LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

Thank you for again supporting The Abolitionist! In this issue we hope to continue the momentum we have built since the release of Issue 16, which focused on Life after the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). We now look at some of the work that is happening to get us to that goal. It is crucial that, in addition to envisioning what our world could look like after the PIC, we familiarize ourselves with the work happening now to make it so. Challenging the social norms and barriers that exist between our loved ones and their communities, finding new ways to keep one another healthy and safe, and building up the world we want instead are all things that we will explore in this issue.

As you read through this issue you will hear from many of our allies—including organizers and former prisoners—but not enough from people that are currently imprisoned. As we work out the new structure for our paper and try these new themes and systems for receiving contributions, we would like to emphasize the importance of contributions from current prisoners. The next issue will be focused on surveillance and it is crucial that we hear the perspectives found in this issue are but a mere sampling of the long legacies of oppression that connect so many of us. In the previous issue, we asked you to prioritize prisoners? Why is it important for a social movement for economic justice such as Occupy to organize the action at San Quentin. Below, former prisoner and organizer with California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Diana Block, share their perspectives on Occupy’s National Day of Support of Prisoners.

In solidarity,
The Abolitionist Editorial Collective

Human Needs over Profit

The Occupy Movement and Supporting the Struggle in the Belly of the Beast

BY MANUEL LA FONTAINE AND DIANA BLOCK, WITH MOLLY FORZIG

On February 20th, 2012, thousands of people across the U.S. held demonstrations in support of prisoners as part of the Occupy Movement, including New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Washington DC, Chicago, Columbus, Denver, Durham, Seattle, Portland, the San Francisco Bay Area, and smaller towns like Fresno and Indio in California. At Ohio State Prison, prisoners went on a one-day hunger strike in solidarity with the National Day of Support of Prisoners.

The call for these actions came from Oakland, CA, where anti-prison activists, former prisoners, and prisoner advocates amplified the voices of people inside prisons. The overarching message praised the Occupy Movement’s courage and creativity in challenging severe social and economic inequality in the U.S. and worldwide, while also urging Occupiers to not leave behind the 2.3 million people who are locked up in prisons, jails and detention centers.

Despite the prison’s attempts to minimize the size of the crowd, over 700 people rallied outside San Quentin State Prison in the San Francisco Bay Area. For three hours, dozens of former prisoners, prisoners’ families and community members read statements from their loved ones and comrades inside. Speakers addressed a range of issues surrounding the prison industrial complex (PIC)—from the direct relationship of economic exploitation to imprisonment, the juvenile system and the role of imprisonment in destroying indigenous communities, to the ongoing use of prisons as a tool for political repression domestically and abroad.

This National Day of Support of Prisoners was a crucial opportunity to strengthen our connection and work to abolish the prison industrial complex. The Abolitionist interviewed two organizers from Occupy 4 Prisoners, the group that organized the action at San Quentin. Below, former prisoner and organizer with California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Diana Block, share their perspectives on Occupy’s National Day of Support of Prisoners.

As you read through this issue you will hear from many of our allies—including organizers and former prisoners—but not enough from people that are currently imprisoned. As we work out the new structure for our paper and try these new themes and systems for receiving contributions, we would like to emphasize the importance of contributions from current prisoners. The next issue will be focused on surveillance and it is crucial that we hear the perspectives found in this issue are but a mere sampling of the long legacies of resistance that connect so many of us. In the previous issue, we asked you to prioritize prisoners? Why is it important for a social movement for economic justice such as Occupy to prioritize prisoners?

Manuel La Fontaine (MLF): Supporting prisoner resistance inside cages both through individual, and preferably, collective actions sends a message to the state that it cannot continue to use prisons as the answer to its social problems. The broader “Occupy/Decolonize Movement” has to recognize the history and purpose of prisons as a tool for political repression domestically and abroad.

Diana Block (DB): When social movements operate in their separate silos and don’t connect the dots, they work to the advantage of corporations, the top one percent and the state. Mass incarceration exposes how distorted the economic priorities of this society are. Millions of dollars are poured into building prisons and caging people, while funding for education, health care, housing, and jobs is gutted. Without these basics, people of color and poor people at the bottom of the 99 percent are

IN THIS ISSUE

Occupy Prisons
From the SHU to the Occupy Movement, 3
America is a Prison Industrial Complex, 4
Palestine
FPLP Leader on the Hunger Strike that “Made Revolution in the Prison,” 4
Gender
Living While Trans Behind Bars, 5
Airwaves
Voices from Inside on the Radio, 6

Brazil
Prisoner-Led Organizing in São Paulo, 7

HIV/AIDS
Laura Whitehorn Interview, 8

Palestine
Bliss from the Past, 9
War Behind Walls, 9

Writing as Resistance
The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 10
Uruguayans Writing in Prison, 10

Gang Injunctions and Hunger Strikes
Resisting the War on Gangs, 11

Continued on next page
Continued from previous page, “Occupy”

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jalil Muntaqim  
Ben Lorber  
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PHOTO BY KATE CONWAY

Continued from previous page, “Occupy”

Prisons have become warehouses for segments of the population that the capitalist system no longer has jobs or resources for. When social movements fight to resist the privatization, racism and other forms of oppression, they are suppressed through escalating forms of policing and incarceration. We can already see this happening as the brutal police response to the Occupy movement and the one against the Mumia Abu-Jamal, Kevin Cooper and Pelican Bay hunger strikers has made these connections and have called upon Occupiers to occupy the bottom one percent, those who are locked up, as an integral part of the movement. These connections are necessary in order to build a truly anti-racist movement and a comprehensive fight for economic and social justice, which includes all the sectors of the 99 percent.

What are some of the challenges in Occupying the National Day of Support for Prisoners? What are some of the challenges?

DB: One of the important strengths of the Occupy movement is the claiming of public space to force public engagement with issues of economic injustice. Prisoners were deliberately locked out of public space, dispossessed and hidden from view. By mobilizing a National Occupy Day in Support of Prisoners, public space is being claimed in the name of the 2.3 million people who are forced to occupy cages. By rallying at the gates of prisons, Occupiers are directly connecting with human beings inside, helping to make the connection one to one. Occupiers are a part of the Occupy movement. Another significant aspect of the planning in the Bay Area has been the commitment to center the day’s activities on the voices of prisoners, as well as their family members and formerly incarcerated people. The day provided a place for these people to represent themselves and challenge their constant demonization by the media and other institutions. The demands for the National Day of Support for Prisoners address a wide range of issues: inhumane conditions of confinement, unjust sentencing policies, human rights, political prisoner freedom, resisting repression, and the need to change budget priorities.

A major ongoing challenge is looking beyond February 20th to ensure that the visibility, collective momentum and leadership of this day continues. This means creating future opportunities to collaborate on campaigns that reflect the demands that have been articulated for this day.

How can this national day of solidarity potentially strengthen organizing collaborations inside and outside prisons?

DB: Many different groups and individuals that organize separately have come together to work on this day. Prisoners from different parts of the state have become involved in the planning, which has been very positive. We have brought together groups and individuals that work against the death penalty, for the civil and human rights of formerly incarcerated people, for freedom of political prisoners and for the abolition of the prison industrial complex. We have also been in touch with the prison groups and anti-prison groups around the country who are participating in this National Day of Support with Prisoners, which is significant since there are not many recent examples of this type of coordinated national activity regarding prisons.

MLF: This National Day of Support with people in cages provides an opportunity for many of us to learn to structure another initiative, i.e. respectively pushing up our levels of discomfort, challenging conventional ideas and practices, resolving contradic- tions, etc., while keeping our eyes on the prize: the abolition of state-sanctioned torture, and ultimately, the prison industrial complex.

What are some examples of how prisoners are organizing inside and how people outside can support this work?

DB: In the past year and a half there have been some dramatic examples of prisoner organizing. In December 2012, thousands of prisoners participated in a prisoner strike. Shortly after that, in January 2013, four prisoners in Lucassville, Ohio went on hunger strike to protest inhumane conditions, including 24-hour-a-day solitary confinement. Then, in July 2013, prisoners at Pelican Bay State Prison in California went on a hunger strike to protest against solitary confinement and gang debriefing policies that were taken up by thousands across the state and is still continuing. More recently, hundreds of prisoners at Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW) have mounted a campaign to stop the conversion of VSPW into a men’s prison and to instead close VSPW all together and repurpose it as a non-corrrectional, community space.

