

THE ABOLITIONIST

FALL 2023

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

ISSUE 40: Control Units

FEATURES RESOURCE

Surviving Solitary

Editors' Note: Critical Resistance is pleased to announce our **new resource guide**, "Surviving Solitary," available now. To receive a copy at no cost for imprisoned readers, simply write to us at: Critical Resistance, P.O. Box 22780, Oakland, CA 94609-2301.

"Surviving Solitary" is a packet of materials containing resources and practical techniques for imprisoned people to use in order to survive the torturous conditions of solitary confinement, including tips and tools for mindfulness and meditation, yoga, physical exercise, body movement practices, and political study, as well as contact information to connect with our movement partners at **Solitary Watch, Dancing Through Prison Walls, Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Flying Over Walls, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)**, and others with additional resources to share. We offer this guide because survival is always the first step to resistance and to support our comrades inside as they fight to stay strong and continue the struggle against the prison industrial complex (PIC).

While putting together "Surviving Solitary," we spoke with a number of former or currently imprisoned activists about their experiences in solitary confinement. The following insights, reflections, tips, and tools come from our brave comrades who have endured extended periods in control units and continue to take up the fight for freedom and liberation. We pass along their wisdom and practical survival strategies in hopes that they may be of help to those of our readers facing similar circumstances.

Please note, the contribution for Laura Whitehorn is reprinted from "Survival in Solitary," AFSC's Survivors Manual which can be found online: https://afsc.org/sites/default/files/documents/Survivors%20Manual_0.pdf

Don't Wait to Live

By Keith LaMar

One of the most important parts of being able to withstand the rigors of being in a control unit is keeping to a routine, by which I mean, one must make sure to invest in each element of self every day: mentally, physically, spiritually,



By Naimah Thomas, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

and emotionally. In other words, one must stay strong on every level. To beat the monotony, one must institute a monotony of one's own—fight fire with fire (so to speak). This entails reading something intellectually challenging every day, in order for the mind and thoughts not become stagnant.

One must exercise strenuously on a regular basis and practice one's breathing, or **how to regulate one's heart**. This is very important. The key here is understanding how to regulate the reptilian part of the self, which is the part that lives instinctively, **the part that suffers the most**. By learning how to regulate the heart rate, one can prevent the reptilian self from hijacking the entire system and thus live more inside of one's humanity. **The most important goal is to do more than survive, and you do that by using the time to develop dormant parts of the self.** Time is a precious commodity, something that even those who have trapped you here don't have unlimited amounts of. So, use your time wisely. Turn it into a strength.

It's also very important to keep track of things. Keep a journal as a way to mark the time. Turn your cell into a laboratory, a place where you can work and mold yourself. This is how you emerge victorious! Practice building community with others, within and outside of the walls. Being able to test your reality with others is instrumental in not becoming institutionalized and adopting the lens of those who seek to profit from your pain. In other words, **one must try not**

to become what the prison says that you are: Plotting and scheming on other prisoners, or building up a persona that is decidedly antisocial in nature, which can only push you further away from sources of real strength and solidarity. Try not to become a role (a tough guy, etc.), because that only serves to reinforce your identity as a "criminal", which will be used against you. You are a human being, someone with access to higher frequencies, and should therefore make an attempt to elevate yourself at every turn, no matter what. Express gratitude to and for those who offer you aid and seek to give as much as you take; this is how you create a circle of reciprocity, meaning the good that you give will come back to you.

Also equally critical: You must learn how to practice forgiveness, as well as have compassion for your former self and deeds done out of ignorance. **You are exactly where the system has been designed to deliver you:** in bondage. The goal now is to become free in bondage, to see and be that which you were born to be. The root word of education is *educare*: to bring forth that which is already there. Hence, it is important to understand and keep in mind that there is something higher inside of you, something unique and fully equipped to rise to whatever occasion you are confronted with. It is with this part of yourself that you must form a relationship. You do that by listening to the voice within, by becoming attuned to the subtle energies inside. Wake up early, organize your space, and thereby organize your inner formulations, and sit with things as they are. Sit with yourself: the pain, the trauma, the hurt, the disappointments, until you become deeply acquainted with them, and then, one by one, try to forgive it all. Releasing yourself from that prison is the first step in releasing yourself from the physical prison. Everything must be resolved in love.

These realities may be hard to accept, but you have to figure out how to live anyway. Not just survive, but live. People ask me all the time, *what are you going to do when you get out?* And the only thing I can say realistically is to continue with myself. I am who I am, and I intend to live as I am. Because the fact of the matter is that I might die tonight in my sleep. So, I'm not waiting. Don't wait to live. You have to live where you are, and to the capacity that you can. We are here to achieve ourselves. And if you are who you say

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the Abolitionist
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Oakland, CA 94609

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Letter from the Editors

Beloved Readers of *The Abolitionist*,

Behold our final issue of 2023—Issue 40 featuring articles on control units. Across the globe, state violence escalates to repress liberation movements. As referenced in this issue’s **Critical Resistance (CR) Updates and Movement Highlights column** (pg 22) and **“Until All Are Free” Political Prisoner news** (pg 26), in September of this year, 61 people affiliated with the Stop Cop City campaign in Atlanta were charged under Georgia’s Racketeering Influenced Corrupt Organizations (RICO) law in an attempt to delegitimize the Stop Cop City movement as a “criminal conspiracy.” A month later on October 7, apartheid Israel escalated its genocidal campaign against the people of Gaza. With over 15,000 Palestinians murdered and over 35,000 injured in only eight weeks, the overlapping crises of Israel’s ongoing genocidal attacks which have collapsed Gaza’s healthcare system, COVID-19, and climate disaster have made conditions unlivable for over 2 million Palestinians, igniting powerful worldwide solidarity demanding an immediate and permanent ceasefire and for Palestine to be free.

As we write this letter at the end of November before heading to print in early December, Israel and Palestine enter a temporary pause for a long-anticipated prisoner exchange resulting in the release of over 117 Palestinian political prisoners so far, most of whom are women and children detained indefinitely without trial or charge under Israel’s administrative detention. Meanwhile, Israel has continued raiding Palestinians homes in the West Bank, arresting over 116. From Palestine to the US, the systems and conditions we fight against are varied and distinct, yet the prison industrial complex (PIC) remains the boot on all of our necks—ready to criminalize, control, imprison, police, kill, harm, and repress our communities and our movements. At CR, we understand control units as a foundational—and particularly violent—repressive tool of the PIC we must vehemently oppose and organize to abolish.

While control units may vary in name, regulation, and logistics, across geographies they are an imprisonment strategy designed to break our will to resist. The issue’s **feature analysis article** (page 4) by longtime anti-prison activist and author **Nancy Kurshan** traces the origins of the first control unit in the US, the campaign to shut down the first lockdown at USP Marion, the development of control units as a counterinsurgency strategy to destroy revolutionary movements on both sides of the wall, and the proliferation of control units since the 1980s. Similarly, in an interview with former political prisoner **Susan Rosenberg** (page 6), we examine how the Lexington High Security Unit in Kentucky was designed to torture and break women political prisoners as Susan reflects on a successful campaign to shut it down. Because resisting control units now in the 2020s is quite different than in the 1980s, we include an original piece by *The Abolitionist* Project Coordinator **Molly Porzig** on CR’s work with Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition supporting prisoners wage the largest action of its kind in US prison history. Based on conversations with coalition partners **Marie Levin** and **“Comrade Pops,”** the piece discusses the necessity and power of disciplined prisoner leadership, of cross-racial unity across imprisoned resistance, international solidarity, and family members fighting back all to defy solitary confinement.

These pieces are accompanied by a set of feature articles covering other strategies and reflections for resisting control units, including a piece by the **Rome Assembly Against Prison and Repression** analyzing the **41-bis regime**, known as ‘**carcere duro**,’ or long-term solitary confinement that targets political threats including the mafia and anti-capitalists in Italy, as well as a compilation of insights from US prisoners **Kenjuan Congo**, **Kamau**, **James Anderson**, and **Gulley Britney** detailing their personal

experiences and reflections enduring control units in this issue’s **feature Prisoner Speakout**. Building off of Gulley Britney’s submission persevering as a transgender person inside, longtime LGBTQ movement lawyer **Jen Orthwein**’s article explores how the **normalized practice of isolating transgender prisoners in control units** further compounds the violence trans and gender nonconforming people face while imprisoned, and offers insights into past and present resistance to this practice, questioning the cheap liberal reforms that are hardly wins for trans liberation.

Given the grave weight of this issue’s content, CR has created a new resource guide **“Surviving Solitary,”** which imprisoned subscribers can write to us to request a copy. For issue 40, we preview a series of interviews with solitary survivors including CR co-founder **Masai Ehehosi**, CR community advisor **Laura Whitehorn**, along with **Keith LaMar**, **Levi Springer**, and **Jo’an Dunn** to highlight the resource guide (on pg 1).

Throughout each feature article, **Issue 40 explores the dialectical relationship between repression and resistance**, while also **uplifting the ways in which imprisoned people have fortified their will to fight in the face of tortuous conditions**. In the wake of more mainstream recognition of both the pervasiveness and torturous design of solitary confinement, calls for reform aimed at reducing the harms of control units by shortening the length of solitary, like California’s Mandela Act—which would set a 15 consecutive-day limit for how long prisoners can be caged in control units within a 60-day period—gain traction. With this issue, CR hopes to interrupt half-measures that fail to challenge the legitimacy of the PIC and hinder PIC abolitionists’ ability to dismantle control units entirely. Imprisoned columnist **Stevie Wilson** reinforces this objective with this issue’s **9971** article, where he breaks down **how liberal reformers have diluted the demand to abolish solitary confinement**, and urges us all to commit to developing new tactics and strategies in the fight against control units. Meanwhile, this issue’s **Inside-Outside Fishing Line** examines the **nebulous practices of solitary confinement** across different units of imprisonment in a cross-wall conversation with imprisoned organizers in Washington State called **“Psychological Warfare By Any Name.”**

Forced isolation is used as a weapon to deprive our humanity and kill our movements because we are mightiest when we stand together as a collective. Flex your muscles for building collectivity and care inside with this issue’s **Abby Throwback**, a reprint resource from **The Icarus Project** on **building mutual aid**. Be sure to check out **submission guidelines** on the **Call for Content** on **page 28** and then write to us. Our next issue, the first of 2024, will print in June focused on environmental justice.

From the streets to the dungeons of the PIC, we are sending each of you radical love, strength, and undying freedom dreams.

Yours in struggle,
-Critical Resistance & *The Abolitionist* Editorial Collective ♦

THE ABOLITIONIST

FALL 2023 - WINTER 2024 • ISSUE 40

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.

CONTRIBUTORS

American Friends Service Committee
Comrade Pops
Felix Sitthivong
Greg Messenger
Gulley Britney
The Icarus Project
James Anderson
Jeffrey McKee
Jen Orthwein
Jo’an Dunn
Jonathan “JoJo” Ejonga-Lihau
Kamau
Keith LaMar (aka Bomani Shakur)
Kenjuan Congo Jr
Laura Whitehorn
Levi Springer
Marie Levin
Masai Ehehosi
Molly Porzig
Nancy Kurshan
Ralph Dunuan
The Rome Assembly Against Prison and Repression
Stephanie Greene
Stevie Wilson
Susan Rosenberg
Tomas Afeworki
Trenton Rush & The REAL Youth Initiative

Melanie Cervantes
Micah Bazant
Michael Russell
Naima Thomas
Nicole Rodriguez
The Places Journal
Rini Templeton
Roger Peet
Sky News
Stephen Dillon
William Estrada
Within Color
Workers World

THE ABOLITIONIST EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE (CRITICAL RESISTANCE EDITORS)

Billy Ray Boyer
Dylan Brown
Jess Ho
Luigi Celentano
Mar Golub
Molly Porzig
Rehana Lerandean
Susana Draper

TRANSLATOR

Luigi Celentano

DESIGNER

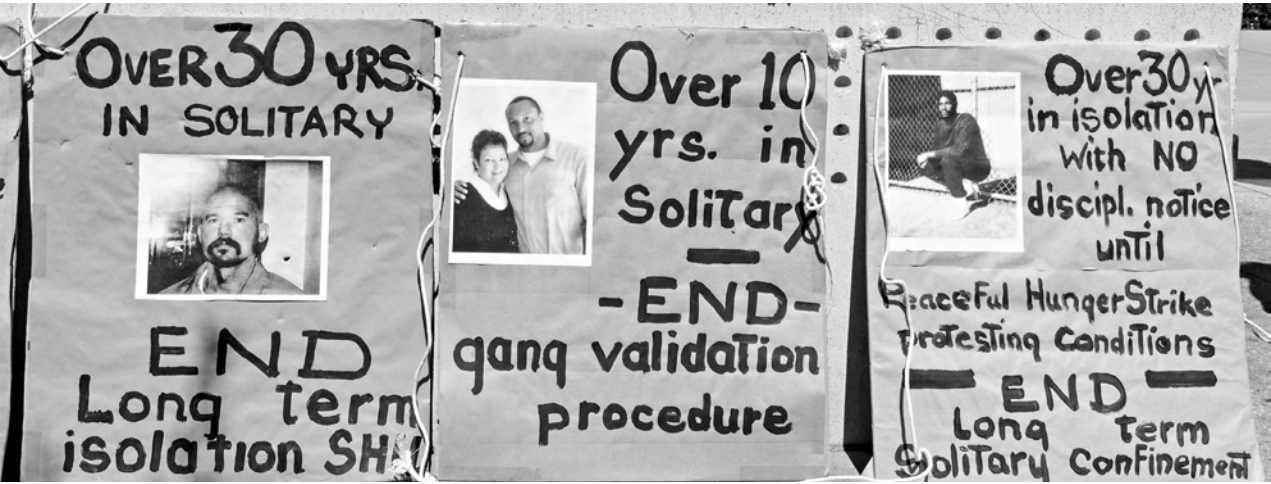
William Ramirez

COPY EDITORS

Alexis Demandante
Alicia Abbaspour
Anna Stratton
Bonnie Feldberg
Chris Gang
Conrad Wolfe
Hannah Opperman
Jayden Donahue
Julia Duray
Kristen Haven
Letecia Garcia
Liz Atkins-Pattenson
Louise Rosler
Madelyn Pawlowski
Mohamed Shehk
Woods Ervin

ARTISTS

Anu Biswas
Bob Schutz, Associated Press
Brooke Anderson
Ed Mead’s Support Team
The Freedom Archives
Friends of Marilyn Buck
Jesus Barraza
Joseph Piette
Justseeds’ Artists Cooperative
Lundi Matin
Matteo Nardone



PHSS demonstration, 2011 & 2013.

you are, then you can be who you are no matter where you are. So, I’m going to live my life right here in this cell, right here on death row. I can still achieve myself here. I can still do what all of us are here to do. That has been my focus. Not what I would do when I get out, but what I’m going to do tomorrow when my feet touch the ground. I’m trying to realize who Keith LaMar is. And trying to be that to the full extent possible.

Segregation

By Levi Springer

Segregation. It has many names. Segregation, isolation, restrictive housing, and solitary confinement. No matter how it’s classified by the department of corrections the reality of it is pure torture inflicted on our most vulnerable human beings in prison. Segregation will either re-make you or break you. I offer the following to keep most of your sanity if you are held in segregation.

First: Learn and write. If you cannot do this, at least try to learn. Anything you can do to exercise your brain is absolutely vital.

Second: Exercise your whole body. If you are unable to do a full body workout, do a brisk walk back and forth in your cell or try your best to move your arms, head, and legs. The more blood circulation the better.

Third: Meditate at least 20 minutes a day. Prayer and meditation is powerful. Prayer is not needed if you have no faith, but meditation is mandatory if you expect to keep your sanity.

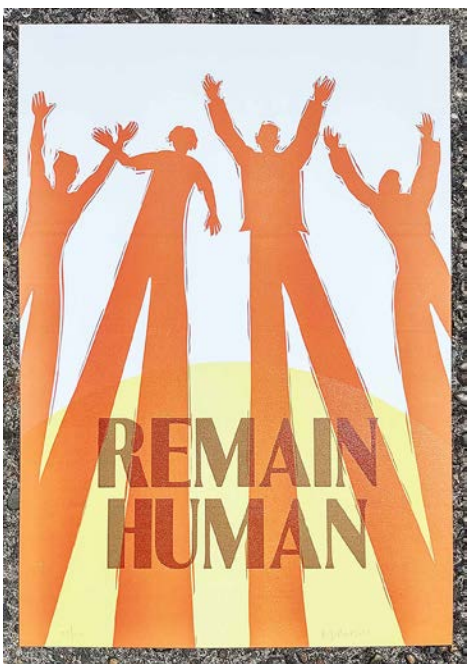
In total, I have spent over 11-and-a-half years in segregation at “Red Onion”. I hope this information is helpful to all my brothers and sisters. I am currently part of a class action federal lawsuit with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Virginia and attorneys from a Washington, DC law firm regarding the horrible effects segregation has on people. See *William Thorpe V. Harold Clarke*, No. 2:22-CV-0007-JPJ-PMS, (4th cir. 2022), most recent update in April 2023.

