**

We also saw how the punishment system continued on; as we paid bail, each person we freed was replaced by another in the same position. Most disturbingly of all, we noticed that the court system occasionally even welcomed our work. For instance, the sheriff's office was relieved when we bailed out a pregnant woman at risk of giving birth in custody or a nonbinary trans person for whom they didn't have a housing designation. Simultaneously, corporate and government-run bail funds began to emerge and partner with sheriffs' offices. For CCBF, by contrast, acceptance by actors within the system was a signal that our strategies were not challenging enough of its power and that we had to push further.

## OUR STRATEGIES TO EXPAND PRETRIAL FREEDOM

CCBF's presence in the coalition helped ensure our joint policy proposals were compatible with prison industrial complex abolition as both an immediate strategy and a long-term goal. We looked to Critical Resistance and the idea of “abolitionist reforms” or “non-reformist reforms” that would shrink the system's power to jail, surveil, or otherwise punish people. Many coalition members were not committed to abolition as a framework, but their observations of the system's functioning led them to the same conclusion: that police, prosecutors, judges, and other actors within the system couldn't be trusted not to use the power they had to hurt people. This shared analysis led the Coalition to End Money Bond to formulate our policy demands for the campaign with a focus on reducing the power, scope, and reach of the current pretrial punishment system. Foremost in our minds was a mandate to in no way increase the state's power to cage, control, or monitor people. This meant that we would not propose or agree to any increases in preventive detention power, presumptions of detention, or any other weakening of existing bail law.



The Coalition to End Money Bond rallies to demand the end of money bail alongside members of the National Bail Fund Network in Chicago on September 18, 2018. Image courtesy of the Coalition to End Money Bond.

Because money bail is—on paper—a decision to release someone, our theory has always been that without the current system of using unaffordable money bail to cage people, prosecutors and courts would have less power to jail people outright. Then, when forced to make transparent, reviewable detention decisions, judges would not be able to justify detaining most of the people they currently jail through unpaid money bail. Prosecutors would have less power to coerce pleas and force people to give up their rights. Ultimately, the state would be deprived of power, and some of that power would be restored to accused people.

At first, the Coalition to End Money Bond tried to enforce existing protections against unaffordable money bail by joining with civil rights lawyers to sue several judges in 2016. In the process, we learned how much of policymaking is about power rather than textual changes to the law. While the lawsuit was pending in 2017, Cook County announced a local court rule that cut the use of money bail in half. The number of people in the jail per day decreased by 1,500 within three months and has stayed at almost 2,000 fewer people for four years. This dramatic transformation in bail-setting practices was achieved entirely through movement building and shifting political pressure toward pretrial release. We also learned the limits of this sort of “soft” enforcement power, as judges continued to set unaffordable money bonds and thousands of people remained in Cook County Jail solely due to inability to pay their ransoms. We needed stronger leverage and binding, statewide policy.

Over the following several years, the coalition attempted to create a statewide version of the local court rule, which could serve the same function as the local court rule but with the force of law. By requiring judges to set money bails only in amounts people could afford to pay, the rule would greatly limit the court's detention power. And, unlike a bill negotiated in the legislature with historically timid allied legislators and aggressive opponents, an Illinois Supreme Court rulemaking process could take away the state's power without opening up the possibility for negative additions. Simply put, we knew in 2017 that we didn't yet have the power needed to pass a decarceral bill at the state capitol, where there would be immense pressure to “balance” the bill by increasing penalties in some other area or for some subset of people.

At this time, CCBF was consistently receiving inquiries from organizers and impacted families living in many different communities in Illinois. We redirected people from merely starting bail funds as charity projects into joining the movement to end money bail and eliminate the need for bail funds. With our coalition partners, we launched a new statewide effort in 2019: the Illinois Network for Pretrial Justice. We continued to target the Illinois Supreme Court and the commission it had formed to recommend pretrial reforms with our new partners. After years of lobbying, the Supreme Court released its recommendations in April 2020 and proved unwilling to endorse abolishing money bail or even our proposed statewide rule on affordable bail. That marked the end of our supreme court rule strategy, but it allowed us to return to the possibility of passing legislation with newly increased power for statewide mobilization and pressure.

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Now committed to passing a decarceral bill that completely ended money bail, the Coalition to End Money Bond and the Network for Pretrial Justice revised our earlier legislation and named it the Pretrial Fairness Act. We were hoping to pass the bill in 2020, but then the pandemic shut down the legislature indefinitely. That spring, we pivoted to respond to the COVID-19 crisis inside jails, ensuring that we acted to protect people immediately while also highlighting the ways the virus magnified the ever-present dangers of incarceration and reinforced the need for pretrial freedom. Imprisoned people and their loved ones risked their safety and wellbeing to communicate with organizers and media on the outside, sharing information about conditions inside and generating a national focus on Cook County Jail as the *New York Times* declared it the “Top U.S. Hotspot” for COVID-19 in April 2020.

The next month, Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd, and people around the world rebelled, rejecting state violence against Black people and calling for justice for Mr. Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others.

As a result of the political pressure created by the uprisings, the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus began working on a package of criminal legal system reforms. By then, our local and national movements had made ending money bail the most “popular” proposal on the table and the issue lawmakers were hearing about most frequently from constituents. As a result, the Pretrial Fairness Act was included as a central component of the bill that was passed on January 13, 2021 and signed into law the next month. When it goes into full effect in January 2023, the Act will make Illinois the first state to completely eliminate money bail.

FEATURES ACTION

# What’s the Call? FREE THEM ALL: Organizing to Liberate Political Prisoners

While the use of imprisonment as a form of punishment and social control is inherently political, the imprisonment of revolutionaries, movement makers, and political dissidents is a long-standing struggle that has greatly informed the foundations of both Critical Resistance as an abolitionist organization and the larger prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition movement as a whole. When envisioning Issue 36’s feature focus “pathways toward freedom,” *The Abolitionist* Editorial Collective wanted to spend some time digging more deeply into the work to free political prisoners and to consider efforts to free political prisoners and “prisoners of war” in the US and globally as a central strategy for PIC abolition. We see this as a clear pathway toward freedom not only for freedom fighters but for our collective liberation. To this end, *The Abolitionist*’s **Ian Baran** interviewed three long-time organizers with **Release Aging People in Prisons (RAPP)**, **Jericho Movement**, and **Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association**. Lifting up the importance of political prisoner support movements, especially as they work within broader movement work, this interview considers the modes of political prisoner support, how the movement has gotten people free, the ebbs and flows of political prisoner support, how political prisoner advocates view their work within a larger abolitionist framing, and what the future of political prisoner support looks like or should look like.

**Can you tell us a little bit about you and your organization?**

**Jalil Muntaqim:** Jericho came into existence in 1998. Before, there was an organization called the Republic of New Afrika, Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika (PG-RNA) that used to do marches around the White House, what they call Jericho marches. When they stopped doing them in ‘96, I thought, well, why? And I thought that they need to continue as we’re trying to build a great support for po-



Members of the Illinois Network for Pretrial Justice gathered for a legislative strategy session in January 2020. Image courtesy of the Illinois Network for Pretrial Justice.

Beyond ending money bail, the Pretrial Fairness Act completely changes the way decisions about pretrial freedom are made. It reduces people’s contact with the system and time in custody by mandating citations-in-lieu-of-arrests for ordinance violations and requires release directly from police custody for most misdemeanors. It takes power away from judges by making the majority of people arrested every year, those who are charged with misdemeanors and lower-level felonies, ineligible for pretrial detention. It raises the standard of proof and factual findings required before someone can be ordered jailed outright (preventively detained) and reforms the process for handling violations. We didn’t have enough power to pass a bill banning electronic monitoring or risk assessment tools, but we restricted some of their worst uses and ensured better treatment for people subject to them.

The Pretrial Fairness Act is stronger than we ever imagined it could be due to the transformative possibilities created by grassroots social movements. When the Coalition to End Money Bond launched in 2016, the goal of actually ending money bail was considered unrealistic by every policymaker we approached. We were told to consider alternative or partial approaches based on what felt achievable, and we declined. Instead, we worked to make our goal achievable by building power and shifting public consciousness as part of a national movement. And even with the hard-won progress made by our campaign, it was ultimately the street protests and property destruction of last summer that enabled our bill to pass in such a complete and transformative form.

Our success in Illinois demonstrates the radical potential of principled grassroots struggle combined with organized campaigns and of abolitionists working with reformers around shared goals. Instead of limiting reform proposals to fit current political realities, policy advocates must work with organizers to change what’s possible. We hope that campaigns to end money bail across the country, anchored now in many places by over 90 local bail and bond funds, can continue to build on our momentum and win even bigger victories. The policy changes won in Illinois can serve as a new baseline in our movement for expanding pathways to pretrial freedom and ensuring that we hold our people in communities instead of cages. ♦

**Author Bio:** Sharlyn Grace is a founding member of Chicago Community Bond Fund and served as its first executive director. She has provided legal and organizing support for grassroots abolitionist campaigns in Chicago since 2013.



By Kah Yangni, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

litical prisoners across the country. By virtue of that I put out a proposal and in 1996 my comrades Safiya Bukhari and Baba Herman Ferguson came to visit me when I was in Eastern Correctional Facility and they said, “Yes, we will do this, but we will take a couple of years to organize it”. In 1998, we organized a march in Washington, D.C. 6,000 activists from across the country joined in, and, because of that march we decided we will continue this momentum and we built Jerich, a national movement, an amnesty movement.

**Jose Saldana:** RAPP was founded by a collective of formerly incarcerated people. One was a Black man by the name of Mujahid Farid, and two [were] white women from the leftist movement of the ‘60s and early ‘70s, Laura Whitehorn and Kathy Boudin. They had the vision of ending mass incarceration beginning with a practical approach to release aging people and those serving long prison sentences, initial first steps to end mass incarceration. Because at the time, and still prevalent today, you have elder people,

in their sixties and seventies and even eighties who have languished in prison for decades. This was the quest, the monumental task they took on that Mujahid Farid dedicated seven years of his life to before he passed away two years ago.

At the time when RAPP was developing, I was fighting the New York parole board. RAPP used actual parole hearing minutes and court decisions to expose [the racism in the New York State parole decision making process] and presented the evidence to Governor Cuomo’s Office. One of the few things he did that impacted our communities and people of color that languish in prison is not reappoint punitive-minded commissioners who were cited in this report. Instead, he appointed six new commissioners from a diversified background. We were always saying that parole commissioners from a law enforcement background cannot ever give us a fair hearing because they won’t ignore their ideology and training after dedicating their entire lives to creating and contributing to this racist system. When I appeared before the parole board in November 2017, the lead commissioner with a social service background asked me one question about the crime that I committed in 1979, which is normal, and I’m thinking “Here we go again...”, but then, she paused for a second or so and said, “Let’s talk about what you’ve been doing with your life the last 38 years”. So RAPP was directly responsible for my freedom. I was released and, you know, I left men behind who were worthy of freedom just as I was and had really no other choice but to knock on RAPP’s door and report for duty.

**Sahar Francis:** Addameer was founded at the end of 1991 during the first Intifada as a response to the need for mass legal aid for Palestinian political prisoners. Our association and Defence for Children International Palestine, which was also established in the same period, were the first such organizations offering free legal support to Palestinian political prisoners

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and detainees, including child prisoners and their families. We were founded by a group of lawyers, former detainees, and human rights activists who saw the need for a strategic response to the mass campaign of arrests by Israel at the time. After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994, we began to also provide legal support to political prisoners arrested by the PA. Today, we offer free legal aid to hundreds of Palestinian political prisoners held in Israeli and PA prisons every year, while monitoring and documenting detention conditions and human rights violations as well as advocating for their rights both locally and internationally.