To varying degrees, people on the outside have supported these actions. However, it has been difficult to build consistent support on the level that is required in order to help win the demands and protect prisoners from severe retaliation. Prisoner-initiated actions demonstrate the leadership and self-organizing capacity of the people inside. Such actions challenge the prevalent negative and de-humanizing stereotypes about prisoners and help to galvanize activities outside. We on the outside have to learn how to better support these actions through public education, advocacy, legislative lobbying, grassroots organizing and direct actions which reflect and reinforce the commitment of the prisoners. We also need to involve other sectors of the progressive movement more strongly in solidarity with these actions. For example, when thousands of prisoners around California go on hunger strike to protest inhumane conditions, everyone who cares about social justice should see this as their struggle too.

What would a strong, cohesive social movement in the U.S. in 2012 look like to you?

MLF: We need a movement that seeks to dismantle all systems of oppression and build inclusive, sustainable communities from our collective strengths. We need a movement that uses restorative practices to heal our communities. We need a movement that prioritizes the voices and participation of those most impacted by incarceration and poverty, and that genuinely puts people over profit, prisons, or any property.

MLF: The recent hunger strikes in California’s State Prisons inside of Security Housing Units (SHUs) exemplified the significance of an inter-generational, statewide, prisoner-led resistance. People can help ensure that the demands from those being tortured inside maximum-security housing units are met, such as the Five Core Demands put forth by people inside California’s SHUs. We must continue to build these movements and push back against these initiatives.

DB: With growing awareness of the socioeconomic destructiveness of mass incarceration, we have the potential to build a more unified, broader public determination to turn back the growth of the PIC. The National Day of Support with Prisoners provides a good example of linking issues, organizations and localities. Looking to the self-organizing efforts of prisoners and former prisoners helps prioritize the campaigns for human rights that are being framed by the people most impacted by the PIC. At the same time, the budget crisis impacting the entire country has opened up new possibilities for decar- ceration campaigns since state governments have an incentive to reduce their prison populations to save money.

In California, the state’s new realignment policy has just shifted the focus of struggle to the county level where local officials are fighting over money available to correction. The strong fight against jail expansion that has been tak- ing place in L.A. is a good example of the type of response that uses mass participation and push back against these initiatives. If prison...
Lester Jackson some 40 years ago: “Consciousness is a cross-section of this population as possible. The 10 Core Demands of the Occupy Movement

1. We want full employment with a living wage for all people who will work, and for employment to be enforced as the right it is.
2. We want an end to institutional racism and race- and class-based disparities in access to, and quality of, labor, education, health care, criminal defense, political empowerment, technology and healthy food.
3. We want decent and affordable housing for all people and for it to be enforced as the right it is.
4. We want affordable and equal access to higher education for all and access to education that teaches the true history of colonialism, chattel slavery, repression of organized labor, the use of police repression and imprisonment as tools of capitalist exploitation, and the perpetuation of imperialism in the development and maintenance of modern U.S. power systems and corporate financial markets.
5. We want an immediate end to police brutality and the murder of oppressed people in the U.S., particularly in the New Afrikan (Black), Latino, immigrant and underclass communities and among underclass communities in your city or town and for all brothers and sisters in the ghettos, projects, bars and train stations across this nation.
6. We want an end to the expansion of the prison system and the perpetuation of imperialism abroad, as well as the expansion of the police and military around the world.
7. We want an end to the war on drugs and the murder of oppressed people in the U.S., and the murder of oppressed people in the world. We want an end to the militarization of the police and the expansion of the prison system.
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10. We want a more equitable distribution of wealth, power and opportunity for all people, and for it to be enforced as the right it is.

The 10 Core Demands of the Occupy Movement National Coalition

1. We want full employment with a living wage for all people who will work, and for employment to be enforced as the right it is.
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The 10 Core Demands of the Occupy Wall Street Movement National Coalition

1. We want full employment with a living wage for all people who will work, and for employment to be enforced as the right it is.
2. We want an end to institutional racism and race- and class-based disparities in access to, and quality of, labor, education, health care, criminal defense, political empowerment, technology and healthy food.
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From N.C.T.T. Corcoran SHU to the Occupy Movement

BY NEW AFRIKAN REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM (NARN) COLLONERS IN CORCORAN’S SECURITY HOUSING UNIT

T he Arab Spring, which is still rocking the Middle East, and our own struggle to abolish indefinite confinement in sensory deprivation SHU Units – the one percent- want to be dis- seminated as broadly as possible to under- mine mass support for the movement.

We learned this in the epoch following the Civil War, when a cross-section of this population as possible and the collective contributions of the 99 percent upon which this society reflects the objective reality that it’s the socio- economic motive force, predicting the in- evitable reactive violent response of the fascist state in defense of its capitalist masters, the ruling 1 percent have never, nor will they ever, concede anything, sure not substantive changes, without struggle which requires unity of purpose, broad- based organization, fluid strategy and effec- tive tactics.

Populist and progressive movements in this nation have succeeded or failed, lived or died, based on how effectively they understood and adapted to this reality. We learned this as we continue to support you with our sacrifi- ces and insight. It is now time to take the movement to its next evolution and ulti- mately to its inevitable conclusion: victori- ous revolutionary change.

Your greatest power lies in your unity and cooperation and ultimately your organiza- tional ability. The peoples of the Arab Spring have never had our most last support, and thus it is here that you must begin forging meaningful ties. These are overwhelmingly New African (Black), Latino, immigrant and poor com- munities.

You champion us all with your ideas and the energy of your commitment, just as we continue to support you with our sacrifi- ces and insight. It is now time to take the movement to its next evolution and ulti- mately to its inevitable conclusion: victori- ous revolutionary change.

This is a protracted struggle, there will be no 90-day revolution here. Victory will require sacrifice, tenacity and competent strategic insight. The question you must ask is: Are you prepared to do what is necessary to win this struggle? If you answer in the affirmative, commit to victory and accept no other alternative. The people, as we are, are you. Until we win or don’t lose, our love and solidarity to all those who love freedom and fear only failures.

Originally posted by the San Francisco Bay View *Names omitted for protection.

Continued from previous page, “Occupy” populations are being reduced, we need to be pro- active and counteract new forms of policing and surveillance that are developed such as the Stop and Frisk policy in New York. When people are released from jails and prisons, we have to join them to fight for the resources needed to survive this harsh economic environment.  Given the rise of political mobilization and corresponding police repression, it is also an important moment to reinvigorate cam- paigns to release political prisoners, especially those who have been incarcerated for decades because of their active role in liberation movements of the sixties and seventies. Fighting for the freedom of movement activists is part and parcel of building a strong move- ment that can resist police brutality and state repres- sion and be sustained over the long haul.

Manuel La Fontaine is an organizer with and member of All of Us or None, a project of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children. All of Us or None is an organization com- prised of formerly-incarcerated people, their families, and allies, fighting for the full restoration of their civil and human rights.

Diana Block is a founding member and current activ- ist with the California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP). She represents CCWP in the California United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) coalition. She is also the author of the memoir Afro the Spirit: A Woman’s Journey Underground and Back (AK Press, 2009).
America is a Prison Industrial Complex

STATEMENT FROM JALIL MUNTAQIM READ AT OCCUPY’S NATIONAL DAY OF SUPPORT OF PRISONERS SAN QUENTIN FEBRUARY 20, 2012

The 2.3 million U.S. citizens in prison represent more than a problem of criminality. Rather, the human toll of the U.S. prison industrial complex addresses and indict the very foundation of American history. Given this reality, the struggle to abolish the prisons is a struggle to change the very fabric of American society. It is a struggle to remove the financial incentive—the profitability of the prison/slave system. This will essentially change how the U.S. addresses the issue of poverty, of ethnic inequality, and misappropriation of tax dollars. It will speak to the reality that the prison system is a slave system, a system that dehumanizes the social structure and dehumanizes America’s moral social values.

The prison system today is an industry that, as did chattel slavery, profits off the misery and suffering of other human beings. From politicians to bankers to the business investment community in the prison industrial complex is a multi-billion dollar criminal enterprise, all of which has been sanctioned by the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. It is imperative that those of you here come to terms with the reality that America is the prison industrial complex, and that the silence and inaction of Americans is complicit in maintaining a system that in its very nature is inhumane.

Abolish the American Prison Industrial Complex!

All Power to the People! All Power to the People!

Jalil Muntaqim (Anthony Bottom), a former member of the Black Panther Party, has been a political prisoner since 1971. He is the author of We Are Our Own Liberators and is currently imprisoned in Attica, NY.

*Edited for publication in The Abolitionist.