Controlling the Control Unit (Reprint)

By Laura Whitehorn

To me, the overriding thing of importance in surviving my various stints in control units was to refuse to relinquish control. By that I mean: keeping always in mind the purpose of the control unit — i.e., remembering what the state was trying to accomplish by putting me there, and then using my own powers of understanding to resist their plan. Among other things, this meant:

- **Making a schedule for my days**, instead of allowing the cops to determine my days.
- Having several different schedules, and alternating them, to avoid having the days all melt into sameness, and to keep track of what day and date it was, etc.
- **Using exterior signals**, such as changes in light, shift changes, regular noises from outside my cell, to keep track of time. The first few weeks I’d note a sound or other objective occurrence, then yell for the cops to find out what time it was, etc.
- Developing several **different forms of exercise** for different days and conditions. One technique of control used in every unit I’ve been in is withholding or postponing rec time. Since exercise was a very important way I controlled my anger so that I didn’t become upset or stressed, it was crucial for me to develop ways to avoid letting this necessity for exercise become one more tool for them to use against me. I learned yoga and did isometric weight-training in my cell, and I ran on the occasions I was able to go out to the rec yards.
- Developing some **creative activity** that allowed me to admire my own human creativity—i.e., draw, write, make things from what is available, etc. Reminding myself that my place in the universe was as a sentient, loving, creative human being, not a caged animal, was



By Roger Peet, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative

helpful. (This is why so many prisoners turn out incredible drawings in ballpoint pen!)

- **Learn something**—undertake to study something and use the mind so I left each unit having grown rather than been diminished by the experience.
- **Write letters**—get pen pals if needed; some active communication with the outside.
- For me, as a political creature, it was essential to **get a subscription to a major newspaper**. (I then managed to share it by smuggling it to another prisoner in the unit.) I was fortunate to have friends who chipped in to get me the paper. In women’s prisons and most control units, no news media are provided.
- I fought for every shred of what I was supposed to have a “right” to, based in the Code of Federal Regs, which governs the Bureau of Prisons. But it’s hard not to get full of rage and frustration while doing this, so once in a while I would **write a furious letter** to the warden or someone else, saying everything I wanted and **then tear it up**. Therapeutic, to a point.

Warden Burkhardt of Alderson responded to my BP-9 (fed prison grievance form) protesting my isolation. He said I was being held in solitary because of my “associations and beliefs”. Knowing what your enemy’s goals are helps you a lot in resisting giving ground. In my case, on days when I felt (and was) particularly abused and mistreated, I could always find hope and strength in feeling it was an honor to be held in conditions of control—in the way Chairman Mao meant it in that old quote we used to love so much about it being a good thing to be hated by the enemy.

Finally, one thing about control units is that, since their goal is to dehumanize, to destroy one’s personality, each individual needs to design her/his own program for survival, based in her/his identity and sense of what makes each of us human. How one person expresses and controls rage is not necessarily right for another. For example, for some people, keeping busy is important; for others, maybe stillness and inward thought is important. What resources, internal and external, each prisoner has available make a big difference, too. (One reason why activist groups are so important!)

Finally, really, I do believe that everyone who has spent time in prison, double for control units, suffers physical if not also mental damage. Having this recognized—say, by the international anti-torture forces—helps. I think it was Stuart Grassian who observed that the women in the LexHSU developed illnesses as a result of the unit. When I read that, it helped me understand the damage to my own health that resulted or was exacerbated by the control unit time. Venceremos!

Let the Light In

By Jo’an Dunn

Don’t cover your windows during the day. Let the light in. A lot of people when they get confined, they create a dark space. They physically take paper and cover up the window right over

the natural sunlight if there is any. It sounds metaphorical, but they are in the darkness. **And the way to dispel this is to let the sunlight to enter the cell.** People cover their windows because they don’t want to look at themselves. They don’t want to be seen, so they stay literally in the dark. The prison means darkness. It means loneliness. When you cover your windows that means you’re agreeing with it. You’re accepting what the prison tells you about you.

Depression is horrible to experience, and it’s horrible for others to watch as well. And once you get caught up in it, you can become trapped by your own self, because you become a habit. Darkness allows you to accept the negative thinking and negative thought processes. You may want to sleep all day. You can’t sleep this time off. You’ve got to work on yourself. So, remember to sit up during the waking hours. Sit up. Don’t lay down. And don’t cover your windows.

Even when it’s hard, get up early and remember to do something for yourself every day. Do something to brighten your day, every day. Exercise. Do jumping jacks, push-ups—something in the exercise realm. Find something to read, whether you’re interested in it or not. Read it from cover to cover. Read who the author is. Read the author bio page. Read all of it. I have an acronym called KOOK, which means “Keeper of Odd Knowledge”. Remember to continue to take in information. Be a KOOK. This is how you keep your brain alert and alive, so you can survive when you have to survive.

And don’t debase yourself over what is already done. You have to find a way to move on. When people berate themselves, they’re agreeing with the system—that you are that person they say you are. Well, that may have been true at one point. But you’re not a bad person, even if you’ve done a bad thing. Let’s figure out why you did it and how to not do it again. Holding onto the anger, shame, hate and harm – it seeps into your body and your body starts to be infected. Think about the harm that you possibly caused: get it out, breathe into it. Exhale that. Don’t just agree with it by sitting in the dark and accepting it. Fight back! Get healthy! Don’t lay down. Wake up and build a routine. Greet the day with a SMILE [Simply Make It Look Easy] and close the day with the same SMILE. That’s how joy enters your body, through your mind.

Sometimes people behave in ways that agree with how the state has labeled them.

Make a list of all the things that people have called you that you believed. Why did you believe them? **Change the language. Change the narrative.** You don’t have to agree with it. You don’t have to go in there and start kicking on the door because that’s what everybody’s doing. You don’t have to start flooding the toilet because that’s what everybody’s doing. You’re the one who’s got to live there. No one else has got to live there except for you. And you don’t have to agree with it. Find somebody to write. Find somebody to communicate with, so that you could talk about the things that you want to talk about. You can get so jaded that you start believing the people who are paid to keep you locked up. This is this is how you get in there and stay in there. You start believing the narrative. If you start believing those things, you start being those things. Don’t listen to them! Figure out who you are and live in that.

Don’t Let Your Anger Consume You

by Masai Ehehosi

When you start thinking about the nature of the system, you get angry. That’s natural. But you have to learn how to get ahold of it, so it doesn’t take you to a place that’s not beneficial. The type of anger where all you’re doing is venting all day...that’s not helpful. That kind of anger, it gives you a lot of headaches. Sometimes, even when people are trying to be helpful, you’ll be snapping at them. So, you can end up making an enemy out of someone who doesn’t necessarily

Continues on next page

have to be an enemy. The guards are in an adversarial relationship, of course, because it's their job to be adversaries. But it doesn't mean that there aren't sometimes human qualities that can be helpful to you. When you look at prisoners who are political, a lot of times their relationships with the guards aren't as bad as they could be. When you let that anger take over, you might blow past some of the things that could be helpful.

The first time I went into solitary, I had the habit of asking "why" about certain things. I had the habit of challenging, and I still do. And one of the things I noticed was when I questioned and challenged, things would escalate. They might have taken me to an office to talk, and when I challenged them, I'd find myself in lockup. And when I challenged that, it might go from one day in lockup to one week. So, I made the connection. I wouldn't tell somebody not to ask questions, but it's helpful to be prepared for some of the consequences.

You definitely have to get rid of that attitude that "this is America and I've got rights." It can be extremely difficult for people who really believe that. When reality sets in it's like getting hit when you're totally unprepared. You've got a right to believe it if you want, but it's not beneficial to misunderstand the circumstances you're in. When I came into it, I was already political, so I came with an understanding of my relationship with the US: That we were prisoners of war. And that helped me a lot. We might use the court system to heighten contradiction and raise consciousness, but we never thought that the US court system was there to help. There were certain prisoners who held on to those views, who needed to believe that they had rights, and so any time now justice will come. And for some of those people, when it doesn't happen, they were the ones who completely cracked. Or they became informants for the state. Because they'd used all their emotional resources on pursuing justice from the US government, and when that



Photo of Masai Ehehosi and Linda Evans (former political prisoner and long-time Critical Resistance advisor).

didn't happen, they weren't ready for that, and they felt beat down.

It was 1975 when I went in, and at that time there was more politicization even in the general population. There was more opportunity for organizations to send in materials. That was just at the start of when they introduced control units, which were designed to limit communication and to put whole groups into isolation because of what they belonged to, or what they believed, as opposed to what they did. The state used that to break down solidarity, to break the revolutionary impulses within the prison system and the larger society as a whole, and to make it almost impossible to do those things. But understanding that—and coming in with that psychological edge from knowing what the purpose of our confinement was—was a big help for me.

Having that political analysis also helped me with my anger. I knew, from my understanding of what we are up against, that you don't have to voice all your thoughts all the time. When you're in a no-win situation, you don't have to "murder mouth" them and start spitting and cussing and calling guards a whole bunch of names. You don't need to do all that. Instead, learn how to channel all that anger and rage. Don't spend your time banging on doors when nobody can

hear you. Don't let them play you out of pocket where they provoke you and you lose a chance to tell somebody from the outside what is happening. You have to develop self-discipline to channel it into ways that are most effective and not let your anger consume you.

About the Authors:

Keith LaMar (aka Bomani Shakur) has been in solitary confinement for the past 29 years, living on death row at the Ohio State Penitentiary after being wrongly convicted of murder for his alleged role in the 1993 Lucasville Uprising. A prolific writer, artist, and musician, he is the founder of Native Sons Literacy Project and (with pianist Albert Marquès) recently released a spoken word/jazz album, *Freedom First Jazz*. Learn more about Bomani at his website: www.keithlamar.org. Or write to him at: Keith LaMar, #317117, 878 Coitsville-Hubbard Road, Youngstown, OH 44505.

Levi Springer spent almost 12 years in solitary confinement and is currently being held at Red Onion State Prison, Virginia's first "supermax" facility. He is dedicated to the work of exposing prosecutorial misconduct, both through the media and by legal challenge. You can write to him at: Levi Springer, #1185787, Red Onion State Prison, P.O. Box 970, Pound, VA 24279.

Laura Whitehorn is a former political prisoner, having spent over 14 years in federal prison for her participation in civil rights and anti-war organizing with the Weather Underground. She is co-founder of Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP) and served as Senior Editor with POZ magazine.

Jo'an Dunn is currently imprisoned at the California Medical Facility in Vacaville, CA. She teaches art as occupational therapy and has worked closely with trans women prisoners, founding the peer-led support group *Queers United In Equitable Treatment (QUIET)*. You can write to her at: John Dunn, V29876, California Medical Facility, P.O. Box 2000, Vacaville, CA 95696-2000.

Masai Ehehosi is a former Black Liberation Army prisoner of war and serves as Co-Minister of Information for the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika. He is a founding and current member of Critical Resistance. ♦

FEATURES ANALYSIS

The 'End of the Line'

By Nancy Kurshan

Editors' Note: In the following article, the author mentions a revolutionary leader and imprisoned intellectual of the radical prisoner movement. Because some state departments of corrections use 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 his initials GLJ. Long live GLJ!

Secure Housing Unit (SHU), Administrative Maximum Facility (ADX), Administrative Segregation (Ad-Seg), Communications Management Unit (CMU), Supermax and more—with variations from prison to prison, a "control unit" is an imprisonment strategy in which all prisoners are locked in long-term isolation typically in individual 9' by 9' windowless boxes about 23 hours a day. In conditions of severe sensory deprivation, imprisoned people have no fresh air or natural light, are fed meals through a slot in the door, and defecate in their cells. There is highly restricted or zero access to education and recreational facilities. Human connection, with other prisoners or family and friends in the outside world, is limited or entirely denied. Visits that are approved take place over a Plexiglass wall through telephones monitored by guards, with prisoners often in shackles.

While all prisons are about control, control units are qualitatively different than the rest. **The intent is to make prisoners feel their lives are completely out of their control**—to make the person feel powerless, stripped of agency and completely dependent upon the prison authorities. There is no pretense that solitary confinement is a temporary affair—no way for people to know how long they'll be there. The regulations for entering and exiting are arbitrary at best and

impossible to comprehend at worst. **Solitary is about long-term, severe behavior modification, designed to be mind and spirit-deforming.** Some people spend decades in these places. Amnesty International released a 2012 report, *USA: The Edge of Endurance: Prison Conditions in California's Security Housing Units*, in which they declared that the conditions in two California prisons, Corcoran and Pelican Bay, violate international standards and are "cruel, degrading and inhuman."

Nancy Hollander's book, *Uprooted Minds: A Social Psychoanalysis for Precarious Times*, can help to deepen our understanding of the function of control units in society. Her book deals with US-backed, state-sponsored torture in Latin America under dictatorship:

Designed to secure the complete submission of the victim (prisoner) and bystander (society) alike, torture was used as a weapon of power by states whose ability to "ideologically control their populations had failed." [...] Torture makes use of the body as a vehicle with which to secure psychic submission to the absolute power of the state. [...] It reproduces [...] the infantile experience of helplessness and abandonment. Torture is employed to impose on prisoners a "law of submission", every intimately small detail demonstrating to them their infantilized, dependent position.

US prisons, and especially control units, work to punish the people inside and to control a population on the outside (internationally) by instilling fear. As such, **control units are the end-of-the line, the capstone of the prison system. Prisons within prisons.** Tantamount to state-sponsored torture, control units are an extreme abuse of state power and a defining tool of the prison industrial complex (PIC). Tracing the origins of control units in the US unmasks a dialectic



1989 Committee to End Marion Lockdown demonstration. Courtesy of The Freedom Archives.

tic between repression and resistance, shedding light on how we might advance struggles for abolition.

USP MARION: CONTROL UNITS ARE BORN

The first control unit was established by the US Bureau of Prisons (BOP) in the downstate town of Marion, Illinois in the early 1980s. USP Marion opened in 1963 when the federal penitentiary on Alcatraz Island closed since becoming outdated and too expensive to run. Before Marion, Alcatraz was where the US government disappeared the people it hated the most. Many of the most resistant and politicized prisoners were sent to Marion, which became, as Alcatraz had been, "the end of the line" of the federal prison system. Prior to the first control unit, both Alcatraz and Marion ran with relative restrictions: prisoners lived and worked with other prisoners, eating in a communal dining hall, accessing group recreation and religious services. On occasion, a prisoner would be put in solitary temporarily following a perceived infraction.

These relative restrictions were the norm across federal and state prisons until 1972, after guards severely beat a Mexican prisoner at Marion and prisoners responded with a peaceful work stoppage. In turn, the feds locked down an entire wing of the prison, instituting the "Marion

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Lockdown” by throwing all the prisoners in that unit into solitary confinement indefinitely. One of these individuals was Puerto Rican independence leader and political prisoner Rafael Cancel Miranda, accused of being a leader of the strike, after he was transferred from Alcatraz. A decade later in 1983, two white prisoners at Marion, members of the Aryan Brotherhood, killed a guard, ironically in the control unit wing of the prison (ironically because prisoncrats always claim control units reduce violence). There was no response or resistance in the rest of the prison. Nonetheless, the BOP seized the opportunity to lock down the entire prison, all 350 men, establishing what we would come to realize was the first control unit prison in the US.

“Control units are the end-of-the line, the capstone of the prison system. Prisons within prisons. Tantamount to state-sponsored torture, control units are an extreme abuse of state power and a defining tool of the prison industrial complex (PIC).”

The BOP claimed that this was a temporary measure. As the lockdown continued, some of us monitoring the situation were certain this was short term. Over the next two years we grew more and more alarmed. We understood this was a significant and new historical development, that we were seeing a restructuring of prison life as we knew it. We realized that the government was experimenting, not just on prisoners, but on the general public outside of prisons as well. If these horrific conditions could win public acceptability, then control units would proliferate everywhere. **We formed the Committee to End Marion Lockdown (CEML), beginning what became a 15-year long fight to stop the spread of control unit prisons** by abolishing the lockdown at Marion, which evolved into the demand to abolish all control units. In October 1985 we issued a call for a conference in Chicago to commemorate two years of the lockdown and to better understand what the future held.

SNUFFING OUT RESISTANCE

I first learned about Marion due to its disproportionate capture of political prisoners. By the time I co-founded CEML, it was like a “Who’s Who” of US revolutionaries: **Rafael Cancel Miranda** and **Oscar López Rivera** of the Puerto Rican independence movement; **Panther 21 members** of New York Black Panther chapter **Sundiata Acoli** and **Sekou Odinga**; **Leonard Peltier** of the American Indian Movement; white revolutionary **Bill Dunne**, and more. Each helped the outside understand what was going on. *Why were there so many political prisoners imprisoned there?* Most of these people had no infractions against them when in general population prisons. Others went straight from sentencing to Marion.

The design of control units is no surprise considering what was happening politically during this period: A powerful Black liberation movement was threatening the white supremacist status quo of the US as national liberation movements were spreading globally. Revolutionary Puerto Rican, Mexican, Native American and Asian-American organizations rose around the country. In *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s*, Yale historian Elizabeth Hinton documents thousands of instances from the 1960s and into the 1970s of militant actions employed by African-Americans in response to the extra-legal violence of white police and civilians and the unresolved issues of racial and economic inequality.