I became involved with Addameer in 1996 as a volunteer, where I mostly followed cases of interrogation and conducted prison visits. In 1997, I was employed part-time and began to represent prisoners and detainees in the Israeli military courts. In 1998, I was hired fully, and worked with the organization's Legal Unit until November 2005 when I was appointed to replace Khalida Jarrar, who had decided to run for Parliament, as director.

**Why focus on political prisoners? Why focus on elderly folks in prison?**

**Jalil:** They belong to part of a movement, a dynamic movement of social and economic change for peoples' liberation and independence. Their position in terms of their relationship to the State is more critical, especially as an oppositional force. We also know that they often find themselves in dire conditions and are repressed more because they speak out against the system. They are often put in solitary confinement, beaten up, lose their visits, or other cruelties that make their lives in prison that much more difficult because they believe in the need for fighting against the system. So why would we not support political prisoners? Especially since the United States denies that it has political prisoners or the existence of political prisoners. If we allow the U.S. to do that, then not only are we making an error in regards to our relationship toward one another, but, why would we engage in struggle with the ultimate potential of our being killed or sent to prison and not being supported? The political prisoner movement is part of the revolutionary movement, and it has to be part of a revolutionary movement. The freedom of political prisoners is an extension of the revolutionary movement and any building of a dynamic of liberation and independence.

**Sahar:** The prisoners' cause has always been of central importance to the Palestinian people, but the level of activism on behalf of prisoners has ebbed and flowed as part of a wider reality. Though many were dedicated to the political cause, they were preoccupied with everything happening around them – from the targeted killings and home demolitions, to the building of the apartheid wall and the Israeli siege on Arafat in his Ramallah compound. At the same time, the War on Terror was feeding into Israel's racialized campaign of painting Palestinian political prisoners as terrorists, which also affected international solidarity. The success of prisoners' campaigns is very closely tied to the movements that can show up for them outside of prison.

**Jose:** The two founders [of RAPP] were directly connected with political prisoners, who were also elderly and likely to die in prison. I was released at 66; statistically my recidivism rate is less than 1%. We're talking about a group of people who they cannot say will, upon release, resort to criminal activities. This was a safe bet; if anybody can get out with this, it is those who have the evidence that they not only will not resort to harming others, but they will enhance community safety. These people are a benefit to their home communities and society at large.

One of the fundamental principles RAPP was founded upon is that no one should be excluded from parole justice because parole justice is equal to racial justice. And that principle is based on the history of movements that were fighting against social racial injustice; none of these movements excluded anybody. One thing



By Josh MacPhee, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

for these other orgs out there: we must have that vision - to dismantle the system entirely by uprooting it and leaving nothing behind. We can't stop. We have to keep going and pass on that baton until this system no longer exists. That is how it has to be.

**What are any initiatives that your organization is involved in in the current moment?**

**Jalil:** Let's start with the Spirit of Mandela. In 2018, I put a proposal to bring back the International Jurors and put it under the title of "In the Spirit of Nelson Mandela" because he was resolute—his resilience, and how he survived some of the worst prisons. So in the spirit of Mandela, that kind of resistance and resilience is important. Why 2021? Because 70 years ago, on December 15, 1951, the great Paul Robeson and William Patterson brought the first *We Charge Genocide*, to the United Nations. After the Tribunal, we're taking the charges and decision and going to file a civil rights complaint in Federal Court to force the court to respond. We are not necessarily sure if they will do so, but at least we're presenting how the government must respond. That will continue to build support for educating the public and support civil rights complaints; we're building social and political consciousness and building our capacity to challenge the system on other levels.

**Jose:** We do teachings, forums, panel discussions in district meetings with [representatives]. We stay connected to these leaders by inviting them to our events, press conferences, and by introducing them to incarcerated people who have returned so they can see them for who they are today, not who they were judged as for the years and decades while incarcerated. There came a point where some of our electives would say we're different, but we're not different. We can all be out here serving our communities as credible messengers and social activists capable of bettering our community and enhancing safety.

We take advantage of every opportunity we get. The ones who support us now are with us, it took a while for some of them to sign on to become co-sponsors, but we have champions who at every opportunity advocate for real transformative changes.

**Sahar:** Addameer recently launched a campaign against the Israeli military court, which focuses on how the Israeli military judicial system plays a key role in maintaining Israel's apartheid apparatus. As a system inherently bound up with the ill treatment and torture of Palestinians, seeking fair trial standards in Israeli military courts is redundant. We will continue to represent prisoners in front of military courts and

exhaust all possible methods to defend their rights, but the importance of this campaign is that while we do the work necessary to support prisoners, we also push for change that targets the roots of the system.

**Can you talk about the movement ebbs and flows from your organizing?**

**Jalil:** The movement is generational. One thing I tell young people today in the struggle, it's not a race, it is not a sprint, it is a marathon. We have to be prepared to pass on the baton from one generation to the next. That's because of the issues of how we engage [in] the struggle with the system itself and how the system represses the struggle. And when we understand that, each contribution we make today is a contribution for those who come behind us tomorrow - this is why we need to be willing and able to put in the sacrifice and work to ensure that we are engaging and contributing on one level or another. At one point, I thought that the real revolution can only be done by fighting in the underground movement. I'm not negating that or saying that is not necessary, it is necessary, but we also have to build mass power. We gotta build a people's movement, a mass movement, what I call a popular mass movement, and when we build it then it can be self-sustaining to ensure that the next generation has the history and the tools to continue the momentum of the struggle. I want to say that it is about being revolutionary, but take the r- off and we have evolutionary. This means that we go from one state of social condition to another. Therefore, as an evolutionary, you have to be a revolutionary, evolve the social order to power to the people.

**Jose:** I think we can sustain the movement and even grow. When I first came home, one thing that was really awesome and unexpected, was that when I spoke at major universities in the city, I spoke to students, and they all claim to be abolitionists. That was unheard of before I went to prison. This is a bright spot; people are seeing that this system has to be dismantled entirely. We are not just talking about reforming racism; we can't reform racism, and we understand that you can't reform slavery - you cannot reform a system that is the pillar of these evils. That's a great thing that people are realizing but, as you know, we can't do it overnight. It takes time to have these discussions with community members, especially those impacted not only by racism and mass incarceration but also by interpersonal harm. We have to have open and honest conversations and give them a glimpse of a vision that they could hold on to.

**Sahar:** As the prisoners' justice movement grows internationally, prisoners' movements here in Palestine are also empowered and strengthened. Although the language of abolition is not commonly used here, the case of Palestine is by its nature an abolitionist one because we know that a series of reforms will not lead to justice for the Palestinians. Instead, the unjust systems of military occupation and apartheid must be challenged and transformed. The struggle of Palestinian political prisoners is fundamentally rooted in a struggle for self-determination against Israel's capitalist-colonial expansion and ethnic cleansing. It is essential that we see our movements become transnationally connected and tied to one another. An internationalist perspective on prisoners' support and justice work can only make our local work stronger because it forces us to recognize that it is the same logic that allows mass imprisonment from the United States to Colombia. Freedom should be understood as an international venture.

**What do you see as the kind of prisoner support to develop tactics and grow a larger movement? How do you educate the masses and build out institutions? It's also easy to see how these struggles feel so disconnected sometimes and it's about how to bring them all together, right, to connect them.**

**Jalil:** There's not one specific tactical initiative that speaks directly to the issues of political prisoners; there's multiple issues that must be

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raised and built upon. Political prisoners are a part of a struggle that we need to build. We need to build out the base from which that movement evolves. If you do so, you build out the basic support of political prisoners as part of that. Stokely Carmichael once said that the one thing that activists need to do is organize, organize, organize. So therefore, if political prisoners need funds for their legal initiatives and defenses, then we need to raise funds. We need to ensure that they are safe, we need to be able to put forth demonstrations and mobilizations to call out prison administrators and force the state to acknowledge the conditions of those political prisoners.

If a political prisoner needs health care, we need to have doctors and nurses who can go inside the prisons to do an assessment of our political prisoners and make sure that they are healthy and getting the kind of medical attention that they deserve. They need to be visited; let them know that they are still loved and not isolated. All of those things cumulatively are part of a movement. Ultimately, what we need to do is abolish prisons. We also need to broaden that perspective because we know that the prison system is based upon the ideas of white supremacy. For us, we need to build an ideology or political mantra that says abolitionists need to abolish everything that is anti-Black, anti-Brown, anti-Indigenous people. We need to build a national liberation front and a national united front, because both are necessary for coalition building and cadre development across the country.

**Jose:** Well, we’re grassroots, we actually believe in the power of those impacted. Just about everybody is now impacted in one form or another, so we try to galvanize our communities to use that power. As it stands now, we are marginalized. We’re trying to get our communities to believe that they can determine their own destiny and define what justice should look like in New York State. Incarceration, no matter how long a period, does not equate to public safety. So, if it doesn’t, then why are we relying on it? Public safety has to be defined another way - we have to look at the school system and who controls what in our communities to start defining safety

by the structure of our community. We’re trying to fix this system, legislatively, and pass bills that will give people a better opportunity to return to their families. One thing that we’ve done very well recently is that we have galvanized families with incarcerated loved ones and shown them how to use their voice, because they are the most powerful voice that we have. We have community organizers in key areas of the state, as well as community leaders, who are [family members of] incarcerated loved ones, so when a family member sees one of our community leaders in a visiting room they connect with them and start having little teach-ins in their apartments. This is how it grows. They come to us and see the support, attend legislative hearings, and speak to legislators for the very first time in their lives. They see the power of their voice and it spreads.

We’ve also developed a coalition of 60 grassroots organizations to pass two parole bills. We support immigration rights, and anybody that is struggling for liberation from this capitalist system of punishment and marginalization, and have come together as a coalition to pass these two bills. We believe that this is going to be the year, this people’s power that we’ve developed and all the base building that we’ve been doing, that our work is going to come to fruition.

**Sahar:** Addameer has not shifted in focus over the past three decades, but we have expanded our services and developed our work to be more effective and far-reaching. Today we have grown to offer four key programs: The Legal Aid Unit, the Documentation and Research Unit, the Advocacy and Lobbying Unit, [and] Addameer’s Training and Awareness Unit.