PFLP Leader Abdel-Alim Da’na Speaks

Abdel-Alim Da’na is a leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and a professor of democracy, human rights and Palestinian history at Palestine Polytechnic University in Hebron. A man who has spent decades organizing left-wing Palestinian resistance, he has been a political prisoner of the State of Israel for 25 years since 1975. During this time, he shared a cell with PFLP leader Ahmad Saadat for four years in Tulkarem prison.

Over the years he has written many books in Arabic on the mistreatment of Palestinian prisoners by the Israeli government. Ben Lorber, contributor to The Electronic Intifada, interviewed Abdel-Alim Da’na in his Hebron home on 8 November 2011.

Ben Lorber: How long were you in prison?

Abdel-Alim Da’na: I spent 17 years in Israeli prisons. In 1972 I spent more than one year, and in 1975, they gave me 17 and a half years. I was released by an exchange of prisoners between PLO and Israel in 1985. I spent ten years and two months jail. They arrested me in the first intifada, the first uprising, and exchange of prisoners between PLO and Israel in 1985. I spent ten years and two years and two months in Israeli jails.

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BL: How were you treated inside prison?

AD: The Israeli management inside the prisons is very difficult, and they mistreated us inside the prisons. Dozens of people inside the prisons were absolutely crazy. I saw many go crazy because of the very bad conditions inside the prison. More than two hundred detainees died inside the prisons. I have written many books and essays about the prisoners inside the prisons. I wrote a book about the 94 prisoners who died inside the prisons, and about some of them were killed because of interrogations, and some of them were not given suitable treatment. In interrogations I spent more than a hundred days inside isolated cell without anybody, and they used all kinds of torture to take information from me. Not only me, but many persons, many detainees.

And you must believe me that the situation is very difficult, very hard. Because we are inside the prisons, everything is confiscated, including our freedom, and we haven’t enough food, our family can’t visit us inside the prison freely, and they must get our families when they visit us.

BL: How did prisoners resist the occupation from within the prison?

AD: We had many hunger strikes, and were used to struggling inside the prison to make our life possible. For example, the first hunger strike was in 1970 — this strike was to put an end to Israeli mistreatment of our prisoners. The guard or the policemen said “Issa, come in!” He beat him. Why? “Because I don’t like him!” And when you speak to the guard, you had to say “please sir, ok sir” and you had to bend your head. We saw that they are treating us in a very ugly, very inhumane way. This was the first hunger strike. And we succeeded in this hunger strike in 1970, to put an end to the guards’ mistreatment of prisoners.

And then we called to bring us newspapers. They at first brought us a newspaper called which was written and published by Israel intelligence, by Shabak [Shin Bet]. We wanted to change this. So Ashkelon prison had a big strike, they continued with this strike for forty eight days, so as to bring freely Arab magazines and Arab newspapers and Arab books inside the prisons. And the Israelis consented to bring in the books! We called this very important for the prisoners — it changed our lives.

We did not have radio transmitters. We were smuggling transistor radios, but the Israeli authorities considered it very dangerous. In September 1985 we had an important hunger strike, we continued it for 13 days. The police minister discussed with us about this hunger strike. We had six representatives among the prisoners — I was one of them — and we discussed our demands and we forced them to permit us to bring a radio. And this made a revolution inside the prisons!

BL: How did you organize and educate yourselves inside the prison?

AD: Every political organization makes their systems and law. There were Fatah, PFLP, DFLP, and these were the three main organizations [in the 1980s]. All the organizations did their best to find books. At first, we had books, we hadn’t newspapers, we hadn’t papers or pens [with which] to write, but we smuggled many things like these. Also, once we smuggled books into prisons, we smuggled papers and pencils and we copied the books by hand to give to our friends.

Everyone, when they enter the prison, must learn to read and to study. When some people enter the prison, they cannot read or write, and we put an end to their illiteracy. Some of them are very famous journalists now, some are poets, some are writing in the newspapers and writing research. I have many names of these people who couldn’t read or write, and now they are very respectable members of Palestinian culture, men in the Palestinian Authority and writers of all sorts.

BL: Did you also write about political theory and philosophy inside the magazines?

AD: Yes! We also had [internal] prison magazines we wrote by hand. For example, Fatah had one or two magazines inside the prison, and also PFLP had a magazine, al-Hadaf [The Goal]. We wrote these magazines by hand, with pencils, and some people put drawings in the magazines, and some prisoners wrote poems, some wrote tales and short stories. … We wrote about political theory and philosophy inside the magazines, and political economy, many Marxist-Leninist essays inside these magazines. And we also had essays where we discussed our situations inside the prisons, and news, and our relationship to the prison freely, and they mistreated us inside the prisons.

Continued on page 8, “PFLP”
For anyone entering prison, the intake process is a dehumanizing one. You're strip-searched, shaved, and forced to wear clothes that unmistakably identify you as a "con." For transgender and queer prisoners, it doesn't stop there. Your hair is cut in to a style deemed by authorities to be “gender appropriate,” and the same rules apply to your underwear. Once inside, administrators and other prisoners continue to police gender expression via physical and emotional violence. If you refuse to conform to the regulations (both written and unwritten), you risk punishment far harsher than your original sentence. But some trans and queer people find ways to tweak the rules to make life a little more livable.

Faith Phillips first entered prison in 2004 at the age of 21. “I imagine being told, ‘You have no right to be here. It was a tough adjustment,’” she said.

Facing abuse from staff and other prisoners, sticking up for her fellow queers in central California’s Avenal State Prison became a necessity. “We decided, ‘We’re not going to allow one person to be singled out!’ So when one day, a queer prisoner was threatened with being sent to a ward where he’d be unsafe, Faith said, ‘F*** that. I’m not going to let that happen.’” Out in the yard, the guards “would leave when the correctional officers (COs) announced that it was time to go inside. ‘ Might as well take me to the hole, because I’m not moving,” she told the COs. “Then the whole queer community said, ‘We’re going to the hole, too.’” They all refused to leave the yard’s bleachers.

The sergeant in charge was not amused. “This is not happening in my yard,” he said. But they didn’t budge. This went on through the night. It got cold. To stay warm, they played a game of freeze tag at 3 a.m., and prisoners who were inside managed to push blankets out to them underneath a doorway.

Faith and her crew of queers came up with a list of demands that included HIV and sex education, a gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and queer support group, getting clothes that were taken from them returned, and an end to harassment by staff (in addition to the original demand that the at-risk prisoner not be moved). Apart from the clothing, all demands were met. It was a big boost for the prisoners, and helped keep one of them out of harm’s way.

This sort of activism came at a cost. As retribution, she went through a series of prison transfers, was sent to the hole, and prison administrators promised, “If you ever think about doing this again, we’ll bury you.”

She learned about an organization called the Transgender, Gender Variant, Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP), while inside, and became an information collector for the group, sending reports from inside on everything from physical harm to the names of guards who used gay slurs to refer to queer prisoners. Now out of prison, she’s pursuing a law degree and is working to decriminalize and free prisoners as soon as they are both released, they moved in together.

Evaluating, Regina noted that “sex was forbidden, and if people were caught, they would get a blue sheet [a disciplinary write-up], and were often sent to ‘lock’ [jailitory confinement].” Of course, sex and relationships do happen—and sometimes the guards are involved. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, gay prisoners encounter sexual assault at a rate three times that of straight prisoners, and if a female was forced to turn in all her prison-issued clothing because it “did not fit” and “was unacceptable” according to the guards, she was then forced to wear clothes that were tight, and she was clearly uncomfortable. “She was later able to trade other prisoners for bigger clothes. Some women wore handmade dildos on a daily basis,” Regina said. Not “when they were going to have sex, but just in general, like to the mess hall or the library.”

Alterations are considered to be “destroying state property.” But the destruction of a prisoner’s spirit is a far more serious problem. The required uniformity of clothing serves to dehumanize the people who are forced to wear uniforms. Meanwhile, prophesying up an industry that produces millions of dollars a year.

Speaking to the BBC, psychologist Martin Skinner noted, “The suits de-individualize the prisoner... People express themselves through their clothes and putting them in these jumpsuits takes their individuality away.” Behind bars, a contraband piece of pink fabric might symbolize much more than just a pretty accessory—it can be a loud, clear expression of gender and individuality.

Reforms Can’t Make an Unfair System Fair

When I asked Lala, a female-identified organizer with TGIJP in San Francisco, which prisons she was housed in, she responded, “When I was a prisoner, I wasn’t housed at a better question,” and listed off almost ten different “men’s institutions” that she had been housed in.