By the late 1970s, white supremacy was not giving up its hold. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) counter-intelligence program COINTELPRO was implemented, aimed (in its

own words) at preventing the rise of a “Black Messiah”. Vicious destabilizing tactics including harassment, intimidation, informants, and rumor-mongering were deployed to create dissension within and between organizations, in addition to outright assassination of leaders like 21-year-old **Fred Hampton** of Chicago Black Panthers. This had a chilling impact on all progressive movements in the US. Smaller groups continued militant struggle—the Black Liberation Army, the Puerto Rican Armed Forces of National Liberation, the American Indian Movement, the Weather Underground and others—but the larger sea of people receded as folks assessed whether they were willing to endure long prison sentences or perhaps die.

Black Liberation now had deep resonance with Black prisoners throughout the country. Many were willing to resist their conditions and some were willing to die if the only alternative was living the horrendous life of a prisoner. GLJ* was a leader of the California prison movement, arrested at 20 years of age for stealing \$70 from a gas station and given an indeterminate sentence. While imprisoned, GLJ got politicized, started a Black Panther chapter inside, wrote numerous letters and texts that are now considered irreplaceable for liberation movements, and organized prisoners to resist fascism and prison-manufactured racial division including race-based “gladiator” fights.

In San Quentin Prison on August 21, 1971 GLJ was shot dead by guards. His death reverberated throughout the country and was reflected in popular culture, including a tribute song by Bob Dylan. GLJ’s death reverberated through the US prison system and does to this day despite prisons doing everything they can to erase his legacy. A few weeks after his death, September 9, 1971, the Attica Prison Rebellion erupted, a watershed uprising where prisoners stood up and declared, as prisoner **Elliott “LD” Barkley** stated, “*We are men. We are not beasts and will not be treated as such.*” The Attica rebellion was a result of years of prisoners organizing and studying together. Uniting prisoners across racial boundaries, Attica was to a large extent a Black liberation-inspired movement and a demonstration by the prison regime of the level of brutality that would be used to repress prisoner resistance thereafter. When the tear gas and bullets cleared, 43 men were dead. One of the murdered was 21-year-old Barkley just days away from his release.

GLJ and Attica were by no means the only threats to the prison regime. From 1970-1971, mainstream US press reported on over 60 prisoner-led strikes, work stoppages, riots and group escape attempts—six times more than 1960. The prison regime developed repressive strategies to quell the effective organizing by imprisoned people. Control units became the answer: A counter-insurgency strategy to squash those revolutionary impulses of the ‘60s and ‘70s inside and outside of prison. For almost 50 years prior to Attica, the US imprisonment rates were constant and commensurate with those of Western Europe. The development of the control units was part and parcel of the massive racist imprisonment binge that ensued in the decades after Attica.

AT THE PRISON GATES

The work of CEML was guided by our love and belief in collective action as the motor for change. We took busloads of people to march at the gates of prisons all around Illinois, the Midwest and beyond. We confronted the head of the US Bureau of Prisons face to face at a criminology conference. We organized. We produced a newsletter, *Walkin’ Steel*, held hearings, created a slideshow and video challenging the paradigm through which prisons are viewed, and wrote letters to editors. We initiated a National Campaign to Abolish Control Unit Prisons and a newspaper entitled “ABOLISH!”, reflecting our stance on control units.

One of the strengths of abolition is that it does not focus on releasing only the “non-violent”



Prisoners at Attica, 1971. By Bob Schutz, Associated Press.

defenders, or only the elders or the dying. Abolition identifies the whole institution as the problem. By focusing on control units, we were in practice doing just that. We developed an extensive mailing list, raised money, and disseminated regular reports on how the work advanced. We corresponded with prisoners and regularly distributed their critically important reflections, which guided our work outside.

Networking with many organizations—including women fighting for reproductive rights, activists in the **AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)**, the **Pledge of Resistance** fighting against US imperial power in Central America, those fighting the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazis—CEML’s primary partner was the activist Puerto Rican community in Chicago fighting to free their political prisoners, including Oscar Lopez-Rivera. We also had great input from the **New Afrikan People’s Organization** who often joined us at the gates of prisons and participated in our educational events.

Challenging reformist and racist ideology by drawing out the facts of the matter, CEML tried to help people see that prisons were about social control, and in the US particularly, the social control of people of color. We have to ask ourselves *why, in a country where 12% of the population is Black, 38% of all prisoners are Black?* Some 30% of those in restrictive units in women’s prisons are Black compared with 20% of the overall women’s prison population. *We have to ask ourselves why, when relatively few women are in solitary conditions compared with men, the women who are in solitary just happen to be disproportionately Black?*

CEML challenged the idea that prisons were designed to rehabilitate and that somewhere along the way mistakes were made. We challenged the idea that “crime” and imprisonment rates were related. We challenged the idea that there were no political prisoners in the US by printing multiple editions of *Can’t Jail the Spirit*, collections of political prisoners’ biographies. And we challenged the idea that this is “just the way things are.” We said that human beings created these problems, are responsible for them, and therefore can change them.

STOPPING A “LIVING TOMB,” A CONTROL UNIT FOR WOMEN

Not long after CEML’s first conference, the BOP announced it would open a second control unit prison, this one aimed at women and particularly women political prisoners. Around that time, I visited Puerto Rican *independentista* **Alejandrina Torres** and anti-imperialist **Susan Rosenberg** who were imprisoned in Tucson, thousands of miles from friends and family. They predicted they would both be sent to this new control unit. Sure enough, when the Women’s High Security Unit (HSU) was opened in the basement of the Federal Correctional Institution at Lexington, Kentucky, three of the first five women sent to this specialized control unit were political prisoners. Two of them were Alejandrina and Susan. The third was anti-imperialist **Sylvia Baraldini**.

HSU prisoners were tortured by artificial lights 24 hours a day. Personal property was extremely limited. Camera and visual surveillance recorded every activity. Guards experimented

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“Human Billboard” by CEML. Courtesy of The Freedom Archives.

with sleep deprivation, waking the women every hour or half-hour during the night. Contact with the outside world was meticulously restricted. Frequent pat searches by male guards were conducted as routine sexual assault. **Described as a “living tomb,” HSU caused the women to experience the predictable psychological and physical effects of control unit torture:** memory loss, inability to concentrate, vision impairment, dizziness, hallucinations, loss of appetite and weight, severe lethargy, claustrophobia, chronic rage, low-level to severe depression, and exacerbation of pre-existing medical problems.

Even before the Lexington Control Unit was opened, the **National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Political Prisoners** and the **National Committee to Defend New Afrikan Freedom Fighters** requested our (CEML) participation in a joint demonstration at Marion and Lexington, what would be a 30-hour demonstration at two prisons in two different states. This would mushroom into a much larger national effort led by the **Campaign to Abolish Lexington HSU** which included groups such as the **Out of Control Lesbian Committee to Support Women Political Prisoners**. Due to the tireless organizing of these activists and the women inside the unit, **Amnesty International** found the conditions and placement of the women to constitute cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A dedicated group of lawyers — **Adjoa Aiyetoro, Jan Susler, Liz Fink, Mary O’Melveny, and Michael Deutsch**— filed a lawsuit on behalf of Susan and Sylvia. An expert witness correctional psychologist concluded that the program was designed for ideological conversion, and if that failed, to make prisoners desperate enough to destroy themselves. In 1988 a federal judge ruled their placement unconstitutional and ordered the women be transferred out. While the unit then closed, it had taken its pound of flesh from the women caged within.

GUANTANAMO— CONTROL UNIT ON STEROIDS

If control units on US soil are “living tombs”, then it is difficult to find words to describe Guantanamo. This outrageous hell hole reveals the hypocrisy of the “land of the free”. In its birth alone, it was an imperialist military occupation— the establishment of a US Naval Base on the land of Cuba. After September 11, 2001, up to 780 people were imprisoned in indefinite detention without trial. There have been many testimonies of abuse and torture by prisoners.

Amnesty International stated Guantanamo was a major breach of human rights, and the **Center for Constitutional Rights** declared it a violation of the Due Process Clause of the Fifth and Fourteenth amendments of the US Constitution. There have been widespread hunger strikes, which at some point the authorities decided to no longer report. At least nine people have died in custody.

Guantanamo reveals the interplay between what takes place domestically and internationally through the prison and military industrial complexes. Much is shrouded in mystery but occasionally we get glimpses, often in the revealing of the central role “war on terror” criminalization strategies have in legitimizing and expanding the PIC by justifying torture. An August 2000 report to Donald Rumsfeld noted that “interrogation techniques intended only for Guantanamo came to be used in Afghanistan and Iraq.” Even an appointee of George W Bush assigned to look into the situation conceded that torture took place. Biden has released 10 people but despite the promises from various presidents to close Gitmo, it remains open. As of March 2023, there were still 34 detainees and the Department of Defense has reportedly put several million dollars into Guantanamo to expand it, including a second courtroom.

CONTROL UNITS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

It’s been 50 years since the dramatic acceleration of racist imprisonment rates, and 40 since Marion became the first control unit prison. Since then, control units proliferated until there was at least one in about every US state. By 2014 there were 80,000 to 100,000 people trapped in isolation, as Ed Pilkington stated in *The Guardian* in August 2022. **Currently, roughly 122,840 people are tortured in solitary confinement on a daily basis across local jails as well as state and federal prisons**, according to a report released in May 2023 by **Solitary Watch**. An estimated 6,000 of these prisoners were in isolation for over a year (based on a 2022 figure).

Finally, more public awareness and initiatives are trying to rein in long-term solitary confinement in prisons, jails, and immigration detention facilities, as a growing number of states and international advisories have introduced new laws to restrict or ban the use while some states have taken steps towards reducing prison populations. Much of the motivation is financially driven, since prisons generally and control units especially are expensive to build and maintain. While the US prison population declined 25% since reaching its peak in 2009 and 21 states have partially or fully closed at least one correctional facility since 2000, as the **Sentencing Project** reports, “at the current pace of decarceration, averaging 2.3% annually since 2009, it would take 75 years—until 2098—to return to 1972’s prison population.”

The recent rise in public awareness about solitary confinement would not have been possible without the brave sacrifice and risk from prisoner resistance, often in the form of hunger strikes. In California, the statewide prisoner hunger strikes in 2011 and 2013 with a parallel

legal strategy resulted in an historic legal settlement and international recognition of solitary confinement as torture. As a result, hundreds of people were released from solitary into general population across the state. Partly inspired by the California hunger strikes, similar strikes took place in Texas in 2022.

SHIFTING PARADIGM: ABOLITION IS POSSIBLE

As horrifying as control units are, we have decades of organizing inside and outside of prisons to reflect on and learn from. From the very first lockdown prisoners and outside supporters have challenged the practice. **In all work regarding prisons, the idea that the most repressive conditions produce more safe results has to be defeated.** Shortly after California opened its first control unit prison Pelican Bay, the prison administration insisted violence had gone down as a result. In fact, violence was on its way down before they opened, as my late husband **Steve Whitman**, an epidemiologist and biostatistician who analyzed large data sets, had found. According to forensic psychologist **Terry Kupers**, in US states where the population in solitary has been reduced, the result is actually a reduction in the rate of prison violence. Of its many contributions to movement history, CEML understood since its beginning that the prison system was not broken, as most liberal critics have thought. We believed it was carrying out its mission—the social control of poor people and people of color. That was the paradigm shift we knew was critical to advocate for.

We have to fight like hell to raise the vision of abolition and also try to reduce the footprint of the PIC now. We fought to get the toxic water changed at Marion and won. Celebrate the small changes as we did, but never let the small changes be enough. The motor for change comes from mass collective action at the grassroots. CEML opened up conversations and created space, but change can happen only when people move into those spaces with energy and actions. Should you read my book, **Out Of Control**, perhaps you will be able to figure out ways to adapt some of what we did to the conditions of today. Let your creative energies flow and put your shoulder to the wheel. Imagine to be possible what seems impossible. But have realistic expectations so you don’t quickly burn out. And stay in the streets. On days that I can walk okay, I’ll be with you.

“We have to fight like hell to raise the vision of abolition and also try to reduce the footprint of the PIC now.”

About the Author: *Author of Out of Control: A 15 Year Battle Against Control Unit Prisons*, **Nancy Kurshan** was a founding member of the **Committee to End the Marion Lockdown**. You can find her book and supporting documents online at Freedom Archives: freedomarchives.org/projects/out-of-control-online-version. She has also written a number of articles about prisons and beyond, including on the history of women in prison, and meeting with Vietnamese survivors of torture during what they refer to as “the American War”. ♦

FEATURES ACTION

You Can’t Kill the Spirit of a Revolutionary: Susan Rosenberg on the Lexington Control Unit for Women

Interview by Dylan Brown of The Abolitionist

Editors’ Note: The following article is a transcript of a conversation between **Dylan Brown** of The Abolitionist Editorial Collective and former anti-imperialist political prisoner, **Susan Rosenberg**. In 1986, Susan Rosenberg was one of the first women imprisoned in the High Security Unit at FCI Lexington, an experimental total lockdown isolation unit in the basement of a build-

ing, totally separate from the rest of FCI Lexington. The Lexington Control Unit was designed for the express purpose of caging women political prisoners involved in revolutionary struggles. This interview has been edited for length, order, and clarity.

Brown: Can you speak to the political conditions that led to the creation of the Lexington High Security Unit (HSU) in 1986, and the significance of this unit in the effort to contain

and control women involved in revolutionary struggles?

Rosenberg: From the late 1960s and into the early 1980s, revolutionary activity was going on against the US, and there was repression through COINTELPRO that was “officially over” in the late 1970’s - but not really. During this period, a number of our movement leaders were imprisoned at similar times. They were Puerto Rican independentista revolutionaries, Black

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revolutionaries, New Afrikan freedom fighter revolutionaries, and anti-imperialist political prisoners. There were more women at that moment part of revolutionary movements who were caught, tried, and imprisoned—of which I was one.

In the 1970s, the “war on drugs” began as rhetoric that turned to a literal war against Black, Puerto Rican, and poor communities, instigating a whole generation of people going to prison in the 1970s and 1980s. The US government was building more repressive apparatuses—high security prisons—for the current wave of revolutionary political activism against the US and for what would come in the future. For example, the Reagan administration imported and exported isolation as a mechanism of imprisonment. Political prisoners in Germany, Uruguay, Spain and Ireland were the first wave of people imprisoned under these torture-like conditions utilizing isolation as the mechanism to drive people either insane or to die by suicide. While solitary confinement and torture existed already, it hadn’t existed at this scale, and in such a systematic targeted way.

There were a number of factors that went into creating the conditions for these units. The first lock-down prisons were in the federal prison system—the Marion prison was one of the very early prisons in complete lockdown, which meant everybody in that prison was in solitary confinement and in units that existed for that purpose. Before Marion and Lexington, there was an experimental isolation wing at FPC Alderson in West Virginia where **Assata Shakur, Marilyn Buck, Susan Saxe, Saffiyah Bukari** and **Lolita Lebrón** were all imprisoned temporarily, in isolation. That was one of the very first attempts to destroy women involved in radical and revolutionary political and literal activity.

Brown: How have you seen the prison industrial complex (PIC) shift and evolve since the closure of Lexington HSU? What strategies and tactics have you seen emerge?

Rosenberg: Well, I think Lexington HSU was an experiment by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and the FBI. The point of that unit was to break us, to have us renounce our political beliefs, to “go crazy”, to isolate us, and to try and break the movement’s support of us and our relationship to the movement. That was really the intention. And while we won litigation against Lexington HSU and got the unit closed, it was overturned on appeal. Up until Marion and Lexington, you were sentenced to prison, and if people went into solitary confinement it was a punishment for behavior that occurred while you were in the prison itself. Once our case got reversed on appeal, it meant that the BOP could put any prisoner in any prison in any location for any length of time without any due process or external accountability around that. This gave them the green light to build these units in multiple places, which they did over the rest of the 1980s and the 1990s. It was also the period where the rise in the actual population of people in prison grew exponentially. These numbers remained on the rise—with the war on crime, the war on drugs, and then the war on terror, which came a little later.

While we won something and were able to expose some of the terrible treatment that we [political prisoners] were getting, we always took the position that if they can do it to us, then they can massify it and do it to everybody. The PIC emerged out of the desire to incapacitate large numbers of people and that’s what they did in part by building lockdown prisons like ADX Florence in Colorado and countless others.

Anyone who got convicted in the 1990s and in the early 2000s and was labeled by the government as a “terrorist” automatically went into lockdown isolation units—we have seen this before at complexes like Abu Ghraib. There are also isolation medical units in the federal prison. More recently, COVID-19 protocol is that everyone gets put in utter isolation, whether that’s called an isolation unit or not. The goal to truly incapacitate thousands and thousands of people becomes really central to the mission

of the BOP, and prisons at the state-level all fall in line with that. From the time that I was one of the first women in the Lexington HSU, the massification of control units has just become enormous. The 2011 and 2013 resistance out of Pelican Bay, as well as the strike in 2018 in South Carolina over conditions inside, are responses to this very deep, very serious commitment to the myth of rehabilitation that is imploding on itself.