Addameer is deeply involved and embedded in Palestinian civil society and plays a significant role in shaping our responses to human rights violations. The strength of this network is especially important in the face of the constant harassment, defamation, and threats faced by Palestinian civil society organizations, in particular those working for human rights. The arbitrary criminalization of human rights defenders and

the attacks on human rights organizations range from the arrests of their staff to travel bans, residency revocations, and military raids. ♦

Author Bios:

**Jose Hamza Saldana** is Director of Release Aging People in Prison Campaign (RAPP). RAPP is a grassroots community organizing and advocacy campaign co-founded by a collective of formerly incarcerated people. RAPP works to end mass incarceration and promote racial justice through the release of older people in prison and those serving long-term prison sentences. This is done as a means of uprooting greater forces of injustice that uphold legacies of racism, revenge, perpetual punishment, and the control of Black and other communities of color. <https://rappcampaign.com/>

Since 2006, **Sahar Francis** has been the General Director of Ramallah-based Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, a Palestinian NGO providing legal and advocacy support to Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli and Palestinian prisons. An attorney by training, she joined the association in 1998, first as a human rights lawyer, then as head of the Legal Unit. With over twenty years of human rights experience, including human rights counseling and representation, Ms. Francis also was on the Board of Defence for Children International – Palestine Section for 4 years, and on the Board of the Union of Agricultural Work Committees. Sahar did her practice on Human Rights in the Society of Saint Yves in Jerusalem, on issues of land confiscations, house demolitions, labor rights and freedom of movement. In 1997 she worked in the Badil Refugee Rights Center on its legal unit. [www.addameer.org](http://www.addameer.org) or DCI/Palestine website [www.dci-palestine.org](http://www.dci-palestine.org)

**Jalil Muntaqim** was one of the longest-held political prisoners in the world, having been incarcerated since 1971. A former member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, he has been a critical influence in the development of revolutionary consciousness in the United States. After being released in 2020, Jalil has continued organizing, and in 2021 held the Spirit of Mandela International Tribunal. For more information on ways to get involved after the tribunal go to <https://thejerichomovement.com/> and <https://spiritofmandela.org/>

FEATURES RESOURCE

# On the Road to Freedom: A Toolkit for Abolitionist Assessment of Pretrial and Bail Reforms

Every year across the US over 10 million people are caged in city and county jails, with nearly half a million imprisoned while awaiting trial. *Prison Policy Initiative* reports that “on any given day, [the US] has 451,000 people behind bars who are being detained pretrial,” costing the government \$13.6 billion nationwide. Many are caged because they cannot afford to pay bail or because of court-ordered pretrial detention.

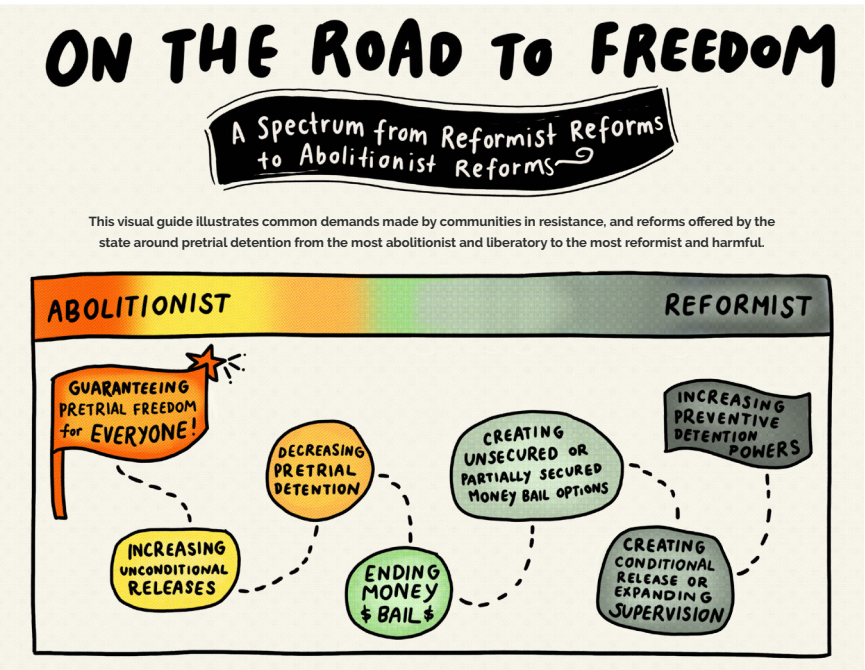
In July 2021, Critical Resistance released a new abolitionist organizing resource, *On the Road to Freedom*, a toolkit created in partnership with **Community Justice Exchange**, visually designed by Danbee Kim, and written by Mohamed Shehk, Pilar Weiss, Rachel Foran, Sharlyn Grace, and Woods Ervin. The goal of this tool is to provide organizers seeking to challenge pretrial detention with guidance examples, possible challenges, and best practices—for carrying out an abolitionist campaign, and ideally resulting in more wins.

*On the Road to Freedom* begins with a colorful spectrum tool that highlights the challenges of navigating different reforms and concessions with the aim of offering guidance on what’s possible, what to fight for, and what not to accept. It also includes a set of evaluative questions that are intended to assess the specifics of pretrial reforms and to help determine where there is strongest potential for an abolitionist outcome. We’ve included both of these tools in Issue 36 as feature resources.

The toolkit includes a set of case studies that use the evaluative tools to look at a variety of campaigns and pretrial reforms across the country. We hope that it will be useful for organizers to compare and contrast their local contexts with these case studies to gain insight that will help strengthen fights against pretrial detention everywhere. For the sake of clarity and consistency, there is also a glossary of terms to support readers with language used in pretrial work, such as “pretrial,” “bail,” etc.

The toolkit can be used as a whole, or be broken up into its component tools and used separately. We hope that you’ll use any all parts and let us know what works. And of course, we hope you make concrete gains in the fight for abolition.

Contact our national office to request a printed version of the complete toolkit. Onward toward freedom! ♦



- 1 Does the reform weaken the system’s power or means to jail, surveil, monitor, control, or otherwise punish people? ✓
- 2 Does the reform challenge the size, scope, resources, or funding of the PIC? ✓
- 3 Does the reform maintain protections for everyone and resist dividing people into categories of “deserving” and “undeserving”? Does the reform maintain or expand existing paths to freedom for all people? ✓
- 4 Does the reform shrink parts of the PIC, industries that profit from the PIC, and/or the power of elected officials who sustain the PIC? ✓



# Parole as a “Pathway Toward Freedom,” and How to Prepare for Parole

*Excerpted Writing from Jorge Renaud and UnCommon Law*

**Editors’ Note:** *In Issue 36 of The Abolitionist, we wanted to include a piece on parole. We worked with Jorge Renaud of Latino Justice in Texas, a former prisoner and, former Senior Policy Analyst with Prison Policy Initiative. Due to some unforeseen health issues that arose, we weren’t able to finish the piece with Jorge in time for this issue, unfortunately. Instead of omitting this topic from the issue altogether, we’re printing a part of Jorge’s draft that includes some context and background for understanding parole in the US.*

*We couple this information with a set of questions from UnCommon Law, a California-based non-profit law-firm that is developing a trauma-informed advocacy approach to get people locked up for life sentences out of prison. These questions are recommended for imprisoned people to reflect on and prepare for parole hearings. Keep in mind that, as Jorge Renaud explains, there is no standard process or universal regulation for parole in the US, and so every state goes about parole or release differently.*

*Additionally, Critical Resistance does not use the word “crime” without complicating or interrogating it, and at the same time we understand that, as Uncommon Law advises, parole boards require that a person coming up for parole demonstrate a certain amount of remorse, acknowledgment, ownership, or admission in their case. Please note that The Abolitionist Editorial Collective placed quotation marks around the word “crime” when it is used in the UnCommon Law resource.*

*Many organizations and legal groups have countless resources for parole preparation. Write to us at our national office if you’d like us to send you more parole resources.*

## INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITION OF PAROLE

By Jorge Renaud

### What is parole?

It is disconcerting to speak about parole when one is an abolitionist and does not give credence to incarceration itself. However, we cannot ignore the reality of incarceration, nor can we dismiss the possibilities for freedom inherent in any existing mechanism that allows for release from cages. I define parole as the conditional release from a state prison, with the released person still under the supervision of a governmental agency with the power to return that individual to incarceration for a perceived violation of those conditions. Federal parole was abolished for anyone convicted of federal “crimes” after Nov. 1, 1987, as a result of the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984. Within definition lie possibilities of standardization among states, of reward for personal transformation and self-education, and of true reunification between estranged families. Notice that I say “possibilities.” The truth is that parole is granted in such capricious and haphazard ways, with so many jurisdictional exclusions as to who is eligible for or granted parole, that delving into it can be maddening. But with hard work and communication, abolitionists can use the fight to standardize parole and move in a significant way toward our final goal.

First – and this is crucial to everything that follows – **there is no statutory or Constitutional right to parole.** It has been considered a privilege by the states, and that view has been codified by the courts. Neither is there a standard approach to parole. There is no coalition of state paroling agencies that defines anything resembling “best practices,” and there surely isn’t any group anywhere with the power to punish states for what can be astonishing inequities in their parole practices.

There are 16 states that have abolished parole for anyone who committed a “crime” after a certain

date. Those states are Arizona, California, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maine, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin, which was the last of the 16, abolishing parole in 2000 for anyone who committed “crimes” before Dec. 31, 1999. What those 16 states offer is a type of mandatory release. Incarcerated persons in those states who allegedly committed “crimes” after parole was abolished must complete a minimum of their sentence, almost always at least 85 percent of it, before release. Some states require the entire sentence to be completed in prison. Some of those states still claim to have parole, as individuals who allegedly committed “crimes” before its abolition are still eligible. However, the parole-eligible population in those states makes up such a miniscule part of the overall prison population.

### What are similarities in state parole practices?

While there is no standard process for who is eligible for parole, who is granted parole, or how parole is administered, there are similarities in the practices of the 34 states that still offer this type of release. Some of those similarities are:

- No state offers parole to every individual convicted of every “crime.”
- Parole eligibility is almost always determined by statute, which sets out how much of a given sentence an individual must complete before being considered for parole.
- Many states grant “good-time credits” to incarcerated individuals, and some states allow those credits to be applied toward one’s initial eligibility date.
- Most states require that individuals convicted of certain acts – usually involving violence and/or sexual abuse – serve a higher percentage of their sentence before they become parole-eligible, and many states deny “good-time credits” to those individuals.
- Parole is granted, or denied, by a group of individuals (the parole board) who are almost always appointed by a state’s governor and serve at the governor’s whim. Few states have any requirements that those individuals have any expertise in substance abuse or mental health or reentry, and most have backgrounds in law enforcement, not the social services.
- Individuals being considered for parole have no right to legal representation. They rarely are allowed to see what documents the parole board uses to grant or deny parole.
- Some parole boards will review an individual they denied within another year, yet statutes in some states allow for up to ten years between reviews.
- Only one state prohibits parole board members from using subjective reasons to deny parole. All the others allow reasons such as “Serious nature of the offense” to be used, despite this factor being considered during sentencing and something which the incarcerated individual can never change.
- After release, individuals on parole can be charged a bewildering array of fines and fees, and the conditions they must follow are rarely tailored to their needs. In many states, most individuals in prison are there after having been paroled and then having had that parole revoked for acts that are, in and of themselves, not “crimes” – moving without telling a parole officer, not reporting on time, failing a urinalysis, or socializing with another person on supervision.

## HOW TO PREPARE FOR PAROLE

*From “Parole Process & Preparation Overview” by UnCommon Law – Fall 2019*

### What will the person eligible for parole be asked about at the hearing?

The main topics discussed at parole hearings are the following: the person’s life prior to the “crime”; any prior juvenile or adult [conviction] history; the “crime” and the circumstances surrounding

it; conduct (both good and bad) in prison; recent Comprehensive Risk Assessments (CRAs or psych evaluations) prepared for the BPH; and plans for release upon parole.

When discussing these topics, it is very important that the person be able to demonstrate that they have gained a clear understanding of their background prior to the [case] (including family relationships and prior [...] record), the circumstances leading to the “crime,” and how they have resolved and can prevent a relapse to the circumstances that led them to violence. These circumstances may include addiction, past experiences of trauma, and other factors that contributed to the lifestyle in which the “crime” took place. A person’s ability to understand and discuss these factors determines whether or not the board finds that they lack “insight.” If the person eligible for parole does not understand these factors, they will be denied parole, no matter how much time they have served and no matter how spotless their disciplinary record is. Being able to explain these circumstances and factors is important because the board’s theory is that, unless the person truly understands how they ended up in the place where such a “crime” could be committed, then they cannot show that it will not happen again.