As noted by Californians United for Responsible Budget (CURB), Governor Jerry Brown—who was endorsed by the powerful prison guard’s union during the 2010 election—was lauded by mainstream media outlets as a “budget hero.” But during the 2010 election—was lauded by mainstream lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights groups for rejecting CURB, organizer Lisa Marie Alatorre said “As CDCR 2012 allows trans people to wear the underwear of their choice, at least on paper. Some California prisons are starting to allow ‘bra chrono’ requests—basically, a doctor-prescribed bra. And trans people in the state will be shunted to certain prisons deemed to be ‘trans-friendly.’ But the segregation comes at a price.

As noted by Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB), Governor Jerry Brown—who was endorsed by the powerful prison guard’s union during the 2010 election—was lauded by mainstream lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights groups for rejecting GENDA into law, even as he cut social services while hesitating to sign the state’s prison budget.

In January, the Governor finally announced plans to reduce funding to prisons by $1.1 billion. This is partially due to the fact that California’s government is flat broke: the state’s independent budget analyst estimates a shortfall of almost $13 billion for 2012. For some trans women, finding a “john” is a survival tactic—a means of protecting yourself from violence in a hyper-masculine, aggressive environment. But intentionally or not, engaging in a relationship behind bars can also be an act of resistance and self-determination in a place that’s set up to obstruct this.

Teddy Bear Made for a Former Prisoner’s Girlfriend, Made from A State-Issued Booty and Nightie

Teddies can be a loud, clear expression of gender and self-determination in a place that’s set up to obstruct this kind of behavior.

The illegality of relationships is a problem, especially for people who are there for the rest of their lives,” Regina said. “How and why would anyone be expected and forced to live without love from a significant other at all? It’s insane!” Regina met her own partner while inside; as soon as they were both released, they moved in together.

Getting the Look for Less

The right to wear a certain style of underwear might not seem like a big deal to some, but for people who have been fighting to express their gender for their entire lives, it goes a long way. Regina said, “When I was a prisoner, I wasn’t housed at is a better question,” and listed off almost ten different “men’s institutions” that she had been housed in.

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Lala entered the system in 1999, and said that in spite of recent reforms, it’s actually getting harder for imprisoned trans people, because “officers are aging out of the system...they’re retiring.” Officers who “were there when trans people and hormones were a problem” are “not going to be a part of a way to true gender self-determination can only happen with a total dismantling of this “corrupt system.”

Some prisons have schooling and training courses that “are presented, and end up in isolation.” Why? “It’s gotten so that the police are trained to separate, divide and conquer. As the more marginalized groups gaining power, they’re dictating which people they want in their prison yards.” Lala describes the sentiment of certain straight-identified prisoners toward trans people: “If you come here, we’re going to stab you.”

As for GENDA’s passing, Lala said, “In a way it’s going to help us, because our people will be there. But the way it’s taking away our freedom, because there are different programming possibilities [at different prisons].” Some prisons have schooling and training courses that others do not. “People are going to be limited to what they can participate in because they’re trans-gender.”

To receive a copy of Surviving Prison in California: Advice By and For Transgender Women, write to TGIP, 345 9th Street, Suite 202, San Francisco, CA 94103, or email info@tgip.org.

Faith Phillips is a writer, PIC abolitionist, prisoner advocate, and currently studying law. She lives in Los Angeles, where she is a visual artist (http://www.facebook.com/Ameliamarieflan).
Prisoner Led Organizing in São Paulo, Brazil

By Andrea Salinas

For the last two decades the Brazilian penal system has increasingly come under the scrutiny of international human rights non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) largely spurred by the infamous massacre at Carandirú prison in São Paulo on the 2nd of October in 1992. Having been present as a reporter there, this account reports that more than 1,300 prisoners had died at the prison since it opened in 1956. It was in resistance to these conditions and in response to the massacre that Brazil’s largest prisoner organization, the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), came into being. The strength of the organization has largely been disregarded by the Brazilian state, but coordinated actions in 2001 and to an even greater extent in 2006, catapulted the PCC to international notoriety, forcing the state to acknowledge the PCC, but to seek out the leadership in negotiating a settlement. While most still regard the PCC as a prison gang, the international press garnered by the revolt of the Matilha on the 20th of March last year, the PCC demonstrated, in a defiant act they call a “sacrifice”, the degree to which they have organized their prison population, but they hold 44 percent of the nation’s prisoners.

Prison Conditions

For over two decades, prisoners, their families and NGO’s had advocated for the closure of Carandirú. Conditions at the prison were grossly unhealthy. Diseases not common in the general population such as tuberculosis and scabies were rampant, as well as cases of leprosy. HIV and AIDS infected 17 percent of the population, and transgrender prisoners who had been at the prison over six years had a 100 percent infection rate. Sixty percent of the population had Hepatitis C. Torture and extra-judicial killing by guards is commonplace in prisons to this day. A state department report for 2001, the year Carandirú was closed, cited the following: “1,284 prisoners died in the first 9 months of the year... Of these deaths, 59 were from injuries suffered during rebellions and 182 were from prisoner-on-prisoner violence.” Amnesty International reported in 2001 and 2005 that the use of beatings and torture were “meted out on a widespread and systematic basis”, including electric shock, asphyxiation, and “parrot’s perch”, the practice of hanging prisoners upside down and beating them. It was under these conditions that the prisoners of Carandirú revolted on October 2, 1992. Prisoners supposedly disputed over space in the prison yard, which incited other prisoners to break into the yard, and quickly took control of the area around 2 p.m. Prison officials notified the Metropolitan Police, and by 3:30 p.m. the police force was gathered outside the prison and the control of the yard was ceded to their forces. Eyewitness accounts state that prisoners dispersed and ran for cover as police entered the facility. Government accounts later said that prisoners demanded to sit down and negotiate their intent to negotiate by throwing weapons out of windows and hanging white flags out of windows. Police forces stormed Cell Block 9, shooting prisoners whose backs had been turned. Witnesses later testified that many prisoners were executed while they hid in their cells. In all, 111 prisoners were killed that day while the police did not suffer a single casualty.

Founding of the PCC

Most in Brazil have labeled the PCC as a criminal gang, as they engage in a variety of unsanctioned enterprises to fund their activities. But these funds are used to provide for the basic needs of prisoners and their families, as well as legal services. The senior leadership and their families continue to live in moderate conditions. Of greater significance is that, to a large extent, the PCC has reproduced authoritarian state practices of violence to maintain control. Despite power structures that are no longer existent with liberation for everyone in Brazilian society, the popular base the PCC has built makes it worthy of examination. The organization, founded by two prisoners at Taubate maximum security facility, espouses a 16 point manifesto that points to a much more complex organization formed in response to the 1992 massacre.

One can surmise from the manifesto that given the situation in Brazil, prisoners no longer trusted the government or NGO’s to improve conditions or close down the prisons, noting that the holding and murder of civilians is the mainstay of the military dictatorship, but seven years later little had changed for the prison population. But at least all living prisoners, and indeed they have for many of Brazil’s poor, as evidenced by the thousands who have been galvanized by the PCC in São Paulo.

Despite the degradation at Carandirú, prisoners’ humanity was largely un-crushed; they established codes of behavior amongst themselves. In grossly overcrowded prisons, they organized themselves in shifts to sleep, no one was allowed to spit or use the bathroom (a 4-sided hole in every cell) during meal times, and during weekend conjugal visits prisoners divided time equally with men vacating cells to the hallways while averting eye contact with women entering with their partners.

Once back into the prison population at Carandirú, the founders Gelasio and Cesinha established the PCC manifesto as a governing force in the prison. With a strict moral code and easily unforgiving punishment, prisoners who persisted (though in large part still existed as the PCC meted out capital punishment for violations of the code) and rape was effectively outlawed, as outlined in point 8. The members of the Party will have to set a good example and the Party will not allow that there be rape, and extortion inside the system. The PCC frowned upon crack cocaine and intravenous drug use, seen as detrimental to their power. Consequently HIV rates began to drop even as the state increased overcrowding in the prisons. Using membership dues and other earnings, the PCC provided for basics such as food, clothing, and hygiene kits, items that were not provided to prisoners by the state. They also established funds to care to members’ families on the outside. Of utmost importance to the PCC was the provision of legal services. Lawyers were hired and former prisoners were sent to law school.

The state unwittingly facilitated the 16th and final point: The most important of all is that no one will stop this struggle because the seed of Command has spread throughout the peniti- tory systems of the state and we also succeeding in establishing ourselves on the outside, with many sacrifices and irreparable losses, but we consolidate at the state level and in the medium and long term we will consolidate at the national level. In coalition with the Red Command and PCC we will revolutionize the country inside the prisons and on our strong arm will be the Terror “of the Powerful” oppressors and tyrants who use the Taubate Annis and Bangui 11 in Rio de Janeiro as instruments of vengeance.