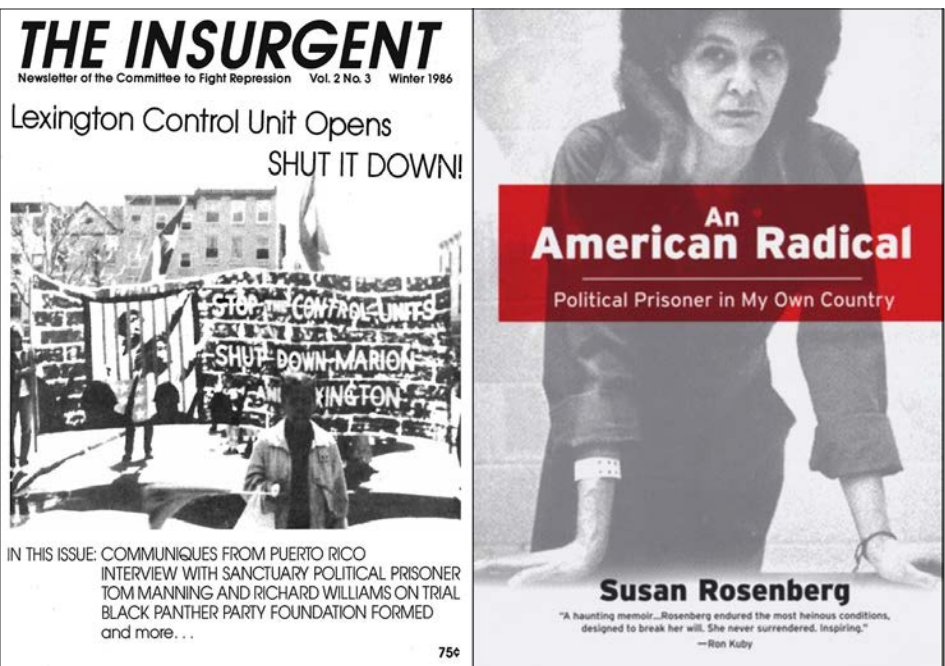
There is no rehabilitation—there’s only suffering. The stories of people who survived those units are not the majority of people. The majority of people get destroyed by those units. The PIC has gone through major changes over the past several decades. Unfortunately, what we thought then has come to pass—if they could do it to this group of three, or five women for two years in a basement in Kentucky—then they’re going to do it everywhere. And that is what happened.

Brown: The Lexington HSU was shut down in 1988, yet control units have continued to spread throughout the US. *What limitations or political dangers are there in legislative organizing that we need to anticipate as best we can in our struggles against imprisonment? In other words, what advice or lessons would you share with abolitionist organizers today from the fight to close Lexington HSU?*

“There is no rehabilitation—there’s only suffering. The stories of people who survived those units are not the majority of people. The majority of people get destroyed by those units. The PIC has gone through major changes over the past several decades. Unfortunately, what we thought then has come to pass—if they could do it to this group of three, or five women for two years in a basement in Kentucky—then they’re going to do it everywhere. And that is what happened.”

Rosenberg: It’s important to make a division when doing “reform” vs abolition because abolition has a completely different meaning. Having been in prison myself and spending almost 17 years in federal prison and then seven years on parole after that, I came out of that experience being a completely committed abolitionist. And I got out before **Are Prisons Obsolete?** by **Angela Davis** was published. And when I did read that book I was like—yes, yes! At the same time, if we hadn’t had the vehicle of litigation to fight Lexington, we wouldn’t have had the platform to fight the overall unit.

There’s a dynamic there about what mechanisms exist that are systemic, that one may or may not have to use in order to have a way of fighting. Going on strike in a prison, a hunger strike in particular, is an incredible leap. And if you do make that leap, it’s almost impossible to come back from that. You’re complying when you return having either won some things or not won anything. Because really, everybody makes decisions when they’re inside. The question is—*are they going to resist that day? Are they going to comply that day? Are you gonna have a fight about getting water that day?* It’s every single thing. I realize that’s not exactly your



Left: A 1986 issue of the newsletter of the Committee to Fight Repression. Right: In 2011 Susan Rosenberg published *An American Radical*, about her time in the Lexington High Security Unit. Courtesy of Stephen Dillon, *The Places Journal*.

question, but I think **there is a dialectical relationship between the absolute imperative of abolition—of ending this system and all that entails—and having mechanisms and tactics that exist within any given struggle that you have to deploy in order to fight for both that specific goal and then the larger picture.** In a lot of situations, they don’t have to be mutually exclusive.

I have spent the last decade working on **Dr. Mutulu Shakur’s** case to get him out of prison. The goal was to get him out, which we did in December of 2022 before he passed away in July 2023. He died outside of prison, seven months after he was released. We were fighting an individual defense campaign and had to figure out the specific tactics and strategies to get him out without succumbing to the pressure and the resistance from the state. This meant utilizing every single possible thing—fighting for parole, fighting for clemency, mass organizing and getting 100,000 signatures, calling up the BOP and the Department of Justice and demanding his release, etc. If we hadn’t done those deep dives into their terrible system, we wouldn’t have been able to get him out.

Brown: I appreciate this response because what I’m hearing in your answer is the necessity of having a diversity of tactics and strategies within a given campaign to build power and achieve your goal. At Critical Resistance, we have a three-pronged campaign organizing approach that combines legislative and legal strategies, grassroots outreach and mobilization, and disciplined media and communications work to shift our terrain and “shrink and starve” the PIC, or chip away at the PIC’s power, resources, legitimacy, and scale over time. When we’re doing an anti-imprisonment or anti-policing campaign in coalition with other organizations, there will be a legal or legislative strategy, but it’s not the sole strategy being deployed. This is a good reminder of the importance of having a diversity of tactics in our organizing work, while remaining clear on our goal and the ultimate political horizon we are organizing towards.

Rosenberg: Yes, we have to bring in the ideological, systemic analysis into every level of our organizing work—*what are the forces, who are they, and what are they doing?* I hope there will come a time when we are much bigger, we have much more capacity, and when a mass struggle actually can impact in a real way making long-lasting change. Some of this is already happening, but it must start with our understanding of our goal and what we are trying to achieve by fighting the system. This is not that new a problem for us—this is an issue for revolution and revolutionary organizing in every place.

Brown: Shifting to your own experience of imprisonment, *what challenges did you face upon your release from Lexington HSU as a former political prisoner who experienced the worst of the worst prison conditions designed to destroy a revolutionary spirit and a commitment to revolutionary organizing?*

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Rosenberg: After the BOP closed Lexington, they immediately opened the first maximum security women’s prison, and that’s where I went right after Lexington. They had FCI Alderson, which was considered “max”, but looked like a farm, it was a different prison environment. There were 100 people in total isolation instead of three, so already we were seeing how they were expanding their own strategy even after we won the closure of Lexington at that point. They were committed to building these types of prisons for women. I was there for three years, and then after that I went to general population. What happened at Lexington didn’t ever go away. I remember Lexington very well to this day over 25 years later. The communities that I built and the relationships I had with other women in prison helped me. They became my best friends and helped me through the very worst of the aftermath of those psychological issues that I experienced at Lexington.

When we were at Lexington, people on the outside would say, “Stop the torture! Stop the torture!” And we all said, it’s not torture. For us, this idea about psychological torture was not something that we really understood, even though we knew they were playing terrible mental games with us. For our own kind of self-worth, we didn’t want to admit that we were being tortured—but we were. They were torturing us. And when I got out, I recognized that’s actually what had happened—and was happening in other places in other ways for a long time.

“For our own kind of self-worth, we didn't want to admit that we were being tortured—but we were. They were torturing us. And when I got out, I recognized that's actually what had happened—and was happening in other places in other ways for a long time.”

Once I got out I decided that I would go to a psychological torture clinic, so I went to **the NYU Program for Survivors of Torture**. I wanted to go to a place where whether they agreed with my self-identity as a political prisoner or not, they would understand the experiences I had as torture. I wouldn’t have to beg a therapist to agree with me that I was a political person or acknowledge what the government did to me. I went into a whole therapeutic experience to try and deal with what had happened to me at Lexington during all those years of extreme impris-



Marilyn Buck with Silvia Baraldini, Susan Rosenberg and other members of the AIDS support group at Marianna prison. Photo taken from Friends of Marilyn Buck.

onment—and that made a huge difference. I feel like for anybody who’s inside you really need to have help when you get out. It’s not because of “recidivism”; it’s because of your humanity, and how to work through what this whole experience has been.

The other thing is that one doesn’t realize how deeply isolated one is when they’re inside. You try to keep being alive by being in some kind of environment that isn’t 100% hostile. When I got out the movement was there, but it was in a completely different place than when I had gone in, and I realized how deeply isolated we were inside. It had become very much non-profit and everybody had become a “professional”. The community here made me a part of them and that really, really made a difference.

The last thing I would say is I really recognize the divisions that exist because of privilege. I was white, I came from a fairly middle-class family, and my parents built a community to support me and a lot of other political prisoners. They really went all the way out to try and help me recover. I didn’t come out and not have a place to live. I even got a masters inside when I was in general population. I could not have done that without access to resources outside.

Brown: You’ve been organizing against imperialism and oppression since the last era at least in the US when many people thought revolution was near. You were targeted as part of the counter-insurgency that the PIC emerged to wage against people making demands for change. *Considering how you’ve continued to engage in political struggle and organize decades later, how have you seen our movements shift? Are you hopeful for lasting change? What do you think it would take given what you know from our movements past and now, to build a strong enough movement that can truly contend with*

the PIC and abolish its tools, including particularly vicious ones like control units?

Rosenberg: It feels like COINTELPRO again to me. It feels like that period, only now—where conditions are really different. I do believe that we are seeing more and more war-like activity by the right wing. This is compelling us to think about what we can do to respond—and that is a huge challenge that we’re all facing and are going to face more and more.

I don’t want to live in a world where this is what the norm is. I think many people don’t want to live in a world like that. It’s incumbent on us who have a view of what kind of a world we wish we could have—need to have—to keep doing the work. That’s part of why I’m a teacher, it’s a platform and a mechanism by which I can put ideas in the world to people who live the experience of all of this repression, but might not and don’t necessarily have the analytical tools to make sense of it. It doesn’t make it acceptable, but once you have those tools you can make a decision about what to do or not to do about it. The summer of 2020 were the largest demonstrations ever in American history against white supremacy and the police. The state recognized this, and that’s part of what we are seeing now with this incredible right-wing, white supremacist, pro-imperialist, capitalist response by Democrats and Republicans and what they’re pushing for our society. We have to fight that.

I’m not as optimistic as I was when I thought we were going to have a revolution in 10 years, but I do believe that there is a thread—a red thread—a group underneath that’s always going to keep fighting. I hope I’m going to be in that group until I’m not around anymore. There are thousands of people who will be, as well. If we want to make the kind of changes that abolition articulates so brilliantly, then we’re going to have to keep fighting. Keep fighting, struggling, organizing, and all of those things. *Has the movement changed?* Yeah, and for the better in some ways even though it’s not as globally connected as we once were and anti-imperialism has somewhat of a different meaning now. I think the intersectionality that has evolved over the last 20 years around Black women’s leadership in particular and issues of misogyny, white supremacy, and the real clear linking of those in our understanding and how to deal with them is a huge advance. I don’t think it can be undervalued how important that is. So that makes me very optimistic.

Author Bio: **Susan Rosenberg** is a human rights and prisoners’ rights advocate, adjunct lecturer, award-winning writer, speaker, abolitionist, and a former US political prisoner. Currently she is an adjunct lecturer at Hunter College. ♦

FEATURES ACTION

Liberx tuttx: The struggle to abolish the carcere duro regime in Italy

By the Rome Assembly Against Prison and Repression.

“Today I am ready to die to make the world understand what 41-bis really is. I am convinced that my death will be an obstacle to this regime. [...] Abolition of the 41-bis regime. Abolition of hostile life imprisonment. Solidarity with all anarchist, communist and revolutionary prisoners around the world.” —Alfredo Cospito

Alfredo Cospito, a 55-year-old imprisoned anarchist in Italy, gained international support from thousands of protesters across Italy and the world for his six-month hunger strike, which lasted from October 2022 to April 2023. Cospito challenged the “**41-bis regime**,” or **Article 41-bis of the Prison Administration Act in Italian law**, also known as **carcere duro** (“hard prison regime”), a provision that allows the Minister of Justice or the Minister of the Interior to suspend certain prison regulations and impose almost total isolation upon a prisoner. Cospito’s hunger strike brought the torturous conditions of life imprisonment and solitary confinement of the 41-bis regime under public scrutiny.

Only certain prisoners are subject to the 41-bis regime and a sentence of life imprisonment in Italy. The state claims it is only applied for extreme cases of violence, citing specific mafias or “terrorist” conspiracies. Under the 41-bis regime, prisoners are subjected to complete isolation and are barred from writing or receiving letters or books, are transferred to special prisons miles away from home, and are entitled to only one visitation per month. There are 1,840 people sentenced to life imprisonment in Italian prisons today, 1,280 of whom are under 41-bis purview. However, the problems with Italian imprisonment extend beyond the 41-bis provision, as Italian prisons are already overcrowded and conditions are dire: In 2022, the Italian state was found complicit in a massacre in which 82 prisoners committed suicide. Cospito’s case is an example of anti-anarchist attacks perpetrated by the state, shedding light on the political forces that have shaped the development of the 41-bis regime and revealing how solitary confinement and gang or mafia criminalization are parallel strategies for political repression even beyond Italian borders.



Demonstration in Rome in solidarity with Alfredo Cospito against the 41-bis regime. Photo by Matteo Nardone, The Pacific Press Agency.

CARCERE DURO

The history of prison differentiation in Italy—that is, the division of prisoners into “good,” recoverable subjects and “bad” subjects to be totally neutralized by the system—has its origins in a series of laws introduced in Italy during the 1970s to counter revolutionary political insurgency. At that time, a mass movement of several far-left revolutionary groups had taken hold in Italy, mainly comprised of workers and students disillusioned with the post-World War II compromises made between the anti-fascists and conservatives. Some of these groups took part in organizing clandestine armed struggle. By the end of the 1970s, there were approxi-

Continues on next page

mately 5,000 political prisoners in Italy as a result of this revolutionary activity (mostly communist in nature). Solitary confinement within prisons was originally introduced during this period in order to separate political prisoners from other prisoners to stop resistance against the prisons from politicizing all prisoners. In order to safeguard the country’s institutions from “subversion,” a not-so-unprecedented form of governance was established under the guise of “emergency legislation”. New laws were introduced by government decree to stiffen the penal-repressive apparatus in increasingly authoritarian ways (the so-called phenomenon of “judicial populism”).

The 1970s not only paved the way for the restoration of the disciplinary system, but also laid the groundwork toward an overall reshaping of the state. Through this political legislative technique of **“emergency decrees”, the Italian state underwent an authoritarian transformation of its liberal architecture** by rebalancing its legislative, judicial, and executive powers. These measures favored the two conservative powers—namely, the Judiciary, whose role is to preserve the status quo, and the Government (Italy’s executive power), whose purpose is to enforce the laws. This rebalancing weakened the legislative power, which, in its role of promoting laws, necessarily has an eye turned to the future and the identification and resolution of social problems. From the 1970s onward, it was clearly revealed that this “emergency legislation” was by no means temporary and that even after the phenomenon for which they were introduced had ended, these laws continued their vigor and even broadened their scope to include categories unrelated to the original purpose. The forerunner of the prison differentiation can be found in Article 14 of the Prison Ordinance, which allows the grouping of prisoners by categories, as well as Article 90, which allows the Minister of Justice to suspend the rules and rights of prisoners in penal institutions affected by riots “for reasons of order and security.” These two articles are contained in Law No. 354 of 1975, i.e., the Penitentiary Order Act, which was passed in response to prison riots and intended to stifle the dignity, rights, and guarantees of prisoners.

Further evolution of prison differentiation took place during two instances of sentence reductions—in 1982, when robust sentence reductions were introduced for so-called “collaborators with justice,” and in 1987, with similar reductions for “dissociation from armed struggle,” which extended to those who declared adherence to a nonviolent political method. After the end of this period of armed struggle in the early 1980s, which resulted in more than 6,000 political prisoners and hundreds of life sentences, the aforementioned legislation was not repealed or readjusted to the new civil and political context; rather, it found a new “emergency” with which to reinforce itself. The emergency, in this case, was called “mafia” and “organized crime,” declared after two judges—Falcone and Borsellino—were assassinated in the spring-summer of 1992 in separate bomb attacks following their prosecution campaigns of alleged mafia leaders. By means of “emergency” measures, the Italian government (excluding Parliament) enforced the special regime under Article 41-bis, paragraph two of the Penitentiary Order Act, and on a July night in 1992, transferred 300 detainees believed to be leaders of “organized crime” to isolated prisons on the islands of Pianosa and Asinara, subjecting them to inhuman and degrading treatment, just as it had done in the past with leftist political militants. In the 1970s, these prisons had been mainly used for political prisoners, and in the 1990s, they were largely reserved for “organized crime” prisoners under the 41-bis regime. Pianosa and Asinara were otherwise uninhabited islands, serving the sole purpose of dehumanizing prisoners. Considered the “Italian Alcatraz,” the Pianosa prison was shut down in 1998.

In contrast to the Italian constitutional framework, 41-bis was considered exceptional and temporary and was limited in duration to three



Photo from Lundi Matin.

years. However, after the Mafia emergency ended, it was extended another three years, and in 2002 it was promoted to an ordinary regulation of the legal system. At this time, its applicability expanded to yet another category of prisoners—those accused of terrorism.