Below are some specific areas that should be explored when approaching a parole hearing. Family members and friends can help explore these areas. These topics touch on areas that are very sensitive and can reach down to the very core of what shaped someone’s decisions about how to live. Although some of this material may seem “touchy-feely,” exploring these issues can have a very powerful impact on the person’s relationships and on their ability to show the board just how much they have learned and changed while incarcerated. There is also a very good chance that this material will uncover issues that the person only feels comfortable discussing within a confidential relationship with the attorney who is going to represent them in their hearing. If a person’s attorney is unwilling to explore these issues, they should reconsider whether that attorney is really helping them get ready for their parole hearing.

### How can the person eligible for parole prepare for the hearing?

Below are some questions that one should be ready and able to answer in the hearing. These topics are not intended to be tackled all in one sitting, however. One should take time to consider each topic and the various factors that have shaped their life.

1. What factors in your childhood and upbringing contributed to your “crime”? How did those factors contribute specifically?
2. What character traits contributed to your “crime,” and how did they contribute?
3. Have any of those same character traits contributed to misconduct in prison (including things you were never caught for)? If so, how?
4. What do you understand about the impact your actions had on the victim(s) of your “crime” or the victims of other misconduct, and how have you attempted to make amends to them?
5. How have you addressed the childhood and upbringing factors and character traits since you have been in prison?
6. What tools do you have now that you did not have at the time of the “crime” (or at the time of prison misconduct), and are there specific programs that you credit for gaining those tools?
7. What challenges do you anticipate upon being paroled?
8. How will your parole plans and support system help you address those challenges?
9. What specific patterns of behavior do you need to prevent relapse, and how will you prevent relapsing? Include specific warning signs or triggers, as well as your coping mechanisms in response to those warning signs or triggers. Identify which of those triggers or warning signs are about people, places, and things (external) and which ones are about your own thoughts, feelings, and character traits (internal). ♦



## 9971: What is Political Education?

By Stephen Wilson

When we are asked what 9971—a prisoner-led radical study initiative inside Pennsylvania state prisons—does, we often reply: political education and mutual aid for the purpose of building stronger and safer communities. Until recently, this summation was sufficient. But a few weeks ago, a new member of 9971 said he thought that political education meant we would be studying civics or how the government is structured. Electoral politics, which is about the rotation of power and not societal transformation, isn't what 9971 studies. We know, as Rachel Herzing says, "Political education isn't just about politics." Because we use the phrase "political education" often and we know that co were a mix of organizers and impacted people, abolitionists and not, anarchists and progressives community requires a shared language, we felt it necessary to define exactly what we mean when we use the phrase.

We know, through lived experience, that education is never neutral; it is either pushing us toward freedom or pulling us toward the status quo. Robert Schuall writes in the foreword of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.



"3 Fingers Separations" by Josh MacPhee, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative..

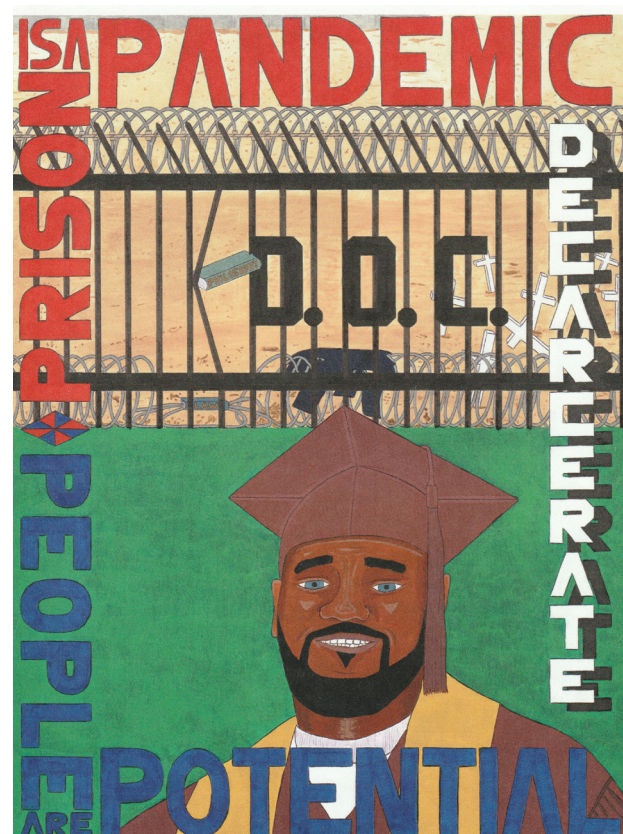
We believe political education is a practice of freedom. But how so? To answer this question and to help us create our own working definition, we reached out to other abolitionists and asked how they define political education.

- Scholar and organizer Dan Berger replied: "I would say it is learning about how the world works and why, done in a volunteer context attached to some kind of transformative project."
- Artist and organizer Noname said: "Teaching and learning about the systems that were created to keep working class and colonized people oppressed."
- Scholar and organizer Charlotte Rosen responded: "I would think of political education as collective learning in community for the purpose of using knowledge gained and interpreted to actively transform the present political, social, and economic conditions."
- Organizer MJ Williams said: "Political education can give people a greater understanding about the conditions of oppression that frame our current lives, and also about ways in which to confront and oppose the forces of oppression."

After reviewing these and other responses, we felt any working definition had to address two points: 1) Why we engage in political education and 2) and how we engage in it. G\_\_\_J\_\_\_ wrote: "The oppressive state has molded the people through a 'what to think' program, and the task of the people is to develop a 'how to think' program. To question. To imagine that things can be different and that the people themselves- that you- can make necessary changes." 9971 envisions political education as the people's "how to think" program.

We engage in political education because it enables us to look critically at our social situation, the structures and forces that shape our lives, and provides the tools and skills needed to transform society. For us, education became political when we began studying why things are the way they are and not just how things are or used to be. Political education widens our lens. It helps us to understand where we are, how we got here, and how we can transform our condition. Political education pulled many of us out of our silos, our own boxes of pain, and helped us to connect our struggle to others. Through political education we realized that everyday experiences, even behind the walls, can serve as sites and sources of political struggle.

We feel, as many of the respondents do, that political education should happen collectively and in community. For many members of 9971, studying wasn't new but studying in community



"Educate Don't Incarcerate" by Dole.

was. Mariame Kaba writes: "Being intentionally in relation to one another, a part of a collective, helps to not only imagine new worlds but also to imagine ourselves differently." It is in community that many of us learn to step outside our boxes and see the world from another perspective. It is in community that we learn new tactics and strategies that help us survive and thrive, especially behind these walls. We know, just as Audre Lorde said: "Without community, there is certainly no liberation."

In a nutshell, we feel that political education is learning, in community, about the world for the purpose of transforming it. As Rachel Herzing says: "Political education should make our politics stronger." We would like to hear your definition of political education or any critique of ours. Send us your definition and share your why and how of political education. This is how we learn.

Always,  
Stevie  
9971

**Editors' Note:** The author mentions a revolutionary leader and imprisoned intellectual of the radical prisoner movement. Because the state uses prisoners' identification with this figure to justify gang validation and other causes of political repression, the editorial collective omitted this person's full name and replaced it with G\_\_\_J\_\_\_. Long live GJ!♦

## 21 Questions

9971 columnist Stevie Wilson created the below survey for budding abolitionists. Share your thoughts with us and send us your responses, and we will pass them along to Stevie and 9971.

1. Introduce yourself and share a little about the projects in which you are currently involved.
2. What was the impetus for your politicization? Was it an event or person that propelled you into this work? Was it a process?
3. Which historical figures have been most influential in shaping your worldview?
4. Regarding prisons and policing, what would you say is the critical distinction between reformists and abolitionists?
5. How did you move from recognition of oppression, to analysis, to activity?
6. Are you currently connected to imprisoned folks? How did you establish this connection? What has been the most difficult part of maintaining this connection?
7. How do you define community?
8. How do you define safety?
9. How do you define solidarity?
10. In your opinion, what are the major obstacles regarding effective political education behind the walls?
11. Understandably, obtaining release is the major concern of prisoners, but how do we broaden their understanding of the carceral continuum?
12. Do you discern a difference between the priorities of outside activists and imprisoned folks?
13. What are some ways the fight against the prison industrial complex (PIC) has been shaped by imprisoned activists/organizers?
14. How do we connect the struggle against imprisonment to other forms of state violence?
15. What is the role of theory in this struggle? How can imprisoned folks contribute?
16. Which populations behind the walls are unheard? What other slippages and blindspots do you see regarding marginalized populations?
17. How do we create visibility for marginalized imprisoned folks?
18. How do we counter the deserving/undeserving dichotomy that is often created by reformist proposals?
19. What role do cultural productions play in this struggle?
20. How do we explain the ethical obligations of abolitionists? How extensive are these obligations?
21. What is incompatible with abolition?



## INSIDE-OUTSIDE FISHING LINE:

# Deeper Than Water: Building Relationships to Resist Repression & Dehumanization in Massachusetts Prisons

With Wayland “X” Coleman & Christine Mitchell

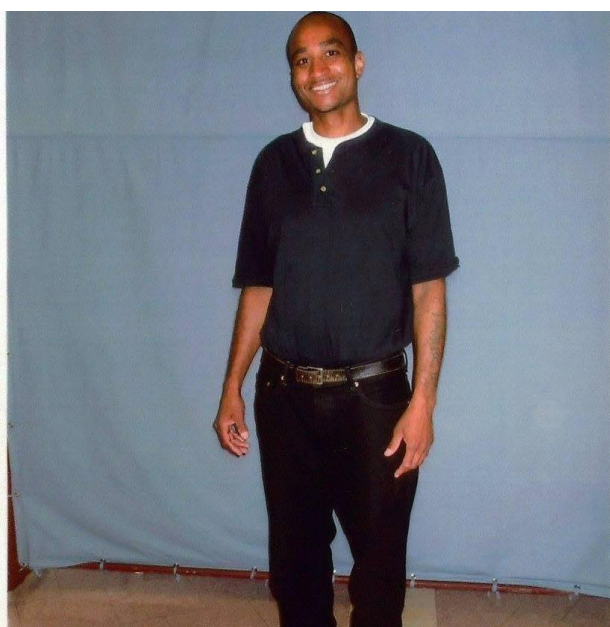
This issue’s “Inside-Outside Fishing Line” is a conversation between imprisoned organizer **Wayland “X” Coleman**, a jailhouse lawyer, musician, student, artist, and founding organizer of #DeeperThanWater, and **Christine Mitchell**, a co-author of the American Public Health Association policy statements on law enforcement violence and carceral systems and senior research associate with the Health Instead of Punishment program at Human Impact Partners, a national public health organization. Wayland worked to organize the **#DeeperThanWater Coalition** in 2017 after the *Boston Globe* published an article by journalist David Abel on the toxic water at MCI-Norfolk, the largest state prison in Massachusetts. The coalition—made up of many public health workers and organizers from Black and Pink Massachusetts, Black Lives Matter Boston, Showing Up For Racial Justice Boston, and Toxics Action Center—is led by formerly and currently imprisoned people and their loved ones. Dedicated to exposing the rampant human rights abuses that prisoners in the US are subjected to, #DeeperThanWater uses the lens of water justice to highlight the toxicity of imprisonment.

This Fishing Line conversation digs into the depth of violence inherent in the Massachusetts Department of Corrections and the prison industrial complex (PIC) at large. Wayland and Christine ask each other questions and share their reflections on the importance and difficulties of building relationships across prison walls under repressive conditions, and the necessity of inside-outside relationship building for abolitionist work.