Routine transfers of mem- bers spread the “seed of the command” and in 1995, seeking to break up the PCC in Carandirú, prison offi- cials transferred Gelasio and Cesinha to prisons in the states of Paraná and Mato Grosso. In 1997, privatiza- tion of telecommunications in the country made cell phones much more ac- cessible through lowered prices and our strong arm will be work coverage. Poorly paid guards, most from the same favelas[shanty towns] were easily bribed, and cell phones became widely used by prisoners and the PCC command. Around 1999, the senior leadership began having twice daily confer- ence calls with the leaders at each prison site.

The Rise of the PCC

The disturbances in prisons in São Paulo state and throughout Brazil rose dramatically through the 1990’s. Despite the high level of prisoner organizing, the state refused to recognize the PCC as a legitimate agent. In 2001, the state was forced to engage in negotiation with the PCC, recognizing the existence of the largest prison rebellion of the time, garnering international attention to their demands. On February 19, 2001, the “mega-rebellion” as it is referred to was organized by PCC leadership via cell phone in protest of the transfer of 10 prisoners to Taubate. The rebellion was initiated from Carandirú and involved thousands of prisoners and 500 prison staff. All prisoners took visiting hours, during visiting hours, prisoners took 7,500 people hostage, including guards. Most hostages were easily bribed, and cell phones became widely used by prisoners and the PCC command. Around 1999, the senior leadership began having twice daily conference calls with the leaders at each prison site.

Continued on page 14
I was not just me, it was me and probably every other political prisoner who was in prison in the '80s. I was in the DC jail then with Linda Evans, and Susan Rosenberg, and Marilyn Buck and Alan Berkman and Tim Blume—the DC jail was in the epicenter of the African American AIDS epidemic when it first hit. We were in with women who were going out to the hospital with high fever, being brought back and told that they were dying and they didn’t know what AIDS was. They were told ‘you have AIDS, you’re dying.’ At the same time if you read the Washington Post (which we did everyday), there was never a mention of women contracting HIV or AIDS except when there was a claim from some guy that he contracted it from a woman sex worker. She was dealt with as a germ, she had infected this man, there was nothing about her condition, was she alive, did she have a doctor? Nothing. Now this was in ’88—way before it was a ‘manageable’ condition.

It was dire what was happening. When I saw guards putting them in cells way down away from the bubble (which is where the guards were), and refusing to touch them or he be near them or give them food—as soon as I saw that, I knew I was on the other side of that. So we started learning. Luckily for us Alan Berkman, (who died himself a few years ago of cancer), was not only a doctor but a community doctor, and so not only could he explain to us not only what a retrovirus was, how it worked and all of that, but he could break it down in language that we could then use to talk to people about the few medicines that people could get. But my friends were dying in front of me, and so there was really no choice.

I was a continuation of our political work from the outside because this was a community that was completely disenfranchised, dispossessed. This is what Michelle Alexander is talking about in The New Jim Crow (even though she never talks about women in particular), this is so much incarceration for women who had petty crimes, drug busts, and they didn’t have money to get out, and they were coming down off drugs, they were so sick and nobody cared. So we started doing that and we actually got connected to him. When they had DC to send some of their outreach workers in. So they sent women inside, whom a lot of the women knew because they had done drugs with them on the street, and they had gotten clean and were doing peer education. That was a revelation to us, that actually people on the outside had the same concept of how to tell health information that we did. We were all learning together.

I went from there straight to Lexington (Kentucky), which is now a men’s prison, but in those days it was also the largest prison hospital for women in the federal system. Within there was a hospital and all the women who had been at that time there was no long-term prison facility in DC. This meant that AIDS was at Lexington, because the same women that had died at the jail were there, as well as women from other parts of the country who had AIDS. There was a hospice program. People were dying. Part of what I was doing was to help women write a final letter to their kids when they were dying, or to sneak into the hospital, or to finally get permission from the Chaplain to go up in the hospital to sit with a woman who was dying because the hospital staff didn’t want to do it.

The one thing I want to say is that right from the beginning we understood that women were living with AIDS (or living with the virus, just HIV, but had not yet progressed to AIDS)—there were very few cases like that in the prison—there were only two or three (or even then that point) were the best cases. They were the way they did it was that standing up and saying “I have AIDS.” I’m living with AIDS, and you can too, you can survive.” Once the first woman said that in Lexington, it started to break the stigma and fear. She was scared, but she stood up and called aloud. She had such guts to get up in front of hundreds of women and say that. She was able to dispel some of that fear and ignorance, and to laugh at it too.

How do you feel that political work was connected to your struggles against imperialism and the prison industrial complex?

I think the main role of prisons as being to repress. The point is to disenfranchise and disempower whole communities, especially Black communities and Latino communities, and other communities of color. I understood that from when I did prison work before I went to prison, starting around the time of Attica. I saw the change in what happened at the ’60s and ’70s to the ’80s and to the boom in mass incarceration. You didn’t have to have statistics to see how crowded the joints were becoming. I knew it was a reaction to the upheavals of the ’60s and ’70s. It was it was a reaction to resistance. It’s a way of destroying communities, so that the Black Liberation movement would never again—at least the state hoped it wouldn’t—mean something the way it did. You know, I got that. The refusal to educate the public, the refusal to treat people for...
The revolt and massacre at Attica State Prison and the slaughtering of Soledad Brother George Jackson have made us all aware that something is happening behind the walls of American prisons. George Jackson called it a “war without terms.”

Who is at war and what are the stakes? Why are prisoners risking their lives, striking, rebelling, taking hostages? Why did authorities sacrifice forty-one lives to regain control of Attica? Why is George Jackson dead?

Many of us mistakenly think that prisoners live in a closed world, with no connection to events outside. The history of the last two decades of struggle inside, however, shows that prisoners have kept pace with the political currents. Prisoners moved beyond traditional food and shelter complaints in the late 50s and 60s to demand religious freedom and civil rights, while the most recent actions have made revolutionary challenges to the prison system itself, and gone beyond to link with a broader movement.

In response, support for the prison movement is growing on the outside. Groups of legal workers are challenging prison conditions in the courts; support organizations help to secure bail, parole, or transportation for visitors.

At the center of this movement are dedicated men and women inside. Prisoner unions, political education around racism and class exploitation, and militant actions which challenge the unchecked authority of prison officials while drawing national attention, are being organized not only by people we label as “conscious” or “liberated,” but also by lesser known but equally courageous people like Earl Satcher, Luis Tallement, Hugo Finell, Richard Clark, Larry Bryden, and Eliot Barkley.

The prison movement is growing, but at a high cost. Every gain brings new repression; leaders are persecuted and assassinated. Attica and San Quentin—executed and assassinated. At the center of this movement are dedicated men and women inside. Prisoner unions, political education around racism and class exploitation, and militant actions which challenge the unchecked authority of prison officials while drawing national attention, are being organized not only by people we label as “conscious” or “liberated,” but also by lesser known but equally courageous people like Earl Satcher, Luis Tallement, Hugo Finell, Richard Clark, Larry Bryden, and Eliot Barkley.

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The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons

Still Writing as Resistance
BY JUSTIN PICHÉ

Editor’s Note: Since 1986, the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons (JPP) has provided a vital voice for Victorian, Indigenous, and others who have shared their stories of imprisonment. These voices resonate in the criminal justice system, walls, around issues imprisonment. These connections are central to any struggle against the prison industrial complex. JPP works to ensure that issues of imprisonment are not marginalized only to academia. Rather, by publishing the written word of insiders, prisoners are a crucial voice.

As Critical Resistance struggles to organize inside and out of prisons, projects such as the JPP offer opportunities to forge connections between prisoners and non-prisoners alike.