CRIMINALIZATION OF ANARCHISM AND COMMUNISM THROUGH MAFIA CRIMINALIZATION

The 41-bis regime and the legalization of life imprisonment were both introduced in the 1990s as repressive devices against Mafia organizations. These devices have not served, as is well known, to weaken the power of the mafias in our country and internationally. On the contrary, the state has been complicit in favoring and covering up this parallel power to maintain certain national and international balances, reinforcing economic inequality between the country’s north and south, and ultimately establishing an intertwined class system. Poor southerners are forced to emigrate, and as European and non-European immigrants arrive in the country, an urban proletariat emerges. Out of 50,000 imprisoned people in Italian prisons, 17,182 are foreigners.

“After the end of this period of armed struggle in the early 1980s, which resulted in more than 6,000 political prisoners and hundreds of life sentences, the aforementioned legislation was not repealed or readjusted to the new civil and political context; rather, it found a new ‘emergency’ with which to reinforce itself. The emergency, in this case, was called ‘mafia’ and ‘organized crime...’”

In 2005, the “hard prison regime”, or carcere duro, and its strict restrictions on prisoners was first applied under Article 41-bis to three members of a communist armed group (the New Red Brigades/ Nuove Brigate Rosse). Sentenced to 18 years’ imprisonment, they spend 22 hours a day in a single cell, with only one hour of fresh air in a concrete courtyard—a few square meters wide, covered with a net to occlude the view of the sky and most sunlight—and one hour of socializing with three other prisoners chosen by the prison management. They are forbidden from seeing or talking to others, except for the hour once a month when they are allowed to see family members. These meetings are held in a small room with a glass partition and prisoners must use an intercom to speak to their loved ones—their conversations are listened to and recorded by the prison police. In 2009, the Rome Supervisory Court was granted exclusive jurisdiction to decide on the application and extension of 41-bis. In open contrast to the constitutional provision that designates the judge prescribed by law—that is, of the place of detention—the Supervisory Court establishes a “special judge” to apply decisions about 41-bis. In May 2022, 41-bis was applied against an anarchist prisoner, Alfredo Cospito, for the first time.

Solitary confinement under 41-bis is mainly used as a tool to obtain information and induce detain-

ees to repent or give themselves up. In the 1970s, the technique of bodily torture was also used on political prisoners to force them to give false testimony. Those who decided to repent obtained significant sentence reductions or immediate freedom. The 41-bis regime emerged in the wake of this repressive approach pioneered on political prisoners. An opposite dynamic exists for 41-bis in its current form. The 41-bis regime, originally created to target prisoners with alleged links to mafia organizations, has been extended to encompass political prisoners, as well. However, the goal is the same: to differentiate prisoners and their treatment by subjecting them to a mechanism of reward in exchange for their cooperation or a worsening of their conditions as punishment for their refusal. All of this occurs in defiance of the principle of a fair and impartial trial.

GROWING RESISTANCE

On October 20, 2022, Alfredo Cospito announced the start of his hunger strike against hostile life imprisonment and the 41-bis regime in Italy. Concurrently, the country was in the midst of a rather peculiar conjuncture, not only because we were only a few days away from the inauguration of the most right-wing government in the history of the Italian Republic since the end of World War II, but also because, in the previous three years, the country’s prisons had been the scene of unprecedented riots. In particular, in early March 2020, with the enforcement of “anti-COVID restrictions,” there were riots in all penitentiaries across the peninsula. The prolonged dilapidation of detention facilities, inadequate services, adoption of preventive health measures, and chronic overcrowding (an average overcrowding rate of Italian penitentiaries is estimated at 114 percent, with peaks of up to 194 percent) laid the kindling for the fire of rebellion inside Italy’s prisons. When family visits were suspended to limit the spread of the virus, this became the fuel that sparked the rioting fire. Prisoners were subjected to beatings in the wards, and there were collective refusals to return to cells from air time—a situation that quickly escalated to escape attempts and wings occupied with makeshift barricades erected in the corridors.

The state’s reaction was very violent, with subsequent raids resulting in the death of 13 prisoners by riot police and many punitive transfers. Dozens of testimonies told of indiscriminate beatings and retaliation against prisoners akin to torture, with people tied naked to beds and beaten for days. In one case, at the Santa Maria Capua Vetere Prison, surveillance camera footage was made public that fully corroborated the testimonies of prisoners’ families against police violence. The extent of the riots and the deaths of 13 people qualified as the most significant prison conflict in Western Europe since World War II, yet the concomitant spread of the pandemic distracted public attention. Violence by law enforcement agencies continued for months. It was mainly the entities that were already addressing the issue (associations, NGOs, lawyers, criminal chambers) and residents of working-class neighborhoods in large cities—where the rate of detention is highest—who carried on the struggle outside of prison.

Newspapers and mainstream media relegated the reporting of the riots to the search for alleged instigators or hidden handlers: against all logical principles, the media perpetuated that it was “criminal organizations” that inspired, organized, and exploited the riots. This falsehood was categorically denied even by the inspection commission appointed by the Department of Penitentiary Administration, but the mere evocation of Mafia influences is enough to take away legitimacy from the protests of prisoners and their families. In 2022, prisoners’ rights associations denounced the staggering increase of prison suicides with more than 80 people taking their own lives, in many cases afflicted with mental illnesses. The situation in Italian prisons was, and still is, very desperate. The material conditions of detention were—and continue to

Continues on next page

be—at the physical limits of durability, leading not only to the riots we have described, but also to more extensive denunciation campaigns than in the past. The newly installed government is expected to legislate on another of the emergency regulations introduced by the special anti-mafia laws: the “ostativity” of life imprisonment, or the regime that excludes the possibility of access to prison benefits.

It was at this particular juncture that Cospito’s struggle acquired a broader significance than his individual case, now challenging the entire functioning of the penal system. At an early stage, Cospito’s struggle remained confined to circles historically supportive of anarchist prisoners. Other prisoners joined Cospito in the hunger strike, and collectives of anti-prison activists staged protests and actions of different kinds, from occupations of iconic monuments to direct actions, from mobilizations at prisons and courts to leafleting and assemblies. Swelling the ranks of mobilizations are the very young and young at heart. Hundreds of meetings have been organized in schools and universities with Cospito’s lawyers and assembly activists in solidarity with his struggle. The focus of the movement is on the most perverse aspects of the detention regime: the ban on keeping photos of family members, the impossibility of seeing anything but concrete from one’s cell, the almost total isolation, and the cramped spaces in which this isolation takes place. Some universities have built mock cells of the same size as those that force prisoners into 41-bis so that people can see the conditions to which Cospito and others are subjected.

After the courts rejected an appeal filed aprioristically, protests not only continued, but also increased. In January 2023, Cospito’s health worsened to the point where the Ministry of Justice was forced to transfer him to a prison with a

hospital ward and admit him to intensive care. Universities in Rome and Milan were occupied, and parades of thousands marched in protest. In a Parliament session in early February 2023, the undersecretary of justice claimed to have wiretaps that would prove Cospito’s ties to mafia bosses. The government’s contention was that the struggle waged against 41-bis was being secretly led by “criminal” associations in order to get special legislation passed against rival cosche (mafia groups usually linked to a family). A strong media campaign began to paint Cospito as a “useful idiot” of the Mafia. In spite of this, protests rage on, and Cospito continued his strike through the spring. On the night of March 25-26, 2023, tobacco vending machines in various regions of Italy were tampered with through a cyber-attack, reducing the selling price of cigarettes to €0.10 per pack, and making the words “Out Alfredo from 41-bis” appear on the vending machine screens.

On April 19, Alfredo and his attorneys learned that the conviction holding him responsible for a demonstration action qualified as a “political massacre”—one of the most serious charges in the Italian legal system—for acts that he did not commit and that in no way could have resulted in deaths or injuries. This pronouncement represented the first step backward by the courts on his case. After nearly six months of struggle and severe debilitation, Cospito decided to end his hunger strike and continue the struggle in less extreme forms. For months, his demands were not given any dignity or heed. Although the ultimate goal of abolishing the 41-bis regime has not yet been achieved, Cospito’s struggle opened a public debate on these instruments of repression. For six months, every Italian newspaper included daily coverage of prison and detention.

Today, we are faced with a dangerous precedent against which it is necessary to reestablish the

truth. Not only inside prisons, but also—and especially—outside. Demonstrations, spontaneous protests, and strikes that challenge the exponential increase in poverty and injustice are often dismissed as mafia-style “criminal” conduct in order to undermine their legitimacy and replicability and sever the spread of these acts of solidarity at their roots. Therefore, questioning the 41-bis regime and the prison system should be first and foremost a call against social injustice. The use of “emergency legislation” and its expansion to encompass “crimes” to target anyone, particularly dissenters, has made evident the strengthening of the executive and judicial powers at the expense of parliamentary legislative power. It has exposed an idea of justice based on the use of force. Protests by prisoners and the activation of many activists, on the other hand, have strengthened organizing and established new committees against the prison system and 41-bis throughout the country. The goal of these committees is to keep focus on the issue of prison at all times, particularly on those regimes that are considered real torture: life imprisonment and 41-bis.

A conference on the issue will be held in Rome in the upcoming months, from which a campaign will proceed involving young people from schools and universities. Thus, we plan to support the struggles of prisoners inside prisons, involve family members and friends of imprisoned people, and remind everyone that there can be a world in which we wake up in the morning and are free from these urban structures of control and detention; a world without prisons is possible if we can also imagine a more equal world.

About the Authors: The *Rome Assembly Against Prison and Repression* was formed after mobilizations in support of Alfredo Cospito’s hunger strike. It aims to promote the debate against 41-bis and life imprisonment and to support anti-prison campaigns in general. ♦

FEATURES REFLECTION

Voices from Inside on Control Units

For Issue 40, *Critical Resistance* received numerous submissions from our imprisoned subscribers and comrades on their experiences with and perspectives on control units. For this issue’s feature reflection article, we share a compilation of some of these submissions. To submit content to be considered for printing in upcoming issues, **check out our Call for Content and submission guidelines on page 28.**

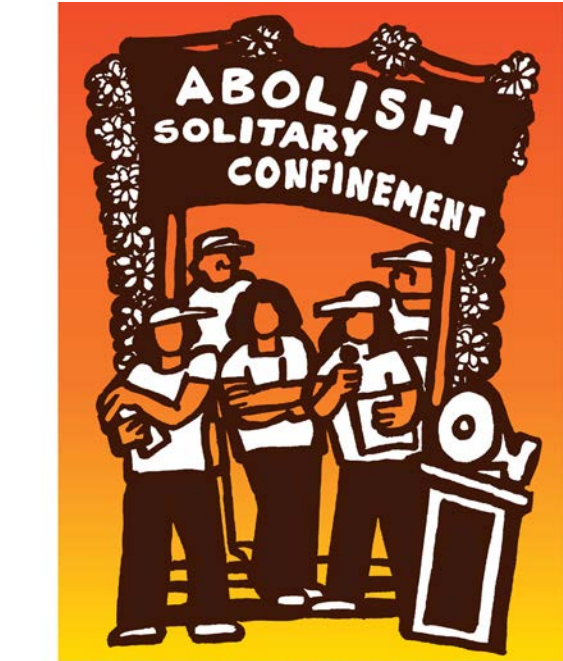
The Purpose of Control Units

By Kenjuan Congo

“The purpose of Marion Control Unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in the society at large.” - Ralph Arons

During my incarceration, which began when I was a juvenile, I spent time in “the hole,” “the Security Housing Unit (SHU),” and “the Mental Health Unit (MHU)” for extended periods at James T. Vaughn Correctional Center (JTVCC) in Smyrna, Delaware. My time spent in these units included an institutional charge and a prison uprising that led to my transfer out of state. Experts have presented physical and psychological evidence that legitimized what was previously dismissed as frivolous complaints by prisoners caged in these sections of prison. The political implications warrant scrutiny as well.

There are contradicting perspectives as to why control units are used. A paper from the criminal justice journal *Federal Probation* describes administrative segregation as “The isolation of a person who presents a continuous threat to the safety and security of incarcerated people, staff, or visitors.” Officially, administrative segregation differs from disciplinary segregation in that it is not considered punishment, but rather an administrative response to the prison’s purported inability to manage the prisoner by



ART BY RINI TEMPLETON -IN SOLIDARITY WITH PRISONERS WHO ARE STRUGGLING TO ABOLISH SOLITARY CONFINEMENT
By Rini Templeton and Melanie Cervantes, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative

normal means (*Adams v. Carlson*, 1973). Prison officials across the country tell the public that control units:

1. Contain the most violent prisoners, the so-called “worst of the worst,” whose behavior has proved to be too violent;
2. Reduce violence by isolating the most violent prisoners;
3. Reduce violence so the prison can operate.

On the other hand, the **Prison Discipline Study** initiated in 1989 by the **Prisoner Rights Union of Sacramento, CA** investigated which prisoners were most often disciplined and how (Prison Discipline Study, 1991). Some of the groups were described as “those with principles or intelligence,” “authors of truthful articles,” “verbally expressing... [their] opinion,” and “reporting conditions to people on the outside,” among many others. The study reveals that the practice

of sending prisoners to control units, which is “based on arbitrary and subjective judgement by prison officials,” will target prisoners who are most likely to challenge the prison system.

In addition, a 1984 report by consultants hired by a congressional oversight committee stated that 80 percent of the prisoners at Marion did not deserve that level of security (Breed and Ward, 1984). Political prisoners who have been in Marion include American Indian Movement leader Leonard Peltier; Sekou Odinga, member of the Black Liberation Army; Alan Berkman; Tim Blink; and Ray Leuasseuer—all of whom were sent directly to the control unit from court (*Can’t Jail the Spirit*, 1989; O’Keefe, 1991). This is in contradiction to the claim that control units are needed for prisoners who cannot be disciplined through normal means.

Prison officials tell the courts and public that these control units are for isolating dangerous prisoners who have proven to be too violent. The Prison Discipline Study (Breed and Ward, 1984), along with *Can’t Jail the Spirit*, offer analysis of which prisoners are sent to these units and why they are sent to them. By examining the facts and evidence, as opposed to simply taking the word of prison officials, one can conclude that control units are used to suppress political dissent.

-Kenjuan Congo Jr

About the Author: *Kenjuan Congo* is currently imprisoned at SCI Chester in Pennsylvania. He writes for a number of publications including *Prison Radio*. Email him at kjcongo@yahoo.com.

Greetings!

I recently read the Fall 2022 paper and was moved to write. Your paper has always given me much food for thought. Thank you for be-

Continues on next page

ing a light for us in the darkness. I first had the pleasure of reading about Critical Resistance through a zine while at the underground Special Housing Unit (SHU) in Florence, Colorado (aka ADX) in the 1990s. A revolutionary communist used to share his many zines, papers, and books with us. This was my introduction into progressive ideology.

As you are aware, isolation cells were/are specifically designed to break the rebellious and stunt the ideological growth of the revolutionary captive. Many of us succumb to the soul-breaking conditions and spiral into various reactionaryisms, mental health breakdowns, and fratricide. I also lost myself, and it took years to regain my bearings. However, what I will say is that SHU conditions forge diamonds! While simultaneously exposing cubic zirconia, those of us who embraced progressive ideology came up out of the ADX torture chamber with renewed vigor, purpose, and a sense of self! Many, including myself, put down their underdeveloped ideological precepts (i.e., “hood” or tribe mentalities, etc.), and embraced party, political, or revolutionary identity – bringing progress to many regressive federal gulags in the process.

Today I am imprisoned in Connecticut (CT) because the Oregon Department of Corrections did not want me in their system. Having been here for about four and half years now, I can honestly say the aforementioned SHU conditioning made these CT gulags tolerable. I thank you for all that you do, as it’s contributed to who I am: then and now! I stand firm... struggling.

In the spirit of GLJ

-Kamau

Write to Kamau at:
William Lamar Burrell
DOC #430383
Cheshire CI
900 Highland Ave
Cheshire CT 06410



By imprisoned artist, Michael Russell.

By James Anderson

Even though the entire world witnessed Republican Minority Leader Mitch McConnell “FREEZE” during two recently televised speeches, he more recently stated, “The media has reported things happened to me that really didn’t.” The message being: Believe what I SAY – not what your lying eyes are SEEING.

It is this exact type of idiotic rhetoric that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) attempts to convey to the public regarding solitary confinement (also known as “the hole”). Asked by Vice News journalist Keegan Hamilton about being re-housed to solitary confinement for a fraudulent and retaliatory disciplinary report, CDCR Press Secretary Dana Simas replied: “There is no such thing as

solitary confinement or ‘the hole’ in California.” *Did I spend 92 days in a hole that doesn’t exist?*

The corporate media very seldom informs the public of the innumerable FRAUDULENT disciplinary reports that prisoners receive, which allows CDCR to send prisoners to the hole “pending investigation.” This rationale – called “indeterminate SHU” or “AdSeg” (administrative segregation) – usually begins with a 30-90 day “property control” period, meaning that the prisoner is denied of all their personal property except for food and toiletry items.

While San Quentin State Prison is known for having some of the best educational and substance abuse programs in California – for its mainline prisoners – a recent decision by the Northern District Court (**Ashker v. Newsom**) allows CDCR to re-place prisoners in SHU “indefinitely.” This should serve as a reminder that politicians and judges are put in positions of power to serve the interests of the powerful, no matter how much evidence and documentation points to their guilt.

If you want to know what is really going down, you have to read independent publications like *The Abolitionist*, *San Francisco Bay View*, **Prison Legal News**, or PrisonWitness.org. For those truly interested in transforming the torturous conditions of solitary confinement, we need to educate ourselves not only about solitary, but about the whole prison system – and get involved with movements to resist the prison industrial complex (PIC) on both sides of the walls!