**Christine:** To start us off, can you share a little about how you’ve experienced state repression while inside?

**Wayland:** Oppression and repression are probably two of the most important words that an imprisoned person can understand. The enforcement of prison rules, or just the overall unchecked privilege to abuse power, leads to an exacerbation of repressive tactics. Through oppression, the minimization of humane acknowledgment, and the dogma of “criminal justice”, imprisoned people are seen in mainstream society as subhuman, and this leaves us vulnerable to becoming victims of illogical policies and impossible rules and regulations. Because the prison rules are written in a way that would cause a person to have a miserable existence if they tried to actually follow them all, everyone breaks rules—even the guards. This means that **the experience of institutional repression is inevitable for any caged person, regardless of their political aims.** In many instances, the guards will come to work and attempt to implement their own personal rules, and threaten the use of the disciplinary process as a means to force your compliance.

When I first came into the Massachusetts state prison system, I knew that I was in trouble. The first thing that they do when you come in the door is strip you bare. They humiliate you while you are naked, throw your clothing on the floor, and then search your naked body as if you were going to have anything on it other than hair. When I experienced that, I knew the humiliation wasn’t about whether or not I had contraband, but about letting me know who was in charge and that they believed they owned me. This was an introduction to the oppressive aspect of imprisonment, and since I had a strong will to resist, I knew that I would do my time kicking and screaming and not accepting what they wanted to make me. I started off in maximum security and I constantly resisted the oppression there,



Wayland “X” Coleman

causing me to be shackled, chained, and thrown into solitary without any property. I was in maximum security for 10 years before I was sent to a medium. My first year upstate, I picked up about 14 disciplinary reports and had been in and out of solitary confinement numerous times for protesting and standing up for myself and others.

**Christine:** What are the regulations around organizing and activism inside Massachusetts state prisons?

**Wayland:** In Massachusetts, they essentially forbid us from organizing or engaging in group demonstrations and encouraging others to protest. The right to peacefully assemble was stripped away from imprisoned people in 1971, in a case, I believe, called *Jones v. North Carolina Prisoners’ Labor Union, Inc.* The court ruled that allowing imprisoned people the right



Deeper Than Water Coalition courtesy of Christine Mitchell

to unionize and protest in groups would threaten the penological interests of the prisons. This decision paved the way for people like me to be thrown to the ground by 15 guards, placed in chokeholds, shackled until blood poured, and thrown into solitary confinement for giving the imprisoned community bottled water when the prison refused to provide clean drinking water. It’s the reason I was gassed, pinned to the ground, and chained by white men in riot gear in a forced transfer from a prison that had no reported COVID cases to one that was COVID positive in the middle of a pandemic. It is one of the many policies that give the green light for violent repression in the name of institutional security.

**Christine:** How do you see state repression impacting the way organizing happens (or doesn’t happen) inside?

**Wayland:** Because we can be beaten, gassed, stripped of our property and privileges, and blackballed from prison jobs, housing assignments (for example, single cells), and programs, the repressive strategy of prisons weakens an imprisoned person’s will to resist. Since we

don’t have the courts to back us, people in prison are less willing to protest. There is a lot of institutionalized fear. Many imprisoned people—especially here in Massachusetts—have been broken into complacency, and because they are complacent they are reluctant to be uprooted from the comfort (and I am cringing using that word) of their cells. When we get into trouble, we lose our stuff. The prison model uses every part of our existence as leverage to control our behavior. TVs and parole eligibility are the biggest carrots. Because the institutional strategies of repression work so well in Massachusetts, I fear that the future of internal organizing inside Massachusetts prisons is in jeopardy.

**Christine:** How do you think we can overcome this? What is the role of inside organizers? What is the role of outside organizers? How can we work together?

**Wayland:** I do believe that when imprisoned people organize and protest inside of the prisons, it strengthens the actions that can be taken by activists outside of the prisons, so the internal struggle is highly relevant. Outside activists have to be willing to communicate with people inside the prisons. You have to know what the internal grievances are and find the people like me, who make personal sacrifices for the sake of all imprisoned people, and support and work with those people.

#DeeperThanWater emphasizes this principle. The role of outside activists is to put constant pressure on the PIC. Public pressure is essential to forcing change in repressive practices and oppressive attitudes. The Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) loathes #DeeperThanWater, because #DeeperThanWater holds them publicly accountable for the way that they react to us when we expose their inhumanity.

**“I do believe that when imprisoned people organize and protest inside of the prisons, it strengthens the actions that can be taken by activists outside of the prisons, so the internal struggle is highly relevant.”**

Christine, how has working with imprisoned activists improved your own sense of activism and prison abolition?

**Christine:** Working with imprisoned organizers, I have learned the importance of growing relationships, building trust, and keeping commitments with people inside, who have often had their trust broken again and again. I have learned how to navigate the prison system to be able to organize with people inside, to follow their leadership, and co-create and build together in partnership. I’m very much still learning from imprisoned friends—about abolition, about organizing, about the conditions that lead to imprisonment—and I expect I always will be. And all of this has convinced me thoroughly that prisons, jails, detention centers, and the PIC as a whole need to be abolished.

As you like to say, Wayland, “the prison walls aren’t built to keep imprisoned people from getting out; they’re built to keep the public from looking in.” I was still within the first few years of more deeply learning about abolition when I met you in 2017, and I was much more involved in organizing around policing than around imprisonment. Being in touch with you and other imprisoned activists has helped me to see how the entire PIC works together to oppress people and to maintain social control.

*Continued on next page*



“Working with imprisoned organizers, I have learned the importance of growing relationships, building trust, and keeping commitments with people inside, who have often had their trust broken again and again.”

**Wayland:** How can we make internal organizers and external organizers more accessible to each other?

**Christine:** First, a little context. In Massachusetts, in order to visit someone in prison, you have to fill out a form with all of your personal information and the DOC does a full background check. Then, the person you want to visit has to fill out a form adding you to their visitor list. Each outside person is only allowed to be on

the visitor list of one inside person. To see their loved ones, visitors have their palms, the bottoms of their feet, the inside of their waistbands, their hair, and their mouths checked—all before walking through a metal detector. Imprisoned people are strip-searched after visits, before they go back to their cells. In order for you to talk on the phone to someone imprisoned, the person inside has to put you on their call list. The number of people they are allowed to call is dependent on what level of security prison they’re in. All incoming mail is photocopied, and the imprisoned person only receives the photocopy, not the original. There are endless barriers to inside organizers and outside organizers being in touch. I will say that once COVID-related visiting restrictions are lifted, we need more outside organizers to visit folks inside. In-person visits [in visitation rooms] are the only way to have a conversation that isn’t recorded by the state, though there are always cameras and guards strolling through the visiting area.

The #DeeperThanWater Coalition tries to make internal organizers and external organiz-

ers more accessible to each other by amplifying the voices, stories, and experiences of people inside. We often post letters and sound recordings of imprisoned organizers on our website and social media. With a book club, we’ve connected people outside and people inside to read *Abolishing Carceral Society*, with the intention of learning about abolition together across the walls. We work to keep relationships with people inside central to our work. These relationships are key to overcoming state repression because we can better support people when they are going up for parole, when they’re released, or when they’re facing problems inside.

**The more we are able to bring people into relationship with one another and the more of a shared understanding about abolition we create, the more we can overcome state repression and build something better together.** Building unity means that we know we can trust one another and depend on one another because we are committed to each other and to the work. Abolition is our non-negotiable, our explicit strategy, and goal. ♦

## KITES TO THE EDITORS

Dear friends & allies at Critical Resistance and editors of *The Abolitionist*,

I want to take the time to write to you all and tell you how much I appreciated your commemoration of this great and strong revolutionary leader within the resistance, Chip Fitzgerald. Thank you for sharing his struggle and pains as a political prisoner.

I would like to reflect that, from his steadfast strength to endure, to his visions and dreams of freedom “Upon My Release,” I felt his pain and his struggle ever deeply, as a political prisoner in my own right, who can only will to be remembered for the efforts I make to move this critical resistance movement forward.

I have been down for just over 18 years for a shooting case out of Seattle, WA, for which I am actually innocent: no fingerprints, no gun residue, no witnesses interviewed, and no gun. Yet I was convicted and given over 26 years in prison.

Eighteen months afterward, I was “struck out” and sentenced to life without parole (LWOP) in 2004-2005 for a fistfight inside of my own cell. I am the only person in the state of Washington with a standing life without parole sentence for a “third strike” in prison.

As I have fought tooth and nail to gain my freedom from this LWOP sentence, I have had witness statements suppressed by investigators, video footage discarded, corrupt judges in dead courts bar my pleas for justice, and in recent days had my mail rejected as “third-party mail,” pleading to friends and family for support, law library access denied, and my typewriter broken as I’m placed in isolation on “investigation”.

Our friend and ally “Chip” Fitzgerald was 51 years in on his sentence at 20 years old, when he passed at 71 from our Earth behind bars and



Drawing by Ryan Wallace, imprisoned artist in CA

in locked steel cages. His dreams for “Upon My Release” died, and I get goosebumps, as my eyes well in empathy for how long Chip had endured his struggle; hoping and willing, planning and falling, and struggling and striving again; always staying strong and steadfast to make better the corruption he had seen all around him, and gain freedom for himself and for us all.

I thank you all at Critical Resistance worldwide for your efforts in the movement, because we the people of this critical resistance are stronger now than ever before. Though our brother Chip Fitzgerald did not make it to see his release and share the “love and laughter, and joys and hardships of life with a special woman,” as he had so willed, nor get to spend the remainder of his “life in the free world, giving himself to achieve the many treasure[s] of what it means to be a valued human being; embracing freedom,” for himself, his life, his imprisonment, and even his death progressed our movement forward, so that one day we will all be freed, and I can only hope and will that one day my own efforts may do the same.

Thank you Romaine “Chip” Fitzgerald for your inspiration to me and to us all, to continue the work that you gave your life to, in order to one day gain freedom for us all. Join us in the critical resistance. Do your part, because the resistance is critical. In strength and solidarity, and freedom from all that binds us.

-C. Walter Weber  
Tiller of the earth  
Contact Charles at  
Charles Walter Weber Jr.  
#772708/E-A-02  
Clallam Bay Corrections Center  
1830 Eagle Crest Way  
Clallam Bay, WA 98326  
(Critical Resistance - Seattle)

## IN SERVICE OF BLACK

By Kenneth West

Black Fist in the Air  
Waving in the face of hopelessness  
and despair  
Black arms waving, never wavering  
Craving  
Equality, Justice,  
and Reparations  
Black Torso ... heaving  
From White Tear Gas  
Refusing to Bow  
The 1960s Negro dead  
Now we put Black fist in the air  
Middle finger extended just for you  
Don't Want to be my brother  
Well Fuck you too  
Black legs Marching  
Marching for Reparations  
Equality. Justice. Systematic Change  
Over broken Corporate glass  
Entire being  
Mind. Body. Soul.  
In Service of Black

**Author Bio:** *Kenneth West is an imprisoned author and poet in Texas. His writing appears in several different books and collections, including Beauty in Chains: Poems by African American Prisoners, and his self-published book, "United in Struggle: Poetry of the People." Write to Kenneth at:*

Kenneth West #846812  
Ramsey 1  
1100 FM 655  
Rosharon, TX 77583

## STILL STANDIN' ON THE LAND

By Tashunka Raven

There's a mesa, called sacred Corn Mountain,  
where the Zuni Way still reigns supreme in  
ev'ry heart;  
Proud, independent heirs of Popé's revolution-  
ary fountain,  
where the Shalako still dances to the sacred rain  
gods;  
A culture still deep in its aboriginal kivas, clans  
and roots,  
prayer sticks, sacred cornmeal and purification  
rites;  
Deerskin moccasins and leggings instead of  
western-style boots;  
never signed a treaty! and the Zuni tongue is  
still spoken right;  
Join hands like we did at Puget Sound and sacred  
Blue Lake,  
and the vict'ry at Point Concepción stand,  
And o'er the G-O Road when Medicine Rock was  
at stake,  
They're still standin' on the land, still standin'  
on the land ♦

**Author Bio:** *Tashunka Raven (also known as McArthur Gunter) is a published Native American author and poet in Virginia.*



By Cody Reynolds, imprisoned artist in Indiana.