A key challenge in activist work is to ensure that all those who have a stake in affecting change on a given set of issues are involved in agenda setting. Without such discussions the concerns of those who have been excluded can easily be misrepresented and/or misunderstood. This pitfall in organization has, on occasion, been a feature of the bi-annual International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA) since its first meeting in 1983 (visit www.actionicopa.org). For instance, Claire Cullane – a prominent Canadian social justice advocate – once remarked that the Second ICOPA meetings in Amsterdam, Netherlands were dominated by technical debates among academics. As a consequence, she noted that there was little room for activists to share their experiences concerning what is to be abolished, how abolition is to be achieved, and what arrangements could be developed as alternatives to state repression. In a published conversation in Social Justice, Angela Davis and Dylan Rodríguez – both founding members of Critical Resistance in the United States – also cited the racial homogeneity of conference sessions. In 1996, one of the co-founders of the newly-established Prison Abolition Network in Toronto as a force that left underexplored the connections between structural racism and the use of imprisonment. Efforts by organizers of the Third ICOPA in Montreal, Canada who distributed a call for contributions to prisoners so that they had the space to share their experiences, were also thwarted by the conference organizers. Thus, the democracies that do not merely include the range of voices at these meetings. Based on these papers, presented in person or by proxy, the first issue of the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons was published in 1988. In keeping with this tradition, the penal imagination, the mission of the JPP is to build upon efforts by incarcerated writers who have sought to maintain a line of communication between those inside and outside prison walls. The purpose of establishing this link is to educate and inform those outside prisons about what is happening inside; thus providing another forum for the voices of prisoners to be heard. Readers also benefit by gaining knowledge of the socio-politics of incarceration and the experiences of imprisonment from individuals who are best positioned to contribute such analyses.

As noted by Bob Gaucher in his book Writing as Resistance: The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons Anthology, 1988-2002 (Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2002), JPP contributors (e.g., Ronald Del Raine, Victor Hassine, Gaye Hori, Charles Hucklebury, Jo-Ann Mayhew, Gerald Niles, John Petroti, Little Rock Reed, Joe Marc Taylor and Paul Wright) have been among the first to examine emerging trends in penalization such as the impact of law-and-order legislation on prison populations and life inside, the construction of supermax and other forms of extreme incarceration, the emergence of the prison industrial complex, the connections between incarceration and mental health, and the use of imprisonment as a tool to suppress political dissent. The importance of a space for expression and political awareness has also been connected to resistance over their bodies and resist penal hegemony have also been featured prominently in the pages of the journal.

As noted in a recent article published in Contemporary Justice Review by Mike Larsen and Justin Piché, the wide range of imprisonment outside the realm of the penal system has become more common in the last decade. These developments have been the subject of recent articles by JPP contributors including Joe Lekarowicz, Sogoboyejo Omoniyi, Michael Larsen and Justin Piché who discuss the socio-politics and experiences of immigration, security, and political summit detention. While new developments in imprisonment suggest that perhaps the future desired by Jo-Ann Mayhew and others is not imminent, forums such as the JPP are vital to activists and knowledge workers who need to remain connected to the lived realities of incarceration if transformative change in how we conceptualize and respond to criminalized conflicts and harms is to occur.

Several of the JPP’s articles have led to a process of archival work: a new database that will feature the notebooks and articles of imprisoned writers. The database is being created by University of Ottawa colleagues in the History of Ideas Research Group to allow readers access to the work of imprisoned writers, while also ensuring that these voices are not relegated only to academic circles. Rather, through the publishing of written articles inside prisons, prisoners are a crucial voice.

One of our strategies for survival was to trap our ghosts, to get control of them before they got control of us. Here I drew heavily on my expertise as a writer, while others who weren’t writers became writers without knowing it, they too trapped their ghosts by trying to use them to forge a novelistic, dramatic, or poetic structure. So it was that an entire literary emerged from the dungeons.

Jo-Ann Mayhew, Gerald Niles, John Petroti, Little Rock Reed, Joe Marc Taylor and Paul Wright) have been among the first to examine emerging trends in penalization such as the impact of law-and-order legislation on prison populations and life inside, the construction of supermax and other forms of extreme incarceration, the emergence of the prison industrial complex, the connections between incarceration and mental health, and the use of imprisonment as a tool to suppress political dissent. The importance of a space for expression and political awareness has also been connected to resistance over their bodies and resist penal hegemony have also been featured prominently in the pages of the journal.

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Imagine the following scenario: a young person in a Black or Latino neighborhood gets stopped by police and entered into that department’s gang database. The police and any law enforcement agent that stops this young person from this point forward then view the young person, where they go, what they do, what they look like, and who they associate with as gang-related. If that young person is arrested, their inclusion in the gang database increases the likelihood of both them being charged with a crime and of the charge being made more serious by being tagged as gang-related. The young person’s case goes to trial, and the fact that a person has been identified as a gang member is used against them by the prosecutor. They are found guilty, and the judge gives them a harsher sentence based on sentencing guidelines for gang-enhancements. The person is thus labeled as a “known gang member” convicted of a gang-related crime. The person’s gang status follows them and determines where they are kept and leads them to be validated as a member of a gang within the prison. In the second prison, of course, this pending activity, what they read or have in their belongings, or whom they associate with is viewed as gang-related. The person’s punishments for any violations inside prison are enhanced due to their gang status. In administrative segregation, for example, they are kept away from other prisoners and for longer periods of time. Even as they are serving parole, their name can be included on a gang injunction list. Sound far-fetched?

The 1980s saw the rise of the United States government declaring domestic wars on its residents. Under the auspices of protectionism, the wars on drugs, gangs, homophobia and poverty were launched. Becoming tough on crime meant that legislators at all levels of government began to engage more vigorously in supporting and advocating for increasingly suppressive and militarized tactics and police and prison practices. A notable example in California was the passage of the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act (STEP Act) in 1988. The STEP Act was allegedly designed to address the problem of street terrorism by strengthening existing laws, preventing the state from engaging in an unconstitutional practice. The STEP Act was necessary to reign in “violent street gangs” whose members threaten, terrorize, and commit a multitude of crimes against the peaceful citizens of their neighborhoods.

In the summer of 2011, feeling they had reached the limit of administrative segregation, being validated as a gang member by prison officials is one of the hardest time accessing life-supporting programs and services. Both gang members and individuals in administrative segregation face severe hardships, including loss of education, and jobs. At the same time people, some of whom had spent time in prison, have in their belongings, or whom they associate with is viewed as gang-related. If that young person is arrested, their inclusion in the gang database increases the likelihood of both them being charged with a crime and of the charge being made more serious by being tagged as gang-related. The young person’s case goes to trial, and the fact that a person has been identified as a gang member is used against them by the prosecutor. They are found guilty, and the judge gives them a harsher sentence based on sentencing guidelines for gang-enhancements. The person is thus labeled as a “known gang member” convicted of a gang-related crime. The person’s gang status follows them and determines where they are kept and leads them to be validated as a member of a gang within the prison. In the second prison, of course, this pending activity, what they read or have in their belongings, or whom they associate with is viewed as gang-related. The person’s punishments for any violations inside prison are enhanced due to their gang status. In administrative segregation, for example, they are kept away from other prisoners and for longer periods of time. Even as they are serving parole, their name can be included on a gang injunction list. Sound far-fetched?

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Continued from “War Behind Walls,” page 9

POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN PRISONS

Nothing is more monotonous an idea, and they have the idea that they are the victims of a racist society, repressed by racist pigs and racist institutions.

—Russel Oswald, NYS Commissioner of Corrections

The last decade has seen a reawakening of political consciousness—people have begun to view their incarceration as something more than just a prison individual, terms. Prisoners are discovering that their oppression grows from class exploitation and racial discrimination. One of the original prisoners, one prisoner said at Attica, when asked his crime: “Born Black.” This consciousness is running headlong into the existing laws on individual, authoritarian methods of control, and the demand for submission and authority.

This movement has real roots and a history which has to be understood. In the early 60s, as the Civil Rights Movement grew, the prison scene changed too. George Jackson was first transferred in 1961 for organizing a black consciousness group. Black Muslims put a legal battle against the right to practice their religion, and led strikes and protests to the outside world. The movement learned to unite in times of severe repression, as in 1963 at Folsom prison, when a Muslim was killed by a guard and the Muslims led a work strike.

As early as 1962, George Jackson had organized a new prison group at Tracy, California. By 1964 he and other inmates were holding regular “teach-ins” in the yard at San Quentin. The black prisoners had a series of discussion materials were secretly mimeographed at night, then distributed the next day to prisoners. The guards were told not to show up at a certain time and place for political education. Much of this material would spread throughout the events in the daily news: Cuba, The War in Vietnam, ghetto rebellions.

Prison officials reacted with alarm to this threat to their power. Leaders were trans- ferred, harassed, beaten, sent up, sent to the hole. New, more elaborate programs of control were set up.

Officials and individual guards tried to inflame racial conflict to create divisions. There were beatings against one another. Rumors would be spread, that blacks were planning to move on whites, and whites would then attack blacks in order to hit first. Or situations would be set up where, for example, one black man would be put in a confined area with white Nazis.

A work strike at Folsom prison in 1963 was finally broken, but the wardens then transferred striking inmates, known as the “hardliners,” to separate units on the other side of the prison. They were attacked in mass, beaten, black and white prisoners, with a support demonstration outside the prison. When many of them took the deal, the strike was broken.