About the Author: *James P. Anderson, aka “the Doctor,” is a prisoner on death row in San Quentin State Prison in CA. He has worked with CR since our first conference in 1998. He encourages readers to check out the San Francisco Bay View (sfbayview.com) and Bruce Gagnon’s blog (space4peace.blogspot.com).*

“Manslaughter” of Transgender People in Texas

By Gulley Britney

Editors’ Note: *The following submission describes experiences of gender violence that may be triggering to readers. The author also uses some language that Critical Resistance (CR) does not. For CR, being an abolitionist organization means to make strategic choices about the language we use, to always challenge how the prison industrial complex (PIC) uses certain language to legitimize itself, and therefore to not use the PIC’s language or logic whenever possible, especially terms that perpetuate oppression or dehumanization. The author also refers to a transphobic slur guards often use, and we changed the spelling, substituting one letter with an *, to disrupt the harm of that particular term.*

Social hierarchy and domination begins in the prison system. As the carceral system expands, my life diminishes. Every time I blink my eyes, I feel the walls closing in on me. The effects of solitary confinement are playing tricks on me! I can’t separate reality from imagination. I can’t decipher what’s truth or hallucination.

I wake up daily to transphobic slurs and cold food, hoping today I get pictures in the mail. Any kind of pictures. Pictures that take me away mentally, emotionally, psychologically, forcing serenity and a sense of hope within me. As I daydream of that peace, my thoughts are interrupted. “Hey tr*nny, do you want some boxers? Too bad, here go some panties, freak!” one correctional officer yells into my cell, followed by the usual raucous laughing and banging on the door and bars.

I am used to this by now.

Although it still bothers me, I don’t let it show to my persecutors. I have more pressing matters

that need my attention. My testosterone injections are usually late. Several times I’ve gone a month without them. Medical staff claiming there was a shortage of medication, or no staff to pull me out my cell, or no needles. I’ve been given every excuse under the sun. When I ask why I haven’t had my T-injection in 4 weeks, I am yelled at and told to get out of prison so I can get my own injections.

I am used to this by now.

As I walk back to my cell, I walk slowly, enjoying the respite from the 24-hour lockdown in solitary confinement. Even though I have to endure the taunts and comments belittling my gender identity from the officers escorting me, I am glad to be free out of the 6x9 brick and steel dungeon. Even if it’s only for five minutes. All five of my senses are alert plus a sixth sense I’ve developed since being held captive in solitary confinement: my heightened awareness of the dangers surrounding me.

As we walk back to my cell there is a blind spot from the cameras. As we cross to the intersection and come face to face with that blind spot, my sixth sense tells me that danger is near. I am able to elude the first punch, which comes from the left. The second punch comes from behind and I’m able to step away with only being grazed. But the third, fourth, fifth, twentieth, thirtieth... I’m doomed.

Of course the attack took place where no cameras could see. I wake up in my 6x9 brick and steel dungeon cell on the floor. Face swollen, ribs aching as I try to sit up. Two of my fingers are possibly broken. Multiple abrasions and bruises across my body like I’ve been beat with hammer. I ask for medical treatment to no avail. I’ll have to self-remedy my wounds.

I am used to this by now.

All I can remember is walking back to my cell and one of the officers making a crude remark about me being transgender. The question was, “So what the hell are you?” I didn’t respond. I guess my silence triggered the attack. Now, I am using the cardboard off the paper tablet for a splint for my fingers. I wrap it with a piece of torn shirt – the torn shirt I was wearing during the attack. The shirt now is ruined, bloodied beyond cleansing. It appears as if a tiger mauled me. I wash my face, one eye swollen shut, the other half way shut but not as swollen. My ear is cut. My neck is sore. As I take inventory of my injuries, I realize there is nothing I can do but let the days pass and allow my body to heal on its own.

I am used to this by now.

Just another typical day in prison for me. I am F2M transgender (i.e. transitioned from female to male): An easy target, perfect prey for predators concealing themselves as correctional officers. Power is a destructive force and can be used for great evil.

In Texas prisons, correctional officers are nothing but bullies – bullies who taunt, ridicule, belittle, abuse, discriminate, harass, retaliate, dehumanize, and torture prisoners, especially transgender people. The greater the power they have, the more dangerous and abusive they become. The United Nations outlawed solitary confinement, deeming it cruel and unusual, yet Texas still utilizes this inhumane practice as punishment to infinity and beyond drastic measures. Texas also practices “convict leasing,” which is unpaid labor, forcing prisoners to work 12 or more hours a day. In the summers, when temperatures hit heat indexes of more than 110 degrees, 90 percent of the time, the correctional officers refuse to do water runs, which cause prisoners to get dehydrated, suffering from heat exhaustion and heat strokes. Texas refuses to put air conditioners inside the prisons for prisoners, even though it is court ordered after a class action suit won by prisoners who sued the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) for lack of respite options during the dire heat of summers in Texas prisons. In Texas, where mass incarceration has been never addressed by trans-

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phobic Republican Governor Abbott, who also refuses to initiate any type of prison reform, this is where transphobic carceral policies flourish.

Even though there are advocates and certain organizations that support prisoners and are pushing for positive changes – including the abolition of solitary confinement, the reduction of mass incarceration, the acknowledgement that prisoner lives matter, the acknowledgement that transgender lives matter, and many others – it is still to no avail. The Texas legislature is a Pandora’s box filled with conspiracies and a hatred for people of color, considering Texas prisons are filled over the capacity with mainly people of color and LGBTQIA. This is proof TDCJ is a monopoly for autocracy, racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

Lane Murray Unit is the epitome of tyranny and inhumanity in Gatesville, Texas, a city known for confederacy pride and white supremacy. Corruption is never addressed and staff members employed at Lane Murray Unit are never held accountable. Ombudsman complaints go uninvestigated. Grievances go unanswered and uninvestigated. And the few investigations that do transpire are frivolous and fallible. Transgender people are assaulted, raped, starved, and sexually harassed to no avail. Reports of these allegations are immediately met with retribution. Transgender people like myself are bullied, harassed, ridiculed, assaulted, and placed in solitary confinement for a prolonged amount of time for no probable cause. There is no justice. There is no policy. There is no professionalism. There are no virtues, no integrity. These entities of law are nonexistent at Lane Murray Unit. I fight for my life daily at Lane Murray Unit. Correctional officers are more dangerous than the prisoners,



abusing imprisoned people with every form and tactic of torture and oppression possible. Being Black or being transgender is a deathtrap in Lane Murray Unit. I’d have more luck trying to survive walking on the borders of Russia and Ukraine with a hand grenade at Crimea’s nuclear plant and setting myself on fire.

What point is there to throw a prisoner in solitary confinement for years other than to torture, incapacitate, subvert, and abuse? It is pure and simple manslaughter of prisoners. Where is the justice? So many questions with so few answers, all the while transgender people are being manslaughtered by the prison system.

I diligently fight for liberation, justice, and peace amid a callous, cruel, and inhuman army masquerading as correctional officers. Sir Winston Churchill once stated, “Victory at all costs, victory in spite of terror, victory however long and hard the road maybe; for without victory there is no survival.” With this engraved on my mind

and my heart penetrated with valor, I sustain. I will not lose hope or give up. In this fight I keep hope alive that these monsters will one day answer for their violations and transgressions and that justice will be served. That Texas will initiate prison abolitionist reform. That prisoners will be treated as humans, not as cows and pigs at a slaughterhouse. That the lives of the LGBTQIA community truly matter. And that the liberation of all political prisoners will come. Nelson Mandela once said, “It always seems impossible until it’s done.” Because of this, I believe that the fallacies of capitalism that have led restrictive growth economically and socially, causing tensions beyond a course of rectifying the problems of transphobia and transphobic violence in Texas prisons, will end.

About the Author: **Gulley Britney** is a F2M (female-to-male) transgender and political prisoner held captive in prolonged solitary confinement for 7 years and counting due to being a LGBTQIA* activist who exposes the corruption, abuse, transphobia, and oppression that exist in Texas prisons. Gulley Britney has been incarcerated since the age of 19. They are published in the San Francisco Bay View newspaper, Southern Cultures magazine, Evening Street Press & Review, Tacenda Literary Mag, (bleakhousepublishing.org), Texas Letters (texas-letters.org), and Prisons Foundation (safestreetsarts.info). They have crossed milestones as a survivor and aspiring writer.

Write to Gulley at:
Gulley Britney #1601283
Lane Murray Unit
1916 N.Hwy’ 36 Bypass
Gatesville Tx 76596
Email @ SECURUS ♦

FEATURES ACTION

Gender Congruent Cages Do Not Keep Trans People Safe

By Jen Orthwein

Over the years, I have slowly come to understand that prison abolition is a goal of queer liberation and queer liberation is an abolitionist goal. Putting that understanding into practice has been a challenge filled with immense trauma and grief. In navigating the intersection between police-and-prison abolition and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus (LGBTQ+) civil rights, my comrades and I have tried to balance increasing the safety, particularly of transgender women of color in prisons and jails, with the movement to dismantle policing and imprisonment. We know prisons are not safe, and never will be safe for transgender, TwoSpirited, non-binary, gender-variant, intersex (“T2SNBGVI+” or “queer” or “trans” or “transgender”) people. However, in the 2010s the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement had created the regulatory scaffolding and political will to allow transgender women to move to prisons designated for women, providing the illusion of a safer alternative. The LGBTQ+ civil rights train was about to smash through the sexist, heteropatriarchal, ableist, anti-Black carceral system.

Prisons are a much more violent microcosm of our larger society. Bigotries and “isms” that exist on the outside are magnified exponentially in prison. It is precisely these factors that drive targeted groups into prison in the first place. Societal contempt for T2SNBGVI+ people, due to the ways we disrupt the gender binary leads to social exclusion, which forces many T2SNBGVI+ people to engage in acts of survival. By design, this thrusts T2SNBGVI+ people into carceral systems. Once in prisons and jails, T2SNBGVI+ people are targeted from all directions, resulting in further exclusion in the form of unconscionable amounts of time in control units and isolation. Control units serve to isolate and punish those who disrupt prison systems. T2SNBGVI+ people’s mere existence within a sex-segregated system disrupts the prison system.

“Administrators were using psychologists’ findings on these measures as evidence imprisoned people were misusing mental health to escape punitive conditions. With this purported evidence they were able to justify forcing people back to the Secure Housing Unit (SHU) or administrative segregation; the very conditions that were causing them to mentally decompensate in the first place.”

I began my career in community mental health in San Francisco in the late ‘90s. Most of my clients were queer and living with HIV. Most of the coordinated advocacy for queer folks with which I was involved at the time aimed to increase funding for housing and treatment for HIV, not the hyper surveillance and policing that disrupted both. I quickly learned the biggest barrier to housing and health care for my clients was their repeated incarcerations. By 2001, I read **Terry Kupers’** book, *Prison Madness: The Mental Health Crisis Behind Bars and What We Must Do About It*. Given what I was witnessing in community mental health, I felt compelled to learn more and identify ways to address this crisis, so I went back to school.

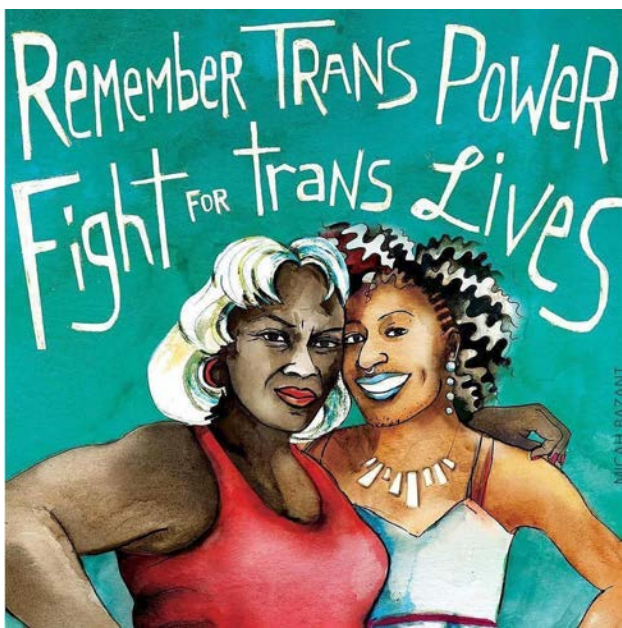
I met **Professor Phillip Zimbardo**, the author of the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, during the 2003 scandal surrounding prisoner treatment at the Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib, which mirrored the violent actions of the prison guards in his experiment in disturbing ways. Dr. Zimbardo

and his colleagues hypothesized that people are not so much inherently “evil,” but we will commit heinous acts if encouraged to do so by systems that enable or encourage them. Their findings supported this hypothesis in disturbing ways. Although his work is irreplicable due to its unethical methodology, the experiment’s findings are borne out in the realities hidden behind prison and jail walls every day.

As a psychologist within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCr), I experienced and witnessed the Stanford Prison Experiment in reality. I, unsurprisingly, became a tool in the state’s perpetration of heteropatriarchal, anti-Black violence. Instead of providing mental health care, I was repeatedly pressured to conduct **“malinger” assessments**, a psychological term used to describe the exaggeration or feigning of an illness for secondary gain, such as escape. Administrators were using psychologists’ findings on these measures as evidence imprisoned people were misusing mental health to escape punitive conditions. With this purported evidence they were able to justify forcing people back to the Secure Housing Unit (SHU) or administrative segregation; the very conditions that were causing them to mentally decompensate in the first place. I resisted these directives because malingering assessment measures are not validated for the purposes prison administrators use them. Many of the people I was directed to assess for malingering were T2SNBGVI+ people. In conjunction with the panoply of symptoms many were experiencing due to traumatic events and solitary confinement, all were also suffering from severe gender dysphoria due to being treated as though they were men. Gender dysphoria, exacerbated by the conditions of their confinement, could, and did lead to serious and grave consequences, including self-harm and suicide.

To address some of the extreme violence and mental health consequences caused by the conditions T2SNBGVI+ people faced in prison, I drafted an administrative directive (AD). The AD included recommendations for which LGBTQ+ civil rights advocates were advocating in San Francisco jails. Many of the recommendations became requirements under the **Prison**

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Art by Micah Bazant for Transgender, Gender-Variant & Intersex Justice Project (TGIIJP).

Rape Elimination Act (PREA). The AD had the full support of the Psychology and Social Work departments. Nonetheless, the administration rejected it. I was then targeted for termination. After receiving two Letters of Instruction for alleged “overfamiliarity” with transgender patients with whom I was assigned to assess, I resigned. Working in prison had changed me in unhealthy ways. It made me a cynical person. I no longer believed mental health care could be provided in prisons or jails.

In 2013, I began volunteering as an attorney with **Transgender Law Center**. There, I worked in coalition with advocates rooted in principles of prison abolition. We formed the **Transgender Advocacy Group (TAG)**, which consisted of organizations and people inside and outside of prison. We developed abolition-oriented guiding principles to advocate on behalf of imprisoned T2SNBGVI+ people in California. Many of our members were heavily involved with the **No New SF Jail coalition** with Critical Resistance, which aimed to close the main jail in San Francisco and prevent the creation of new jails to replace it. Our coalition’s initial efforts focused on exposing and addressing the conditions for transgender people in San Francisco’s jails.

We had also reached what *Time Magazine*, with **Laverne Cox** on the cover, coined the “Transgender Tipping Point.” Laverne Cox’s character in *Orange Is the New Black*, **Sophia Burset**, was caged in a women’s facility, providing an inaccurate depiction of almost all transgender women’s experiences behind bars. After the first couple seasons, there seemed to be a belief among the public that transgender women lived, relatively comfortably and amicably, with other women in prison. The inaccuracy of this popular depiction of trans experience led to a public education campaign about the actual realities for transgender people in prison, and the factors that lead them there in the first place. It wasn’t until Season 4 that Sophia was placed in the SHU in retaliation for attempting to speak to the media about the anti-trans violence perpetrated against her. In this way, *Orange Is the New Black* was able to illustrate that Sophia’s safety was not contingent on her being in a facility with other women. However, by then, there was the political will and belief that to address the safety of trans women in prison, the system needed to allow some to transfer to facilities consistent with their gender identity.

Addressing transgender people’s placement in prison and jails was not a new issue, and options other than gender congruent placements had been in practice. In 1985, a judge ordered a segregated unit for gay and transgender prisoners as part of a settlement in a lawsuit filed by the **ACLU** against the Los Angeles County jail. Although touted as a success in many academic and legal circles, queer scholars such as **Professor Russell Robinson** and **Dean Spade** criticized this approach. They exposed how the racialized, gendered, and classed construction of homosexuality, and the figure of the vulnerable gay prisoner, are produced and enforced in the Los Angeles County Jail to the detriment of queer and trans people of color and poor people

who bear the brunt of racist, homophobic, and transphobic policing and criminalization.

In 2015, the SF Sheriff’s Department was placing transgender women in a segregated 12-person cell insider the men’s facility called the “SRX” cell. The cell was located at the back of the facility. To get to their cell, transgender women had to be paraded by other imprisoned people who would shout transphobic, homophobic, and sexually charged statements when they entered or exited the SRX cell. People designated “SRX” had no access to programming. The No New SF Jail Coalition was successful at closing the main jail. It was an election year, and the sheriff used the closure and transfer of transgender and gay people out of the main jail and, therefore, the SRX cell, to announce the Department “may” cage transgender people consistent with their gender identity. Instead, he transferred them to a men’s pod where they were fully visible 24/7 to the men also caged in that pod.