# ABBY THROWBACK: Sometimes Freedom Means You Have to Burn It Down: Harriet Tubman and an Abolitionist Vision That Don't Quit

By Alexis Pauline Gumbs

**Editors' Note:** For this issue's "Abby Throwback", we are reprinting Alexis Pauline Gumbs' powerful examination of the past, present, and future possibilities of Harriet Tubman's abolitionism. This piece was originally printed in Issue 21, which focused on the theme of Art and Abolition in Fall 2013.

On June 2, 1863, Harriet Tubman, called "the Moses of her people" for her multiple successful journeys to help enslaved Africans escape to freedom, navigated the Combahee River in South Carolina's rice plantation stronghold with some of the first Black soldiers ever allowed in the Union Army and a colonel who had fought alongside white anti-slavery radical John Brown. That night, they were joined by almost 800 enslaved Africans who claimed their own freedom, burned down the plantations where they had been captives, and dealt a blow to the slave economy of South Carolina that historians agree was decisive in turning the Civil War around and ending slavery in the United States.

On June 2, 2013, the 150th anniversary of Harriet Tubman's Combahee River Uprising, twenty-one Black feminists returned to the Combahee River. We wanted to celebrate that victory. We got in the river. We made sound circles out of Harriet Tubman's words. We spent a weekend affirming each other and challenging each other to actualize the breakthroughs we needed in our lives. We wanted to see for ourselves the place that inspired the Black Lesbian Feminist Socialist Combahee River Collective to point out in 1977 that oppressions based on race, class, and gender cannot be eradicated one at a time, because "the major systems of oppression are interlocking." And we needed to ask ourselves: What needs to be burned down today? What is required for the full freedom of all of our people now?

## COMBAHEE LEGACIES

Harriet Tubman was an abolitionist. She did not spend time organizing for the better treatment of slaves on plantations and in individual households. She took major risks to help enslaved people escape from the South to the North and to Canada, and she put her body on the line to help people being re-enslaved by the Fugitive Slave Act to escape their captors in the North. Harriet Tubman was about the end of slavery by every means available and by any means necessary. She strategized with John Brown, a white abolitionist who believed in armed insurrection to overthrow slavery and who was ultimately hanged for his efforts to fight the slave state. She found Abraham Lincoln's wishy-washy stances on slavery, as he sought to appease the southern states, disrespectful, and she refused to ever meet with Abraham Lincoln, even when he asked fellow abolitionist Sojourner Truth to invite her to the White House.

But by the time Harriet Tubman planned the Combahee River Raid, she had already helped most of her family escape out of Maryland and had left behind those family members who refused to claim their own freedom. The moment of the Combahee River Uprising required the bravery of those people who were still enslaved, most of whom may have been living on plantations their entire lives. The moment of the Combahee River Uprising required these people of all different ages and roles within the plantation to give up everything they had known, without looking back, and to burn down the places they had lived in the service of a freedom they had never experienced.

When we visited the Combahee River, we thought about those patterns in our own lives that do not need to be tweaked or revised, but actually need to be abandoned completely in order for us to be

individually free. In this moment, it makes me wonder what our prison abolitionist movement needs to turn its back on and use as kindling in order to earn the world that we deserve, which is beyond what all of us who have lived our lives in a police state can even imagine. Do we need to give up our belief that people should be punished, even when they hurt us? Do we need to give up our belief that the state can evolve when it was founded on forced labor and captivity? Do we need to give up our need to get individual rewards for our action, like Harriet Tubman did when she worked underground under the name Moses for so many years? Do we need to be willing, as Harriet Tubman was, not only to challenge unjust laws, but also to break them? Do we need to give up the small feelings of power and privilege that we have, even as oppressed people inside of an oppressive system? Do we need to imagine the future more rigorously?

## "MY PEOPLE ARE FREE"

Three years before the successful Combahee River Uprising, Tubman is said to have had a prophetic dream in which she saw the end of slavery and the freedom of all formerly enslaved people. She woke up full of joy and repeated over and over again the words, "My people are free. My people are free," in the present tense. I believe that it was her strong belief that the end of slavery and the freedom of her people was already destined that enabled her to have the courage to do whatever it took to fight for liberation. Remember that even well into the Civil War, most people never thought the United States would ever exist without slavery, but Tubman maintained her revolutionary vision.

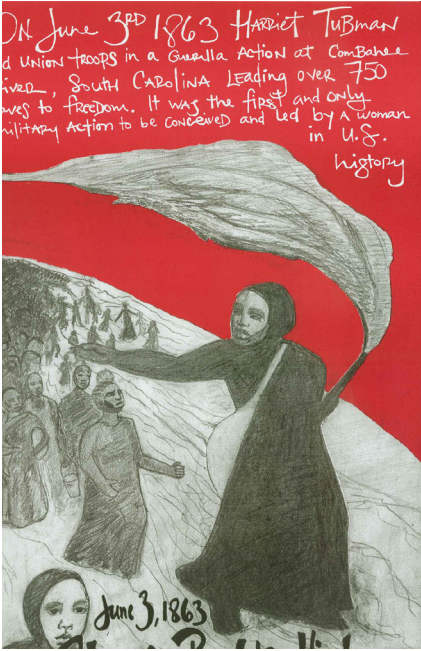
For those of us who are contemporary abolitionists, who believe that all our people should be free and that the prison state and police state fundamentally disrespect all human beings and must be dismantled, Harriet Tubman's vision is instructive. Do we believe that our people are fundamentally free? Do we really believe in a world without prisons? What will it take for us to act boldly in the service of our visions? I think that it takes doing what Harriet Tubman did, actually seeing a world after prisons in which our people are free. It is our role as visionaries, artists, organizers, and activists, inside and outside of prisons, to imagine the world we deserve in detail, so that we can say that we and our people are free, right now, and then act in accordance with that freedom.

## LEADERSHIP FROM THE INSIDE

One of the most important lessons of the Combahee River Uprising for the contemporary prison abolitionist movement is that leadership must come from those most impacted by the prison, policing, and surveillance systems. Without the success of the Combahee River Uprising, it is very possible that the Union would have lost the Civil War, and the Confederate States would have continued to practice slavery as the core of their labor system. Let me say this as clearly as possible: The leadership of enslaved people and escaped slaves was crucial in ending slavery in the United States. Without the bravery and action of enslaved Africans, slavery could not have been destroyed. Harriet Tubman herself was an escaped slave and a fugitive criminal with a bounty on her head when she planned this uprising. The majority of the soldiers whom she

led through the Confederate-held Combahee River were new soldiers who had taken advantage of a recent shift in policy that allowed enslaved people who escaped and made their way to the Union Army base to become soldiers and continue to fight to end slavery. So they were also former slaves who had broken the law in order to gain their own freedom and to fight for the freedom of others. And the vast majority of the people involved, those almost 800 enslaved people of all genders who flooded the rice fields, burned over 30 plantation buildings down, and brought themselves and their children to freedom, were enslaved at the time that they enacted this rebellion. Freedom did not come from the outside; it came from those immediately and recently inside the trap of slavery.

The obvious point here is that the leadership of people who are currently in prison and former prisoners is key to any movement to end a prison state. The leadership of those who are most watched, harassed, and persecuted by the police is key in any movement to end a police state. All of us who are outside prison walls and who are inside prison walls must remember that fact (which is intentionally obscured by popular historical accounts and films like *Lincoln*). May we not for a second forget that the people currently locked in prison in the United States are among the most powerful people on the planet because they have the insight and potential to make prison impossible and to enact a society where we are all more free. How can this reality transform solidarity work with prisoners by people outside of prison? How could Harriet Tubman's work as a fugitive slave with a reward on her head change the ways we think about the roles of former prisoners on parole and of former political prisoners in exile? What does Harriet Tubman's infiltration work with scouts who found out the location of Confederate Torpedo boats say about relationships with prison guards and other workers inside prisons within our abolitionist work?



Harriet Tubman - Celebrate People's History Poster by Darrell Gane-McCalla, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

In 1977, inspired by Harriet Tubman and the Combahee River Uprising, the Combahee River Collective made the provocative statement that, "if Black women were free all people would have to be free, because our freedom requires the destruction of all the systems of oppression." On the 150th anniversary of the Combahee uprising, Black feminists affirmed that our dreams and our tangible visions, our interpersonal practices and our political statements, the way we frame our organizing and the ways we use our time, are all crucial to our collective liberation. Today, with Combahee in mind, I say that the freedom of prisoners and the end of the prison state requires us to remember how connected we are, despite oppression's systematic ways of fragmenting us. The world we deserve requires us to be freer than we ever imagined. ♦

**Author Bio:** Alexis Pauline Gumbs is a queer Black troublemaker, a Black feminist love evangelist, and a poet, educator, and scholar. She is the founder of the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* and the co-founder of the *Mobile Homecoming* experiential archive amplifying Black LGBTQ Brilliance. She lives in Durham, NC.



# UNTIL ALL ARE FREE: POLITICAL PRISONER UPDATES

**Welcome home David Gilbert!** - Outgoing New York State Governor, Andrew Cuomo, granted clemency to Weather Underground activist David Gilbert, who was subsequently granted parole on October 26. After 40 years behind bars and years of supporters organizing on his behalf, David is finally free. For up-to-date news, articles to read, and ways to support go to [friendsofdavidgilbert.org](http://friendsofdavidgilbert.org)



David Gilbert by Bec Young

**Rest in Power Rita “Bo” Brown** - Former political prisoner Rita ‘Bo’ Brown passed away on October 21 after a long, horrible battle with Lewy Body Dementia. Bo was a 74-year-old white working-class butch dyke lesbian, anti-authoritarian, anti-imperialist who was locked up for nine years in federal prison. The first year was as a social prisoner in 1971 and the other eight as a political prisoner in the 1980s for several bank robberies in Oregon claimed by the George Jackson Brigade, an independent underground cell operating out of Seattle, Washington.

**Jaan Laaman is now released!** - On May 15, longtime political prisoner Jaan Laaman was released from prison. Jaan served 37 years for his involvement in the United Freedom Front.

**Sundiata Acoli** - Sundiata Acoli has been imprisoned for 48 years and must be brought home now! Please get involved in the fight to free Sundiata by checking out the Bring Sundiata Acoli Home Alliance at [sundiataacolifc.org](http://sundiataacolifc.org) for up-to-date information, petitions to sign, and other ways to get involved.