As black and Third World unity grew, it became a driving force in overcoming this racism. Anger became focused on the institutions and the officials. Black and brown leaders, backed up by prison populations 50% black and brown, were able to forge unity as fellow convicts with groups ranging from black nationalists to white Nazi groups. “Don’t forget our white brothers! They’re in this thing too!” One ex-prisoner at Attica, George Jackson, wrote to George G. Doctor says black and white prisoners, coupled with a support demonstration inside the prison walls.

In the New York City rebellions of last fall, organized prisoners by Third World inmates, the prisoner negotiating team of four blacks, one Puerto Rican, and one white reflected the racial unity behind the struggle. In the recent Attica revolt, Tom Wicker wrote in the New York Times of the “convict’s amaz- ing unity,” recalling one black prisoner who shouted out, “If they start shooting, if they start shooting, don’t forget our white brothers! They’re in this thing too!” One ex-prisoner at Attica, George Jackson, wrote to George G. Doctor says black and white prisoners, coupled with a support demonstration inside the prison walls.

Alongside the “liberal” reformation school of thought, there has always existed a more “hardline,” forthright fascist approach, held by some police, lesser officials, and top administrators. There is evidence that as the struggle intensifies, these hardliners are gaining strength and gaining new support for the movement in general. In the face of these actions the contradic- tions within the prison administration have intensi- fied to the point that we can begin to see internal disputes among the authorities themselves.

The events of the last year, particularly, have dem- onstrated a heightened militancy and strength in the movement: the seizure of New York City prisons, the Auburn riot last fall, Attica in California, the publicity given to the Soledad brothers, Angela Davis and Ruth Clarke. Increased public awareness has resulted in a restriction of the visiting rights for recalcitrant and politically embittered offenders.

Prison officials have responded with extreme alarm to this “60%” from the rest of the population. After all, California is the most free and open state in the model for this attempt; for many years, special ar- eas such as the “Adjustment Center” at San Quentin, and the “Wing” at San Quentin, excluded prisoners segregated from the “mainline” prison popula- tion. Increasingly, these units have been filled with politically active hardliners. The men who have been isolated seven of his eleven years behind bars in these “pris- ons within prisons.”

Other states are following the California model. A de facto “adjustment center” has been set up at the Auburn State Prison in New York since the riots of last November, to isolate the prisoners charged with provoking the disturbances. These men, the Auburn 80, have been isolated indefinitely: no indication of when they will be allowed back into the general prison population.

Last May, at a National Conference of Prison Admin- istrators in New Orleans, the question of “the new type of prison offender” produced one recommen- dation for the “establishment of separate institu- tions for recalcitrant and politically embittered offenders.”

A glimpse of the future? The California Correctional Officials Association has submitted a proposal that a new maximum security unit for “the small segment of inmates bent on long-term destruction of the facility atVacaville. Vacaville is the state’s medical facility where shock treatment and other “behavior modification” techniques are being used in an effort to insure control over “violate prone” prisoners. Welcome to 1964.

ATTICA AND AFTER

The massacre at Attica has raised the prison struggle to a new level. The events at Attica, the greatest event since the Watts riots of 1965. At Watts, almost everybody recognized that there was a new level, a more serious, more determined movement. Countless blue ribbon committees were appointed to make studies of the roots and causes of the violence. But because these roots are so deep in our socio-economic system, five years of ghetto rebel- lions and countless committee reports have not led to any significant change of basic social conditions, but rather to an intensification of the means of con- trol and co-optation—larger police budgets, more sophisticated weapons, and a new generation of potential leadership through jobs in such government-funded shacks as the OEO Poverty Program.

Likewise, the massacre at Attica will probably gen- erate an even greater interest in the nature of prison condi- tions and more money for guards and equipment. Already, Captain Williams, who commanded the assault at Attica, said “there is no mystery to the investigation of that event. Assaults at San Quentin have resulted in a restriction of the visiting rights of attorneys; Attica has faced possible, legislation outlawing negotiations with prisoners who take hostages.

Despite these attempts by the State to suppress the prison rebellion and isolate its leaders, the move- ment cannot be isolated. Instead, it is growing rather than dying. The prison movement, in fact, has grown stronger. It is not only a protest against the conditions in prison, but a protest against the conditions in society. The fact that there are more people in prison today than there were in 1964, is not because there are more people in prison, but rather than live another day in prison demonstrated that something is terribly wrong with American prisons.”

“Q: How long have you been in?
A: I am a revolutionary.
Q: What are you charged with?
A: I was born black.
Q: How long have you been in?
A: I had troubles since the day I was born.”

Robert Blake, Black Prison Negotiator, Tombs Rebellion, October 1970

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There is no going back when men reach this point.

Martin Luther King said, “There is no going back, or there will be more Atticas and San Quentins.”

Jimmy Carr pointed out “the prisoners are producing men whom the authorities don’t want either on the outside or on the inside.” It is producing a group of dedicated revolutionaries. We must all work to support and strengthen their efforts—refute, legal work, militant action are all needed when we are dealing with a war behind the walls.”
in those groups. It got me at an HIV-focused magazine, and I have been able to allow the magazine to do more for prisoners and to make things more accessible for prisoners. There are few resources for people living with HIV and Hepatitis C is prison, but there are some people in Philadelphia Fight who have a newsletter called “Prison Health News”. They are people who really care about prisoners.

Do you have any final comments for readers?

Well first of all there are three arguments that I would make any time I would speak any place. One is that the left should recognize that the prison system in the United States is not only by itself out of control, but that it has an impact on what sorts of resistance can be hoped for on the streets. If you take mothers off the streets, then who raises the kids? Who has the next generation? Prison destroys the community, and without a community you can’t have resistance.

I argue that any progressive organization should have, as a part of its demands, free all political prisoners. Political prisoners come from left organizations and movements, and so we have to protect our own. It’s a way to say we are against the state.

The third thing I have said was that left organizations should include HIV/AIDS and treatment and access to care in their programs. That has changed in the most recent years because there are so many powerful progressive organizations doing work just about that issue, both globally and in the United States. When I first got out in 1999, there were not. I went to a number of left events and conferences where I would never hear about that issue, both globally and in the United States. When I first got out in 1999, there were not. I went to a number of left events and conferences where I would never hear about HIV unless I went to an HIV/AIDS event. Now it’s a little different. Global HIV groups like Health Gap deal with issues beyond just HIV/AIDS, and some Occupy groups and especially queer groups include demands about access to treatment as part of their general demands. I think most of that has been fueled by the participation of Black and Latino people living with HIV/AIDS in those groups.

My years in prison made me understand peer education much better. It was a very concrete form of popular education tactics from Freire. I ended up feeling much more comfortable with concepts about how health care, and imperialism, and the prison system fit together on the level of the neighborhood and the city instead of on an abstract level.

The other thing I learned from the HIV work inside of new cells and important cases. I’ve done teach ins, kind of popular education models, just go some place and start talking about “What is the prison system?” People can change through that and become so much more powerful than when they start out and people on the inside can be connected with movements on the outside that they had never heard before.

I just feel like unity around our concepts, our approach, and our demands is so important. I know one change that happened when I was in prison was the rise in not for profits as a form in which a lot of activists started to be organized. I understand because I do remember very well the idiocy of bake sales. You have this full time job that doesn’t pay anything, and you do your political work at night, and then you go home and bake brownies at three in the morning for the next day’s bake sale. So I do understand the need for it. What I see a lot of times is that people can become so focused on their own needs for their organization—whether its funding or to promote this concept—that what they are doing is that the form of the work takes precedence over the concept. And that feels too bad for me, I mean here in New York, you could go to an event every night of the week and not be done.

Another thing I’ve been learning from the experience at Occupy, is that democratic processes in any kind of work are so critical—learning to be in each other in a meeting and to value what each other’s saying, and that the decision doesn’t always have to be what you want. It completely transforms the organizing. It’s the difference between the model of someone saying something reactionary or racist on the street and you stop talking to them, and a model of developing ways of talking to people so that you can have a conversation, and maybe everyone comes out with different ideas, and not just the people we’re “organizing”, but also we come out different. And we become better organizers.

One other thing that is important, that we’ve been talking about in our Occupy work, and what [political prisoner] David Gilbert has been talking about, part of our work about prisons, is that prisoners are not making our communities safe. What we need are community alternatives, community responses, and that has to be developed. The point is that mass incarceration is destroying communities, and that makes them less safe. By destroying social structures, mass incarceration makes communities less safe. I think that is something that in our prison justice work needs to emphasize. We need to heal society to build an alternative way of how we live.