During this period, other cities in California were being exposed for similar treatment toward T2SNBGVI+ people. In a 2014 lawsuit, the ACLU cited years of abuse against T2SNBGVI+ people in San Bernardino County Jail, who were generally locked in their cells 23-hours per day. According to court records, about 600 people were caged in the **Alternative Lifestyle Tank** between 2012 and 2018. In 2018, instead of advocating for reform, the ACLU forced San Bernardino to shut down its “Alternative Lifestyle Tank” completely. Influenced by the abolition organizing around Los Angeles County Jail, access to release-preparation programs and compensation for those who were subjected to the unit were the priorities of the settlement.

Research shows transgender people suffer acutely due to high rates of physical and sexual violence, discrimination, retaliation, and frequent denial of gender-affirming mental and physical health care in prisons and jails. Prison conditions create precarious and violent conditions for transgender women. A 2008 study out of UC Irvine illuminated transgender women in California men’s prisons were 13 times more likely to be sexually assaulted. National statistics reveal transgender people in prisons and jails are over five times more likely than the general population to be sexually assaulted by facility staff and over nine times more likely to be assaulted by other prisoners. When T2SNBGVI+ people report fears for their safety or actual physical and sexual assaults, they are subjected to coercion, retaliation, and intimidation in multiple forms.

“To escape the pressure and abuses experienced on the mainline, “safety” for many transgender people means isolation, even though people are not actually safe in isolation. Solitary confinement brings on a panoply of severe and debilitating mental health symptoms. A T2SNBGVI+ person’s vulnerability to staff abuse, discrimination, and the culture of “divide and conquer” that maintains control in prison invariably breaks any protective relationships T2SNBGVI+ people form there.”

In 2016, Transgender Law Center represented **Athena Cadence**, a Black transgender woman who had been in the SRX cell. Athena had been subjected to multiple placements in segregation in retaliation for filing grievances. Now that she and other transgender women were out of the SRX cell they had more “freedom”. However, they were relegated to a section of a men’s pod and still forbidden from participating in programming. During the last two months of her year-long imprisonment in the county jail,

Athena protested by engaging in a hunger strike. She asserted only one demand: Transgender women be placed in the unit designated for women. Athena’s strike came in the wake of several failed attempts to get help after filing complaints through the jail’s normal procedure. “I didn’t feel like I had anything to lose,” Athena explained. “The more I tried to stop it, the worse it got.” Athena felt strongly she had an obligation to fight for the freedom to exist authentically. “There is no freedom for me, until there is freedom for all of us,” said Athena. “And if I — if we don’t do anything about it, then who will? This won’t end until we end it.” Athena was never moved to a unit with cisgender women, but the risks she took through her civil disobedience exposed the conditions for transgender women inside the SF jail. This pressured the new San Francisco Sheriff to finally create written policies that should have allowed transgender women to be caged in units designated for women.

In 2020, I began representing **Ms. Lyn Rawles**, a 54-year-old Black transgender woman, on claims of civil rights violations, inclusive of a sexual battery at the hands of SF sheriff’s deputies. Her treatment mirrored that of the prisoner participants in the Stanford Prison Experiment and actual prisoners in Abu Ghraib. It was also clear the written policies for which Athena and community organizers had fought so hard were not implemented. During booking, Ms. Lyn was interrogated about her genitalia. When she asserted, “I am a woman”, she was escorted to a “safety” cell where she was forcibly stripped and sexually assaulted by five deputies while another eight stood outside and watched. After being left overnight in the “safety” cell, which had no bed, Ms. Lyn was placed in a double cell with a man. She attempted suicide and was subsequently placed in another “safety” cell until her release. She was never charged with a crime, but she is now among the staggering forty-seven percent of Black transgender people in the US. who have been imprisoned at some point in their life. In conjunction with TAG coalition members, we advocated for processes that would prioritize the quick release of transgender people from custody and compensation for Ms. Lyn for the torture she experienced inside the jail. We were no longer interested in pushing written policies we knew the Sheriff’s Department would never implement.

Transgender women in men’s prison are particularly vulnerable to becoming commodities in underground economies on the mainlines, through sex work, trafficking and coercive protective sexual relationships. To escape the pressure and abuses experienced on the mainline, “safety” for many transgender people means isolation, even though people are not actually safe in isolation. Solitary confinement brings on a panoply of severe and debilitating mental health symptoms. A T2SNBGVI+ person’s vulnerability to staff abuse, discrimination, and the culture of “divide and conquer” that maintains control in prison invariably breaks any protective relationships T2SNBGVI+ people form there. Through “adverse transfers”, “enemy concerns”, and “threats to management and security”, individuals are forced back into isolation and the irreparable harm that comes with it.

The **United Nations** condemns long-term solitary confinement as torture, yet it is too common for US prisons to isolate transgender people. Research shows that deprived of a sufficient level of social stimulation, individuals soon become incapable of maintaining an adequate state of alertness and attention to their environment. Even a few days of solitary confinement will shift an individual’s brain activity towards an abnormal pattern characteristic of stupor and delirium. **Black and Pink National’s Coming Out of Concrete Closets report** found that 85 percent of detained LGBTQ+ people and people living with HIV had been in solitary confinement at some point during their sentence; approximately half had spent 2 or more years there. Altogether, respondents had spent a total of 5,110 years in solitary confinement.

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As I had witnessed during my tenure within CDCr, many transgender people frequently cycle in and out of acute psychiatric units, psychiatric segregation units and mental health crisis beds to escape dangerous conditions or to receive mental health treatment for symptoms associated with long-term isolation. In psychiatric control and isolation units, people are stripped of their clothes and property, including gender affirming items. They are also prohibited from using razors, which causes transgender women significant distress. Supportive providers are constrained by CDCr rules and regulations or retaliated against, unable to provide the affirming care, trauma treatment or resources T2SNBGVI+ people often need.

Over the years, TAG coalition members have aligned with broader organizing efforts to end the practice of solitary confinement all together in California. By building with people inside California prisons, TAG has aimed to listen to, and lift the voices of imprisoned T2SNBGVI+ people and raise broader awareness of the violence toward transgender people inside and their relegation to isolation within these systems. Some of the ways we have done this is through clemency and criminal defense advocacy, public online petitions, telephone and letter-writing campaigns to targeted stakeholders, individual advocacy at the institutional level, research support. As attorneys, we have tried to be creative and bring what limited lawsuits we have capacity to bring to raise awareness about the realities T2SNBGVI+ people face inside prisons. The legal landscape for imprisoned people is dismal due **the Prison Litigation Reform Act** though, and decades of unrepresented imprisoned litigants has led to legal precedents that form insurmountable obstacles to hold prison officials accountable or change their culture. That is a subject for another article, but relevant to the reality that we have legislated our way out of any means to address these abuses through the courts.

In 2019, with the political will to address the conditions of T2SNBGVI+ people in prison, we formed a coalition of predominantly abolition oriented, LGBTQ+ civil rights attorneys and activists, including members of TAG, **Lambda Legal**, **ACLU**, **TransLatin@ Coalition**, **California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP)**, **Transgender, Gender Variant, Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP)**, Transgender Law Center and formerly imprisoned transgender people. We drafted **Senate Bill 132**, the **Transgender Respect, Agency and Dignity Act**, which aimed to give transgender, nonbinary and intersex (TNI) people more agency to seek safety through access to gender congruent cages. We knew full well that there was no policy we could create to actually keep people safe inside prison.

CDCr threatened and had the power to quash the bill in Appropriations, which forced us to make compromises, including removing an oversight or accountability mechanism, and allowing for the addition of “a management and security” override. We thought that by including limitations on the reasons CDCr could deny a TNI person’s housing preference that the override would be difficult for CDCr to lawfully apply. Although that has appeared to be true, we still ended up with a bill that gave the illusion of agency for TNI people with no oversight or accountability to ensure the bill was properly implemented. Initially, CDCr seemed to comply with the new mandate by transferring about twenty-six transgender women to facilities designated for women in early 2021, but they did so in ways that outed them all. They assigned them unique numbers and placed them in Reception without access to razors, so they were forced to grow beards. Staff also incited fear of the transferees by spreading rumors that violent men were being transferred to the women’s facilities. National anti-trans organizations, such as the Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF), capitalized on the fears spread by CDCr staff by organizing inside the women’s prisons and filing a lawsuit to challenge SB 132.

Of those who initially transferred were two Black transgender women I was representing on claims that arose while they were caged in



Art by Micah Bazant for Familia Trans Queer Liberation Movement and Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

men’s facilities. One, **Ms. S**, had spent most of her time imprisoned in isolation due to retaliation, as well as sexual and physical assaults in facilities designated for men. She had previously been subjected to isolation in the “Alternative Lifestyle Tank” of the San Bernardino jail as well. The other, **Ms. L**, had been violently attacked in a men’s prison by her cellmate. Both were among the few TNI people initially transferred to a women’s facility. Once there, they were immediately targeted for segregation and isolation.

In May 2022, after having spent nearly a year in isolation on an allegation she had consensual sex, Ms. S was falsely accused of raping another imprisoned woman. These false allegations made it into national conservative media outlets and declarations submitted in litigation challenging SB 132. We were contacted by the alleged victim and were able to obtain a declaration stating Ms. S did not rape her; however, rumors spread quickly, and Ms. S. was attacked by about 10 people on May 20, 2022. The group was given access to Ms. S. by custody staff. Ms. S has remained in isolation ever since May 20, 2022, while the group members who attacked her remained in general population. In the summer of 2022, Ms. S rammed her head into the cell door, knocking herself completely unconscious. She was subsequently forced to take toxic levels of psychiatric medications without due process. The medications completely debilitated her, and I spent August preparing and arguing in front of an Administrative Law Judge to have her removed from the involuntary medications. We were granted relief due to CDCr’s due process violations and a determination that Ms. S’s symptoms were due to the conditions of her confinement, not an underlying mental health disorder.

Since transferring to a women’s prison in 2021, Ms. L. and Ms. S. have spent a combined total of 4 ½ years in isolation. They are in indefinite isolation because they purportedly pose a “threat to the security and management of the institution” due to “enemy concerns.” The warden has endorsed them both back to men’s facilities citing unfounded allegations that they are both predators. Ms. S. and Ms. L. remain in isolation waiting to be returned to a men’s prison.

Since June 2021, very few TNI people have transferred to gender congruent facilities. The few who did appear to be represented by civil rights attorneys in suits against CDCr employees, which begs the question: *Is their treatment after transfer retaliatory?* CDCr freely provides information regarding SB 132 through a FAQ on their website. As of May 29, 2023, 353 TNI people had requested to be transferred to facilities designated for women. Fifty-one were approved, 24

denied and 39 allegedly changed their minds, leaving approximately 239 people still waiting responses. Given the realities faced by those who have transferred, it is unsurprising significant numbers of TNI people have changed their minds.

A public records’ request also revealed significant racial disparities in how requests are being processed and granted. Approximately 72% of transfer requests have been made by Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) while 24% have been made by white people. However, from February 2021 to August 2022, approximately 6% of BIPOC and 20% of white people were granted a transfer. These disparities have only increased since 2022. Further, approximately two-thirds of the white people who have transferred under SB 132 were transferred to a lower security facility, while more than two-thirds of BIPOC TNI people remain at the highest security facility for women. The same public records act request also revealed that TNI people who transferred under SB 132 were not committing violent acts within the women’s facilities.

Through SB 132, we intended to allow T2SNBGVI+ people the agency to seek safety without isolation. We wanted them to have to access rehabilitative opportunities (e.g., programming, education, work, mental health services) so that they could have the same opportunities for earlier release as their cisgender peers. We also wanted to ensure they had the ability to mitigate their own gender dysphoria by choosing to live in gender congruent facilities. Instead, as they have done repeatedly throughout history with laws intended to improve conditions inside prison, CDCr officials limited the gains from SB 132 and then used age-old divide and conquer tactics to attempt to prevent TNI people from building solidarity and relationships in women’s facilities. Implementation failures have served to expand the abuse of T2SNBGVI+ people inside and exposed gross racial disparities in CDCr’s practices. Although we knew legislation to allow for T2SNBGVI+ people to access gender congruent cages would not keep them safe, we had hoped the bill would be implemented and result in safer and healthier conditions for T2SNBGVI+ people. To date, the conditions appear to have gotten worse, particularly for Black transgender women. We will continue to shine a light on the realities imprisoned transgender and queer people face inside despite the passage of SB 132.

“We wanted them to have to access rehabilitative opportunities (e.g., programming, education, work, mental health services) so that they could have the same opportunities for earlier release as their cisgender peers. We also wanted to ensure they had the ability to mitigate their own gender dysphoria by choosing to live in gender congruent facilities.”

Given the failures of SB 132, our coalition has re-oriented our efforts away from conditions work toward liberating queer and trans people from prisons and jails, as well as expanded our efforts to connect with broader movements for liberation. Coalition organizations, led by trans women of color, have increased their access to resources to support diversion and reentry by passing legislation to create the **Transgender Wellness and Equity Fund**. The fund was allocated \$13 million dollars in 2021. It provides transgender, gender non-conforming, and intersex (TGI) people across California with resources, including mental health programs, culture-based programs, medical services, and supportive housing assistance. LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations such as Black and Pink, TGIJP, CCWP and TransLatin@ Coalition continue to expand their connections with individuals in-

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side and advocate for their release. They also provide opportunities for volunteers to connect with and support these efforts in a variety of ways. Connecting and supporting organizations led by T2SNBGVI+ people, particularly T2SNBGVI+ people of color, is an invaluable way to support this work.

It is through organizing like this - work that connects our people to resources, each other and

FEATURES ACTION

Resisting Torture: Refusing to Surrender

With Marie Levin and “Comrade Pops” by Molly Porzig

Editors’ Note: Critical Resistance (CR)’s National Communications Manager, Molly Porzig, wrote the following article based on two conversations for The Abolitionist: with **Marie Levin**, the sister of a leading control unit prisoner; and **“Comrade Pops,” an alias for an imprisoned comrade of Marie’s brother** and participant in the 2011 and 2013 actions discussed. Molly was a lead organizer of the media team on behalf of CR that supported the action referenced throughout the article. Marie and Comrade Pops’ contributions are italicized to be more identifiable. Some names and details have been omitted or made implicit to aid this issue passing through prison censorship.

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

-Comrade Pops

Resisting solitary confinement in the 2020’s versus ten years ago has shifted drastically, largely due to the sacrifice of imprisoned people in a control unit called the Short Corridor in Pelican Bay State Prison. In 2011 and 2013, California prisoners known as the Short Corridor Collective (SCC) united across prison-manufactured racial divisions and started waves of hunger strikes (HS) that rocked the US prison system for years, sweeping across the entire state from the Security Housing Unit (SHU) in Pelican Bay, through the Administrative Segregation (Ad-Seg) into the state’s jails, prisons, and detention centers. While the first two 2011 rounds peaked at nearly 7,000 participants statewide, 2013’s reconvened action surpassed 30,000 prisoners, making it the largest action of its kind in US prison history. Requested by the SCC, Critical Resistance (CR) formed a new statewide coalition with movement partners called Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity (PHSS) to support the action and SCC’s demands. Together, this cross-wall organizing forever changed the landscape of resisting imprisonment in the state and globally.

A COALITION & SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN

Some SCC members attempted similar actions in the early 2000s, but were unable to get out word due to the tight censorship characteristic of control units. This time they knew connection to outside organizations was essential in raising their demands to effectively pressure prison administrators. In conditions that sow dissension between racial groups, the SCC intentionally forged cross-racial unity in their struggle, drawing representatives from all four major racial or ethnic groups in the state’s control units: white prisoners, Black prisoners, and Southern and Northern Latinxs. PHSS supported the SCC, who shaped demands and determined the direction of the fight with restricted communication. Any goals, strategies, tactics, plans, and decisions made by the coalition was done to further the SCC’s action in an effort to achieve their five core demands, which were:

1. End group punishment & administrative abuse

liberation efforts that we see the future of our collective work and more potential for freedom for T2SNBGVI+ people across the state and beyond.