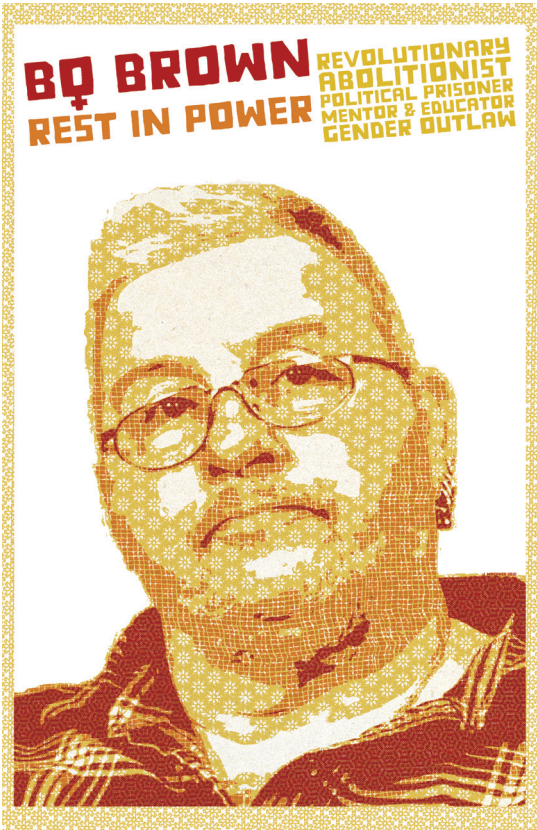
**Rest in Power Chuck Africa** - Chuck Africa joined the ancestors on September 20th after a struggle with cancer that started in prison four years ago. From Philly Anarchist Black Cross (ABC): “He’ll forever be remembered as one who loved with all his might & we’ll keep fighting in his honor. #RestInPower.” Check out the “On A Move” podcast by Mike Africa Jr. on September 23, for a tribute to his Uncle Chuck Africa.

**Russell “Maroon” Shoatz is free!** - Former Black Panther Russell Maroon Shoatz has finally been granted compassionate release after 49 years behind bars and decades of vigorous campaigning by allies for his freedom. Shoatz was granted a medical transfer on October 25 to leave a Pennsylvania prison for treatment and hospice after five decades of imprisonment. A former member of the Black Panther Party and a soldier in the Black Liberation Army, Shoatz organized inside prisons for decades to abolish life sentences without parole, inspiring activists and attorneys to take up the cause.

**Eric King** - Anarchist, vegan political prisoner Eric King needs mass support. On October 14th, Eric had his first evidentiary hearing in Colorado Federal Court for a charge of allegedly “assaulting” a Bureau of Prisons agent in 2018, a charge that could carry 20 years. King says he was the one who was assaulted that day by a prison guard. Go to [supportericking.com](http://supportericking.com) for up-to-date information and ways to support Eric.

**Jessica Reznicek** - Jessica Reznicek was sentenced to an eight-year prison sentence for actions she took to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline. Jessica was hit with a “terrorism enhancement,” which doubled her sentence. She additionally was ordered to pay over \$3 million in restitution. Go to [supportjessicareznicek.com](http://supportjessicareznicek.com) for more ways to advocate on her behalf.

**Leonard Peltier** - “A petition has been filed with the US Department of Justice seeking clemency for Leonard Peltier, as required procedurally for the case to come to the attention of President Biden. Currently, a congressional ‘Dear Colleague’ letter in support of Leonard’s release is circulating in the House of Representatives, generated by Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), who co-signed the letter sent by then-Congresswoman and now Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland to the Trump administration in April 2020.”



Bo Brown Rest In Power, by Josh MacPhee, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

Now is the time to let your congressional representatives know the strength of public support for Leonard by urging them to sign on to the letter to the Biden administration. Contact your local House Representative by phone, email or letter mail. Request that they support freedom for Leonard Peltier, stand with Rep. R. Grijalva and former Rep. Deb Haaland, and sign-on to Rep. Grijalva’s new letter in effort to gain Leonard’s release.

**Xinachtli** - Get involved in fighting for the freedom of Xinachtli (Nahuatl, meaning “seed”) by going to <https://freealvaro.net>. Xinachtli is a political prisoner in Texas, an anarchist communist community organizer and Chicano movement revolutionary. He needs our support now! Write to Xinachtli at this address:

Alvaro Luna Hernandez  
#255735 McConnell Unit  
3001 Emily Drive  
Beesville, TX 78102

**Dr. Mutulu Shakur** - Join the struggle to free Mutulu Shakur in his ongoing clemency campaign for freedom. Dr. Shakur’s health has continued to deteriorate during his more than 35 years of incarceration. Find out more at [mutulushakur.com](http://mutulushakur.com) or write to him at the following address:

Dr. Mutulu Shakur #83205-012  
FMC Lexington  
P.O. Box 14500  
Lexington, KY 40512

**Oso Blanco** - Oso Blanco has a new website: [freeosoblanco.org](http://freeosoblanco.org). Blanco’s artwork raises funds for Zapatistas and native kids. The funds go to the Children’s Art Project (CAP). Please support the “Zapatista supply warrior” in his mission, and share the link within your networks!

**Dan Baker** - Dan Baker, a social justice activist, was recently sentenced to 44 months in prison and three years of supervised release. Dan was arrested on January 15, 2021, after the FBI compiled social media posts related to Trump supporters’ actions on Inauguration Day to build a criminal case against him. He was charged with two counts of transmitting a communication in interstate commerce containing a threat to kidnap or injure.

**Mark Colville (Kings Bay Plowshares)** - As of September 10, Mark Colville **is out!** Colville is one of seven Catholic Worker plowshare activists who broke into Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base in Georgia in April 2018 as an action to protest the construction and use of nuclear weapons. The seven activists, all elderly, were convicted on federal terrorism charges in October 2019. Colville is a founding member of the Amistad Catholic Worker community and house of hospitality in New Haven, Connecticut.

**Patrick O’Neill (Kings Bay Plowshares)** - Another one of the seven anti-nuclear activists has been in federal prison since January and has been **released** to a halfway house in Raleigh, NC, close to his home of Garner, NC. He is scheduled to be there until November 19. He’s been denied permission to attend Holy Mass on Sundays. ♦

# CRITICAL RESISTANCE (CR) UPDATES AND & MOVEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

## CRITICAL RESISTANCE UPDATES

Both California-based chapters of **Critical Resistance (CR)**, **LA & Oakland**, have been working with **Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB)**’s campaign to push state officials, and specifically Governor Newsom, to shut down multiple, and eventually all, prisons in California. Recently, the Prison Closure campaign connected with families and communities of Tracy and Susanville. The closure of Deuel

Vocational Institution (DVI) in Tracy will guide the campaign toward more successful prison closures, while the slated closure of California Correctional Center (CCC) is teaching the campaign many ways to ensure communities, prisoners, and families are centered in the closure process of prisons. The campaign has worked to bring prison closure material to every yard in California.

**Critical Resistance Portland (CRPDX)** has continued their strong mail program and has

been starting to engage in a new coalition in the area.

**CR New York (CRNYC)** has celebrated victories in working to fight ICE in New Jersey and has worked in coalition to bring people home from detention facilities, including successfully bringing Marvin Reyes Ventura home to his community in New Jersey from ICE detention and possible deportation. *Welcome home Marvin!*

*Continued on next page*



Critical Resistance and Education for Liberation Network published a new toolkit with AK Press, *Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators*, along with a six-part virtual event series this past fall. *Lessons in Liberation* creates bridges between abolition and education, and highlights existing organizing efforts. The collection, including the accompanying forthcoming website and discussion guide, offers educators, parents, and young people entry points to build critical and intentional connections to the growing movement for the abolition of the prison industrial complex, particularly in PreK-12 learning contexts.

“Write Them All”  
By CR PDX

CR PDX has been hosting monthly prison letter-writing nights for over six years to provide political education, resource connection, and genuine support to thousands of imprisoned people in the Pacific Northwest.

The Write Them All (WTA) campaign was launched in July of 2020, **while global uprisings against police violence brought awareness to many that policing needs to be abolished.** Through WTA, CR PDX organized over one thousand outside participants across Oregon and the US to send personalized, handwritten letters to everyone locked up in Oregon state prisons. This correspondence also included a printed bilingual (Spanish and English) letter with information about Critical Resistance, *The Abolitionist* newspaper, Beyond These Walls, Liberation Literacy, Black and Pink PDX, and *All Rise* magazine.

CR PDX undertook this campaign knowing the power of letter writing. We see writing letters as a simple, direct, and deeply meaningful way to support people inside and challenge the PIC. CR PDX is proud to say that we accomplished this monumental task - successfully writing more than 14,500 people imprisoned across the state of Oregon. Following our framework of dismantle, change, build, writing to people inside prisons is a way to a) disrupt the isolation of imprisonment, b) challenge the logics of containment and control, and c) build community and strength in the abolitionist movement.

The Write Them All campaign allowed CR PDX to send over 14,000 stimulus and vaccination information packets to Oregon state prisoners as well as thousands of prisoners CR corresponds with nationally in both October 2020 and April 2021. Without the infrastructure and volunteer base of Write Them All, the stimulus mailing would not have been possible. This effort thwarted the Oregon Department of Corrections’ (ODOC) attempt to limit prisoners’ ability to receive their stimulus money, fueling the power of people to act in solidarity across prison walls against state violence.

MOVEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

Since the release of our previous issue #35 in the summer of 2021, our movements have been hard at work advancing our struggles against climate disaster and resource extraction, legacies of genocide, imprisonment, and more. Here are some points of movement news that caught *The Abolitionist* Editorial Collective’s attention.



“Turtle Island” by Eric J. Garcia, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

NATIONALLY

Indigenous People’s Day was held on Monday, October 11, 2021, and was marked as a national holiday. In the San Francisco Bay Area, the sunrise ceremony honoring the history of the Occupation of Alcatraz was held, while in Washington, DC, cops used a long-range acoustic device (LRAD) on Indigenous elders, water protectors, and allies. What does state acknowledgement of Indigenous People’s Day really mean when treaties are still being broken, murdered and missing Indigenous women are still having their stories ignored, and water protectors are continuing to be met with violent police and mercenaries throughout the world?

The neoliberal agenda of Washington continues to ignore the systemic and chronic issues BIPOC and poor white communities face, while the far-right wages a war on women and trans, immigrant, and BIPOC communities. As the right wing and moderates prepare for the next election cycle, they continue to pass increasingly restrictive voting laws to ensure their ability to maintain power. We continue to be vigilant and hold the line of abolition as we work to break down all systems of oppression perpetuated and maintained by the prison industrial complex.

EAST COAST  
Washington, DC

Week of Indigenous Resistance

On the morning of Indigenous People’s Day radical graffiti was left on the statue of Andrew Jackson in front of the white house that read “EXPECT US” in red paint. This declaration marked a week of action at the capitol that was the largest Indigenous uprising since the 1970’s. There were more than 500 arrests made over the week of action of Water Protectors and allies that mobilized for the “People vs Fossil Fuels” week of direct actions. A sit-in was held at the Bureau of Indian Affairs that resulted in the arrest of 55 Indigenous people.

New York City

US Found “Guilty” of Genocide

The International Tribunal on Human Rights Abuses against Black, Brown and Indigenous Peoples was held from Oct. 23-25 and cumulated in the International Panel of Jurists finding the US government and its subdivisions “guilty” of genocide and gross Human Rights violations. This moment was the results of multi-year and multi-generational organizing by the Spirit of Mandela Coalition and Jalil Muntaqim who had the idea of returning to the UN on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1971 delivery of the *We Charge Genocide* petition to the UN by Paul Robeson and William Patterson.

“Shut ‘Em Down” Solidarity

Organizers from DC Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC) and others held a noise demo and rally outside the DC Jail. Folks inside the jail called in to the rally to speak on the importance of abolition. There was also a rally at the National Mall to demand freedom for political prisoners.