People can stay in touch with me by emailing LauraW@POZ.com.

Laura Whitehorn has been an anti-imperialist political activist since the 1960s. She spent 14 years in prison for the Resistance Conspiracy Case. Released in 1999, she lives in New York City with her partner, the writer Susie Day.

Laura organizes for prison justice and political prisoners, edited the book The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison, and Fighting for Those Left Behind, essays by Safiya Bukhari (feministpress.org), and is an editor at POZ Magazine.

### SEND US YOUR WRITING AND ARTWORK!

We accept articles, letters, creative writing, poetry, interviews (in English and Spanish), and art.

We are currently accepting submissions for our next themed issue on mental health. Unfortunately we cannot print all of the pieces we receive. Any pieces we consider for publication will go through an editing process for both content and grammar. **Please note: we do not accept individual appeals for money, legal support, or publicity.**

**Ideas for Articles and Artwork**
- Examples of current prisoner organizing
- Practical steps toward prison industrial complex abolition
- Ways to help keep yourself and others physically and mentally 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, and prison
- Experiences of life after imprisonment
- Your opinion about a piece published in a recent issue

**What to Submit**
- Articles should not be more than 1,500 words (about 5 handwritten pages)
- Letters should not be more than 250 words
- Artwork that will print well

**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
- If possible, send a copy of your submission, not the original

**Writing Suggestions**
- Try to write an outline before you write the piece. Ask yourself: does the first paragraph tell the reader what the piece is about?
- Does the last paragraph have a conclusion and some suggestions for action?
- 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.

**Send your submission to:**
- The Abolitionist
- Critical Resistance
- 1904 Franklin St., Suite 504
- Oakland, CA 94612

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**SUMMER 2012**

**THE ABOLITIONIST**

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**Laura Whitehorn**

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family members, who when given a chance to leave refused as they understood their presence as a buffer to a massacre. An Associated Press report cited the following from a prisoner’s wife: “We were so scared we considered hosting a party to keep us left whenever we wanted, but we preferred to stay inside for fear there could be a repeat of the massacre of 1992.” Two weeks later, the governor of the state of São Paulo announced that the PCC would be closed by the year’s end. In September 2001, seven months after the first mega-rebellion, the prison was closed down, and in December 2001 it was demolished.

Since this time, the PCC’s membership has grown exponentially. The Council on Foreign Relations estimated in 2006 that 940,000 prisoners, and 100,000 “street soldiers” identified themselves as PCC members. There are more than 6,000 dues-paying members on the outside, who have built the same structures to mediate conflict in many of the favelas of São Paulo, filling a gap for people disappointed by the state. Residents of these neighborhoods attribute decreases in murders, rapes, assaults and robberies to the order that the PCC has established in their neighborhoods. It must be said, however, that as in prison, adjudications settlements often utilize violence.

The connection between the neighborhoods and the PCC was widely demonstrated in the largest prison rebellion the world has ever seen to date. On May 12, 2006, in a massive, highly coordinated uprising, the city of São Paulo was brought to its knees. PCC soldiers simultaneously hit over 40 state targets: banks, government buildings and police stations. Seventy-three prisons and tens of thousands of prisoners joined the rebellion. The rebellion was sustained for over one week, and was incited by the transfer of over 700 prisoners to solitary confinement at new maximum-security prisons dispersed throughout the state. As the PCC has a very clearly defined hierarchy and leadership roles, they can function with great discipline and efficiency.

The secretary of prison administration, Nagashi Furukawa, was compelled to negotiate with the PCC to end the rebellion. He visited Marcus Willians Herbas Camacho, known as Marcola, the leader of the PCC since 2002, in his new isolation cell. It is acknowledged that a principle demand, the provision of television to prisoners, was met. And while the state denies further concessions, a radio interview with Marcola reported that they negotiated with Furukawa to end the attacks, agreeing to allow prisoner visits from their lawyers, and time out of their cells. It is largely unacknowledged that in Brazil, the rebellion marked a great success for the PCC in establishing themselves as political players in São Paulo with the power to assert their rights in decisions about conditions of confinement.

Whatever opinion one might have of the PCC in Brazil, one cannot deny that they have developed an expansive base through a highly disciplined membership that works to provide structures that have not only enabled prisoners to survive conditions of confinement, but have also improved conditions of survival within their home communities. The PCC’s work has shown that prisoners’ home communities greatly desire alternatives to the state, and that alternatives can be created within those very communities. Most importantly, the PCC has provided the structure and organization for prisoner voices to be heard, and has accomplished far more toward meeting prisoners’ basic needs and those of their families than any organization on the outside.

Continued from “PCC,” page 7

Continued from “Radio,” page 6

Juliet: For past participant of the annual project, Karlene Clarke, who participated in every broadcast from 2002-2008, the broadcasts gave her “the opportunity to just be heard, to have a voice and be able to be part of the community and family - who I wasn’t in contact with because of my incarceration - during NAIDOC week.” The broadcasts not only give an unedited and self-represented voice to those that are so often silenced, but they also provide exposure and a critique to the ongoing injustice facing Indigenous Australians as they experience unprecedented rates of incarceration.

Why are radio shows like yours needed by prisoners and their communities? Sylvia: The prison system presents a web of delayed and restricted communication for everyone caught up in it. In only certain days you can visit if you can afford to make the trip, only certain calls can be made, limited or no email communication; all snail mail is screened, etc. Almost no communication is easy, free, immediate or uncensored. We try to make our show the opposite of that – open access to communication, information and cultural connections.

Radio is one of the few forms of media that people incarcerated have unrestricted access to. Radio waves travel through prison walls and nobody can stop what’s coming out of the radio unless they take the radio away. And while the prison system charges people outrageously exorbitant fees to make and receive calls, our show is incarcerated in the Georgia prison system on the outside can call and leave a message at no cost, no matter where they are calling from. Furthermore, the calls are broadcast in real time, within an hour or two of being recorded. This is very important to us. We are no longer allowed to put the calls on air because of FCC regulations, we want people on the inside to be able to trust that the voice coming to them over the radio is a call that was made that same night, not something that was recorded and canned weeks or months before. Because time is so much of what people are denied control of in prison – of experiencing things in real time.

The music segment of the show, Hot 88.7 Hip Hop from the Hill Top, is also at the core of the program. Our radio station is located in the state of West Virginia, a region that is very rural and predominantly white, although there is also long history of Black and Native peoples living here. Because of the incredible level of incarceration and racism inherent in the prison industrial complex, many people in the prisons here are culturally isolated and worlds apart from their home communities. They are currently people incarcerated here in these mountains from as far away as the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Alaska, and everywhere in between. We do our best to play all the music requests we get sent to us in letters, so that people can hear the music of their home.

How does your show support prisoner organizing? Sylvia: Just over a year ago, in December 2010, we rebroadcast a segment from WPBS radio’s show On the Block, of an interview with Elaine Brown speaking on the peaceful strike that the PCC orchestrated in the Georgia prison system. In this way, people in prisons in Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia could hear in real time the status and demands of people on strike in Georgia prisons. Over the summer of 2010 we broadcast weekly updates Mac called in about the California prisoner hunger strike. Getting accurate information like this into prisons across state lines in real time is critical and difficult.

We also hope to be a resource and support for those transitioning out of prison - we want people recently released to know that our community radio station is a place where they are welcome, and that we are one way for them to stay in touch with their friends who are still inside.

What potential do you see for prisoner-focused radio in the future? Sylvia: To me so much of the beauty of this show is that it would be so easy to replicate. In terms of technology, all you need is access to the airwaves and a way to record phone calls. That’s it! Any volunteer DJ could do this. The real work of this show has been done by those on the inside, who have shared their information and phone number with each other, and their friends and families. That’s the only reason we get so many calls each week. Imagine if every radio station with a prison in its listening area had a show like this. We could really build an infrastructure of, as Mac so well said, Inside-Outside Communication, setting the stage for meaningful solidarity acts. The possibilities are huge.

Amelia Kirby and Sylvia Byrerson – Hosts of WMMT’s Hot 88.7 Hip Hop from the Hill Top /Calls from Home, along with fellow DJs Ada Smith and Elisabeth Sanders. Go to: http://appalshop.org/wmmt/994-2 to listen live.

John “Mac” Gaskins – Longtime listener and supporter of the show. Mac was incarcerated in the prison system in southeast Virginia, now lives in Washington D.C. and is an organizer with SPARC – D.C. (Supporting Prisoners and Acting for Radical Change).


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