NEW YORK

Organizers marched through the Bronx to the Vernon C. Bain Center, aka “The Boat”, and held a rally outside. Elsewhere in New York City, organizers held a rally outside the offices of architects constructing new cages. A solidarity statement from JLS was played aloud during the event. And in Attica, NY, the Prisoner Solidarity Committee held a protest outside the walls of Attica prison that included eyewitnesses of the uprising 50 years ago.

MIDWEST

Minnesota

Stop Line 3

Since the fight to stop Line 3 over 900 water protectors have been arrested as they fight the international company Enbridge’s oil pipeline. Minnesota police were found to have been paid \$2.4 million by Enbridge for cost related to the surveillance and arresting of water protectors.

Green Bay, WI

Organizers from ABOLISHmke held a march and rally to “confront and expose the routine atrocities staff [of Green Bay Correctional Institution] commit with the tacit support of lo-

*Continued on next page*

Shut ‘Em Down 2021

Earlier this year, Jailhouse Lawyers Speak (JLS) national membership called for mass outside demonstrations as part of the National Shut ‘Em Down Demonstrations to be held in the spirit of abolition on the historical dates of August 21 and September 9, 2021.

**JLS asked organizers to highlight prisoners’ historical struggles and the current political struggles to dismantle the prison industrial complex (PIC). People on the outside held a multitude of events in response to this call for abolition by holding political education events, rallies at jails, prisons and detentions centers, banner drops, radical graffiti events, and more all across the country.**

As part of our movement highlights, *The Abolitionist* has compiled a list of just some of the solidarity events that were held in response to the call to #ShutEmDown2021.

Another part of the call for 2021 was JLS announcement that reads, “*Jailhouse Lawyers Speak members around the nation are making a direct appeal for people locked up to disrupt the normal prison operations of america. These demonstrations will be known as National Shut ‘Em Down Demonstrations. Scheduled to take place August 21 – September 9th 2022. This announcement comes early to give our friends, families, comrades and supporters on the outside enough time to get the word inside to every jail, prison, and ICE facility by any means.*”

Solidarity across walls and borders forever! ONWARD TO FREEDOM!



cal and state authorities.” They also held a large banner drop over I-43 that read, “WI PRISONS ARE A CRISIS!!!”

Chicago, IL

Black Alliance for Peace and Party for Socialism and Liberation of Chicago held a speak-out and noise demo outside the Cook County Jail.

THE SOUTH

Texas

Criminalizing Abortion

In Texas, a fight over abortion rights turned grim when the Supreme Court allowed a state law to go into effect that gives private citizens the right to sue anyone giving, receiving, or helping someone get an abortion. Immediately mutual aid projects working to help people access abortions or contraceptives were set up to counter the Texas law. Hackers also attacked the state reporting website that was set up in order for private citizens to report abortion seekers and providers. Some anti-choice and anti-abortion formations are now calling themselves the “abolitionists,” reminding prison industrial complex abolitionists to be more precise in our politic than ever.

“Shut ‘Em Down” Solidarity

Gainesville, FL

Around 100 protesters took over the street in front of the Alachua County Jail when deputies wouldn’t allow them to get closer to the jail.

Reidsville, FL

Organizers and family members of those inside held a rally outside the Georgia State Prison.

WEST COAST

California

California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) Celebrates 25 years!

Our beloved comrades at CCWP celebrated 25 years of struggle for PIC abolition. We congratulate them on this magnificent milestone. Onward to freedom!

“Warm Shutdown” of Deuel Vocational Institute

In Tracy, CA, DVI was finally moved into a “warm shutdown” and will continue to run and be staffed as a way to upkeep the prison. Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) is calling on Governor Newsom to completely shut down DVI so it can never again be used to lock up communities. \$2.2 million a year will be spent to keep DVI in warm shutdown mode, while communities are struggling to get jobs and fund resources that truly keep us safe.

The RISE Act Becomes Law

After community advocacy and organizing, CA SB 483-Allen, aka the RISE Act, was signed into law by Governor Newsom. The RISE (Repeal Ineffective Sentence Enhancements) Act will retroactively apply the elimination of the three-year enhancement for prior drug convictions repealed in 2017 with SB 180 and the one-year enhancement for prior felonies repealed in 2019 with SB 136. This historic win also paves the way to close more CA prisons!

“Shut ‘Em Down” Solidarity

Organizers held rallies, solidarity events, and noise demos across California. In Sacramento IWOC held a noise demonstration outside of the Sacramento County Jail. A demonstration was held outside of an ICE office in Santa Maria. In LA, a rally was held outside Men’s Central Jail. Outside of Solano County Jail in Fairfield, a noise demo with ongoing jail release aid was held by Voices of Vacaville.

In Soledad, organizers held a rally in front of Correctional Training Facility (CTF) to bring at-



By Jess X Snow, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

tention to violent raids that happened in 2020, resulting in the targeting of inside prisoner organizers along with a COVID-19 outbreak. Word from behind the wall was that the raid was in response to the uprising sweeping across the nation outside after the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others, as part of the Black Lives Matter movement.

In the SF Bay Area, around 40 organizers marched to San Quentin and held a rally at the prison gates. Local Bay Area rapper Mistah F.A.B. attended, joining the call for abolition. Organizers also held a banner drop on the Bay Bridge that read “Prison Abolition”.

“Jailhouse Lawyers Speak members around the nation are making a direct appeal for people locked up to disrupt the normal prison operations of america. These demonstrations will be known as National Shut ‘Em Down Demonstrations. Scheduled to take place August 21 – September 9th 2022. This announcement comes early to give our friends, families, comrades and supporters on the outside enough time to get the word inside to every jail, prison, and ICE facility by any means.”

Tacoma, WA

Rallies were held at Northwest Detention Center (NWDC) on multiple days. The organization La Resistencia, which hosted the noise demos and rally, has been organizing for the closure of NWDC since its opening in 2005. NWDC has also been the site of both hunger and work strikes by those imprisoned inside.

Portland, OR

Critical Resistance PDX was part of the Shut ‘Em Down Demonstration coalition that held an on-line event to “rally around JLS nationals members’ call to highlight prisoners’ historic and current struggles” in the fight to end the PIC.

INTERNATIONAL

Six Palestinian Prisoners Escape Israeli Prison

In early September at the Israeli prison called Galouba, six Palestinian prisoners escaped capture through a tunnel they had dug for years with spoons. The escape was celebrated throughout Palestine and the world as a sign of the determination and will of Palestinian resistance to the apartheid state. Eventually the liberated Palestinian prisoners were caught, and widespread reports of violence inside jails and prisons by Israeli forces were seen as evidence that the state was trying to beat down the will of the Palestinians. Global solidarity marches and actions took place to celebrate the escape and to bring attention to the settler colonial state’s use of violence within prisons, just as in the US, to repress dissent and liberation. ♦



# CALL FOR CONTENT

## Help shape the content of *The Abolitionist*

Make your voice heard in our paper!

Submit content by writing a piece for either our Features section  
OR one of our columns

In 2022, *The Abolitionist* Editorial Collective will print only two issues in the year. The Features section in Issue 37, to be released in late Spring 2022, will focus on housing and shelter. Issue 38’s Features will focus on labor and will be released in the Fall of 2022.

Send us an essay, an article, research, a poem, a story, a play, a comic, art, a personal reflection, or questions on these topics for our upcoming Features sections!

- **Issue 37 Submission Deadline: Friday, February 4, 2022.**
- **Issue 38 Submission Deadline: Friday, August 26, 2022.**

There are many ways for you to shape the content of the paper, either by submitting a piece to our Features section or by supporting one of our columns. Check out all of the ways you can submit content for *The Abolitionist*:

### 1. Write a piece for our Features

- Pieces in Features can be different functions of writing—including theoretical, to reflective or action-oriented—and they will all share a common focus, theme, or topic of consideration. **Check the Feature focus for issues 37 and 38!**
- **2. Submit content for one of our columns**
- Send a **Kite to the Editors**
  - › **Reflect on your personal “pathway toward freedom”** like Ricardo did in Issue 36’s Reflection Feature and share with us for a future Kite
- **Share your survey responses** to Issue 36’s **Prison Closure survey** (pg 8) or **Stevie’s 21 Questions** (pg 15)
- Request to be an author of an **Inside-Outside Fishing Line**
- Contribute a report or an update on organizing inside for our **Movement Highlights** column
- **Write a poem or song lyrics** that relate to the features or any other topic of your choice
- **Make visual art** to complement the Features section or one of our columns
- **Create a political cartoon** for our Features focus for either Issue 37 or 38, or work with us to become a regular political cartoonist for the paper

- **Reflect** on how you use *The Abby* in your study and **share that reflection for our 9971 column**, or submit questions on study that you want Stevie to address in future columns

### Some approaches to writing Kites to the Editors:

- Elaborate on something that you agreed with in an article and explain why you agreed with it.
- Elaborate on something that you disagreed with in an article and explain why you disagreed with it.
- Relate an article to other things you have read, watched, heard, or experienced.
- Write a note to the editors sharing questions that you believe are timely and necessary in this political moment and that you would like answered by Critical Resistance.

Send submissions to the Kites to the Editors section to:

The Abolitionist Paper  
Attn: Kites to the Editors  
P.O. Box. 22780  
Oakland, CA 94609-2391

**Please make sure you read our Submission Guidelines before working on a submission to ensure your piece aligns with how we decide what to print..**

Send your submission to:

Critical Resistance  
Attn: The Abolitionist  
P.O. Box. 22780  
Oakland, CA 94609-2391

### SUBMISSION GUIDELINES: SEND US YOUR WRITING AND ARTWORK!

We accept articles, letters, creative writing, poetry, interviews, and artwork in English or Spanish.

#### IDEAS FOR ARTICLES AND ARTWORK

- Examples of prisoner organizing
- Practical steps toward prison industrial complex abolition
- Ways to help keep yourself and others physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually healthy while imprisoned
- Updates on what’s happening at the prison you’re in (for example: working conditions, health concerns, lockdowns)
- Legal strategies and important cases that impact prisoners
- Alternatives to policing, punishment, imprisonment, and surveillance
- Experiences of life after or before imprisonment
- Creative or reflective writing with an abolitionist message
- Freedom dreams and imaginative pieces with radical vision
- Your opinion about a piece published in a recent issue
- Reflections on how you’ve used the paper (in your conversations, work, study groups)
- Empowering, liberatory art of resistance and community power (and that will print well)

#### LENGTH

- Articles should not be more than 1500 words (about five handwritten pages)
- Letters should not be more than 250 words

#### HOW TO SUBMIT

- **If you want your name and address printed with your article, please include it as you would like it printed.** If you do not wish to have your name or address included, please let us know that when you submit your piece. Instead of your name, you can choose an alias, publish your piece anonymously, or use your initials.
- If possible, send a copy of your submission and not the original

#### WRITING SUGGESTIONS

- Even if writing is difficult for you, your ideas are worth the struggle. Try reading your piece out loud to yourself or sharing it with someone else. Doing this might help you clarify the ideas in your submission.

**Notes on Editing:** We edit all pieces for both content and grammar. We will send you a copy of the piece before printing it. **As an abolitionist publication, we do not print material we find in some way perpetuates oppression or legitimizes the prison industrial complex.** Given that institutional mail can be slow and purposefully delayed at times (or even disappeared), please make note in your submission of phrases or sections you would like the editorial collective to print unedited if there are any.

## SUBSCRIBE TO *THE ABOLITIONIST*!

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