Author Bio: Jen Orthwein is a queer, trans masculine, white, psychologist and attorney. For the last twenty-five years, they have advocated for their queer community, first as a community mental

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

A core HS participant, **Comrade Pops** situates these five demands rooted in a broader political vision: *“As always, our goal was and still is to reach the people. We are up against the mass psychology of the police state. Our overall objective is not to reform the prison industrial complex (PIC); but to create a different way of doing restorative justice. There can never be true justice when we live in a punitive society. Struggle takes on different forms. Our ultimate goal was towards abolitionist horizons, an ongoing call for the dismantling of all repressive institutions.”*

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

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

CR established a workgroup structure for PHSS comprising a **three-prong strategy—legal / legislative, media, and grassroots mobilization / outreach**. The legal strategy was two-fold: a team of former prisoners and lawyers led the mediation between the SCC, the prison administration and the DOC, while the coalition put pressure on state legislators to force the DOC to make structural changes concerning solitary confinement. The **media** organizing was also two-fold: **shifting the terrain of struggle by generating press coverage and controlling the narrative of the action**, while **creating our own grassroots media** to encourage people to match SCC’s courage in action to win the five core demands. **Outreach** worked with the media organizers to **mobilize the grassroots far**

health provider, then as a psychologist working in California’s systems of confinement, and now as a practicing civil rights attorney and forensic psychologist. They currently organize alongside and build with imprisoned queer and trans people, civil rights activists, and community advocates to mitigate the harm caused by penal systems, dismantle systems of confinement, and direct resources toward community care.♦



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

and wide in support of the HS: connecting with organizations, advocates, former prisoners and SHU survivors, family members of HS participants, youth, healthcare professionals, faith-based communities, mobilizing everyone to the state capitol to speak at legislative hearings and press conferences, and to plan local community events, rallies, political education teach-ins, workshops with gang-affected communities, banner drops, film screenings, and more. **Rather than any prong outweighing another, CR’s approach positions each prong to reinforce and propel one another in tandem.** In 2011, CR helped lead all three strategies; in 2013, CR carried only media. Both years, **CR had four main overarching goals** in joining PHSS:

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

SHIFTING THE TERRAIN OF STRUGGLE

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

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

“The PIC has ‘created a narrative that we were monsters without any redeemable qualities, therefore all of the physical and psychological harm meted out by the prisoncrats we deserved. All legal protections like due process were thrown out the window. The writing on the wall with the prisoncrat policy was that in order to gain some relief, either you die, or snitch and parole.’”

When the first action began on July 1, 2011, PHSS knew it had spread widely throughout the prison, despite the department of corrections (DOC) and prison administration insisting roughly a dozen prisoners refused food. Speaking to *The LA Times*, CR pressured a reporter to do his job and not get off the phone with the DOC until they gave him an exact count of meals refused – forcing the DOC to confirm not one dozen but over 1,000 prisoners participating. Our media strategy also coerced the DOC to admit that some 3,000 people were caged in long term solitary confinement, a fact they had long kept secret. With this, we broke the press silence in broadcasting control unit conditions, stirring the media frenzy needed to herald the SCC’s five core demands to an international stage.

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

PHSS’s grassroots media was also robust, involving a website with daily posts & insider updates, as well as short video interviews and statements from family members and former prisoners who survived solitary confinement. The website was an essential tool for mobilizing local, national and even international support, including activating healthcare workers to write a solidarity statement & submit testimony of solitary as torture, drawing the attention of the **United Nations** and **Amnesty International**. This enabled allies in Bolivia, Colombia, Palestine, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to organize solidarity tactics including banner drops, rallies and speak outs. International allies circulated joint statements challenging the proliferation of solitary confinement globally and criticizing



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

the US’s PIC as a model for control units around the world.

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

FAMILIES FIGHT BACK

To connect with more prisoners’ families, we reached out to partner organizations who supported prisoners’ families, visited prisoners, or provided services in different prisons. We carved out creative ways for sharing the news without calling it exactly what it was including in *The Abolitionist* newspaper. By its third week, the action spread from one of the most remote prisons in the northernmost state border 850 miles south to the state’s southernmost prisons and jails. *“We owe a great deal to the thousands of imprisoned men across the state that supported us. In that support lies our power to affect change. It was the men in the general population who stood in solidarity—their courage and sacrifices, their steadfastness in numbers that gave us voice”* (Comrade Pops). This mass of prisoners united in struggle and shared voice would not have been possible without the countless family members fighting for their loved ones, risking family visits to spread word however they could.

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

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

Like many PHSS and CFASC organizers, Marie often spoke about the multi-layered separation their families experienced due to their loved one’s imprisonment and isolation. Marie explains that Sitawa’s imprisonment harmed their family not only because he was in solitary for so long, but also due to the extreme distance to

visit the prison—nearly 400 miles (and twice as far for families in the south). **The DOC doesn’t have “any care in the world about separating families”**; in fact, **family separation is one DOC strategy of repression to further isolate prisoners**. Marie explains her brother’s imprisonment impacted their mother:

“My mother’s health declined with dementia; she was so hurt the DOC was not allowing my brother to come home, and she had gotten to a place where reading his letters was too painful. I remember giving her a letter from my brother once and she flicked it away from me. ‘I don’t want that letter.’ She discouraged me from trying to take my boys to see [Sitawa], because she thought the pain would be unbearable. Her doctor told me unhealed trauma causes dementia. It was traumatic for my mother’s only son to be taken from her and never given back. It was traumatic only being able to visit him once a year, to not being able to talk to him on the phone. My brother’s continued isolation and imprisonment has left a deadly stain on all of our hearts.”

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

In 2019, after being transferred again, Sitawa had a stroke at the age of 61 and was taken to the hospital. Marie and their family were told that he would not be able to speak, not be able to identify objects, or move his limbs. *“They counted him out for dead,”* says Marie. *“They were ready to issue a compassionate release, but I knew that at some point they could send him back to prison.”* A couple days later they sent him to a San Diego facility with no notification. *“I was distraught and they wouldn’t give me any information—all they said was he wasn’t there anymore,”* Marie recalls. Prior to his first stroke, Sitawa already had high blood pressure and thyroid problems. While imprisoned, he also developed diabetes. Marie connects her brother’s ongoing health problems to his imprisonment and the many years he endured being tortured in solitary: **“They allow so much processed foods and venders, it’s no surprise one of the five core demands was adequate food. Too many prisoners develop severe medical issues due to their confined diets.”**

In 2020, Sitawa had another stroke and was placed on medical parole in a facility in Stockton. Finally, he has been able to get some care and physical therapy to recover after multiple strokes. He can now move his legs on a stationary bike and is speaking again. Marie continues to be a spokesperson for her brother and other imprisoned people with CFASC and Essie Justice Group.

VICTORY, SETBACKS, AND DIALECTICS: THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

9971: Abolition Now: Reform Will Never Stop Torture

By Stevie Wilson

Ten years ago, solitary confinement, especially its long-term and indefinite use, was a cause célèbre. The mainstream media was brimming with books, essays, and articles denouncing it. *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, and *The New Yorker* ran exposés on its deleterious effects. Panels, hearings and studies were convened on its harmful impact. The 2011 and 2013 prisoner-led hunger strikes in California and the ensuing media coverage pressured prison officials across the US to reevaluate their use. Even the United Nations chimed in. The consensus was that solitary confinement, especially for more than fifteen days, was torture. It had to be done away with.

Prison officials in Pennsylvania (PA), where I am caged, faced an acute problem. Not only was public opinion growing against solitary confinement, but **the Department of Justice was investigating** substantiated allegations of abuse of imprisoned people who had been placed in solitary confinement. PA prisons officials were under the gun and we had real leverage. **We could have demanded the impossible.** What happened next demonstrates how reforms not only deradicalize and demobilize, but how they also inevitably expand state power and create more ways for the state to harm people.

Our initial demands were to end solitary confinement; it is torture, and no one deserves to be tortured. When liberal reformers became involved, the demands changed. And not because imprisoned people wanted them to. The reformers, being “free” and having media access, were able to hijack the campaign and substitute their own demands. And those solutions were palatable to the state.

First, the **reformers shrunk our demands.** The demand was no longer to end the use of control units and they said solitary confinement wasn’t even considered torture anymore. The new demand became for the state to be more selective regarding whom it placed in control units. Second, the reformers dichotomized the prison population into “deserving” and “undeserving” of placement in control units. If solitary confinement is torture, then no one deserves to be there which is why reformers stopped saying solitary



Photo of Robert King, former political prisoner (part of the Angola 3) and former member of the Black Panther Party, protesting solitary confinement in Pennsylvania in 2012. When imprisoned, King was tortured for 29 years in solitary confinement. Photo by Joseph Piette, courtesy of *Workers' World*.

confinement is torture. They were actually arguing that it is okay to keep certain imprisoned people there.

“When liberal reformers became involved, the demands changed. And not because imprisoned people wanted them to. The reformers, being “free” and having media access, were able to hijack the campaign and substitute their own demands. And those solutions were palatable to the state.”

The **reformers suggested carve outs.** Juveniles, pregnant women, and imprisoned people with mental health challenges would be spared torture in control units. Everyone else was fair game. PA prison officials embraced these carve outs and signed an agreement with the DOJ. This agreement shifted the burden of control units from certain groups of imprisoned people to other groups. *Is that progress?* The newly protected classes could not be held in solitary confinement for more than thirteen days but everyone else is still subjected to long-term and indefinite solitary confinement. Not one bed that was dedicated to solitary confinement was eliminated. And as long as the beds are there, the state will fill them.

It didn’t end there. **The state has created an alphabet of “special programs” that cage people in control units for long periods of time.** In addition to the regular hole, the RHU (restricted housing unit), PA now has the SMU (special management unit), the SRTU (secure restricted treatment unit), the LTSU (long term solitary unit), the BMU (behavior modification unit), the STGU (security threat group unit), the MHU (mental health unit), the DTU (diagnostic treatment unit), the SDU (step down unit) and RRL (restricted release program). A person doesn’t have to break a rule or be found guilty

labor behind the walls and imprisoned people’s attitude toward labor. Your clarification about Texas’s compensation for wages was helpful and is exactly what people need to understand: Policy and practice behind the walls are often quite different. People outside the system read policies and believe they work a certain way. Only currently incarcerated people, like SDS, can tell us what things look like on the ground. Thank you.

Your point about material conditions becoming worse is true. Everywhere, imprisoned people find themselves struggling more and more to survive. And as you said, “the struggle against these conditions has given us the courage and motivation to mobilize.” But I want you to go a step further than mobilization; I want you to organize. Build community. Obviously, you are doing that amongst your study group. But work to build community, build connections, with the people there and behind the walls. Remember, without community there is no liberation. Think about what community means to you as a group. *What responsibilities does one have to the community? What can one expect from the community? How do you want to relate to one*

of a misconduct to be placed in these new control units because the state does not consider these special programs solitary confinement. The reality is that these are control units where conditions that are often worse than those faced by people doing time in solitary confinement for rules infractions. There are more people imprisoned in control units today than there were ten years ago.

The reforms have expanded the power of the state to legally harm and torture imprisoned people. The alphabet of control units continues to grow. Reform has not ended solitary confinement. Reform has not ended the torture. Reform has not achieved a real reduction in the use of control units or created a pathway towards their elimination.

We imprisoned people must learn from this example because the fight is far from over. We must not allow anyone to divide the prison population into “deserving” and “undeserving.” No one deserves torture. We must not allow reformers to shrink our demands; when we shrink our demands, we shrink our possibilities. We shrink our very movement.

“The reforms have expanded the power of the state to legally harm and torture imprisoned people. The alphabet of control units continues to grow. Reform has not ended solitary confinement. Reform has not ended the torture. Reform has not achieved a real reduction in the use of control units or created a pathway towards their elimination.”

Ten years later, we are still struggling to end the pernicious use of control units. We must gather our lessons from the past decade and create new tactics and strategies. The landscape has shifted. The mainstream media has since found something else to fixate on but the demand remains the same: End torture. Eliminate control units.

Always,
-Stevie

Author Bio: Stephen Wilson is a Black, queer abolitionist writing, (dis)organizing, and building study groups and community behind the wall in Pennsylvania. A subscriber of *The Abolitionist* for a few years now, Stevie became a columnist of our newspaper in 2020. “9971” is his column focused on radical study for abolition, and also refers to an inside study project. ♦

KITES TO THE EDITORS:

IN RESPONSE TO ISSUE 39 KITES, BY STEVIE WILSON

Editors’ Note: *Many of the Kites to the Editors printed in Issue 39 of The Abolitionist in June 2023 responded to Stevie Wilson’s column 9971 from Issue 38, printed in December 2022, which discussed labor conditions inside prison and the 13th Amendment. Stevie responds to Issue 39 Kite writers here in Issue 40 in an effort to deepen and grow the dialogue between imprisoned subscribers of The Abolitionist through the Kites to the Editors column.*

Re: Kite in Issue 39 from Stomp Down Studies, from behind the wall in Texas.

Greetings. I want to thank all the members of Stomp Down Studies for their responses to the Work and Us survey. Your experiences and input will help us produce a better, truer picture of

another? Community is about relationships. So focus on building and deepening your relationships.

Practically, I encourage you to reach out. You have already done so. You wrote *The Abolitionist*. Stay connected. And ask for what you need. You mentioned “conditioning, miseducation and a lack of clear understanding of the system and its overarching design and mechanisms.” Through political education, these issues can be overcome. There are zines and books that can clarify what has happened, who is responsible, who our friends and enemies are, and how we can change our condition. I recommend starting with zines. They are low or no cost and can be easily transported around the prison. We can connect you to zine distros that will provide catalogs if you would like that. Let us know.

Lastly, I love the point you made: “We must shift our focus to release.” The impetus for the survey was grounded in the same thought. I feel that the most important issue to imprisoned people is freedom. We want out. We know things are not and will not get better behind the

Continues on next page

walls. No matter what reform is passed. We are struggling to forge real pathways to freedom. We need outside allies to understand this point. Removing a clause from a state constitution isn’t going to free any of us. Continue to remind people that freedom is the goal of imprisoned people. Yes, we want to be able to live better behind the walls as we struggle to get out. But the struggle is about freedom, not prison amenities.

With Solidarity,

Stevie/9971

Re: Kite in Issue 39 by Roderick Lear

Greetings Comrade! I am delighted that you enjoyed Issue 39. And what you say about being in conversation with, being connected to, Masai is so true. We must connect with and learn from our elders. I had been thinking the same thing about the 13th Amendment campaigns we see across the country. *How did this campaign get so much momentum behind it?* One reason is that liberal reformers took it upon themselves to speak for imprisoned people instead of actually talking to us, asking us about what is important to us. We know the goal of every imprisoned person is to get out of prison. And this 13th Amendment stuff isn’t getting anyone closer to freedom. We need to amplify this point and recenter the voices of imprisoned people. I believe those closest to the problem are closest to the solution.

Solidarity,

Stevie/9971

Re: Kite in Issue 39 from Adonis Rose

Greetings! I am happy you enjoyed Issue 39. I hope *The Abolitionist* continues to be a learning tool for you. I wanted to connect with you to discuss a comment you made: “I feel very strongly about being able to work once I get out...” I recently had a conversation with scholar **Ruthie Wilson Gilmore**. We spoke about how imprisoned people equate work and freedom. Here, where I am imprisoned, we are fed the lie that not having a job negatively impacts parole chances. So many people believe it. Until they see the board and realize their work experience inside means nothing to the board. Moreover, there aren’t enough jobs for everyone so it cannot be a real factor in parole considerations. The situation is probably the same where you are. So *why do we equate work with freedom?*

I can understand why parolees and probationers do this. We know that working is often a requirement/condition of continued release. Lose your job and you lose your freedom. I have been thinking about how labor behind the walls conditions people to not only equate work and freedom, but also makes us disinclined to organize behind the walls and once released. People inside fear losing their jobs (freedom), and parolees and probationers do too. Prison also conditions us to take the lowest paying, unsafe jobs. *How can we challenge this conditioning? How can we disentangle work and freedom, inside and outside? How can we organize beyond or despite fear?*

With Solidarity,

Stevie/9971

KITES IN RESPONSE TO
ISSUE 39 ON REPRODUCTIVE
JUSTICE

BODILY AUTONOMY

By Trenton Rush

Bodily sovereignty is the ability to control your own body. The prison authorities will attempt to instill in a prisoner’s mind a sense that they have lost basically all human rights. Law enforcement and correctional officers continue to abuse their authority and treat people as if they’re property and not human beings. This tactic is to control the mind and break the spirit.

Martin Sostre was a political prisoner and jailhouse lawyer who stood firm in what he be-

lieved was right and fought against what was unnecessary. Martin Sostre served a total of 12 years in prison (1952 - 1964). While incarcerated Sostre refused to submit to rectal examinations and shave his beard which was a part of his natural appearance. Whenever he didn’t cooperate, the officers would forcefully assault and abuse him then throw him into solitary confinement. Sostre filed a complaint (*Sostre v. Rockefeller*; later *Sostre v. McGinnis*). He won that case in Judge Constance Baker Motley’s court in 1969. The investigation determined that Sostre’s 372 days in solitary confinement at Green Haven was “cruel and unusual punishment.” He received 124 days of earned time and was awarded \$13,000, to be paid by the warden and commissioner of corrections.

I can say I relate to Sostre based on the fact I was placed in the Winnebago Detention Center for 16 months (October 11, 2018 - February 18, 2020). I was placed on “orange-D” which was 23-1-hour recreation time. While on orange level they served very small portions of food which had to be eaten with paper utensils. We were not given the same meals that were being served to the general population. They didn’t allow us to have anything in the cells except tissue and even that was distributed in small quantities. Every morning at 7am the guards woke us up to do searches. When I was transported to the Department of Corrections (DOC), I still had to do a rectal exam after leaving an institution that searched frequently. They continued to search after every movement. I was eventually informed that if I didn’t submit to a strip search I would not be able to leave my assigned living unit or attend any programs. Later we contested that rule and I was then able to refuse the strip search if there was no probable cause to search. Martin Sostre’s acts play a huge role in the laws today. In order for us to stay educated we have to continue to read into the laws and guide the ones who are unaware. In 1970, Judge Motley ruled the rectal exam was dehumanizing and degrading. But because the press is not allowed into prisons, the world remains blind to the harsh living conditions prisoners experience on a daily basis. Martin Sostre didn’t allow officers to take away his dignity. He continued to fight back for what was right and not allow the system to break him mentally.

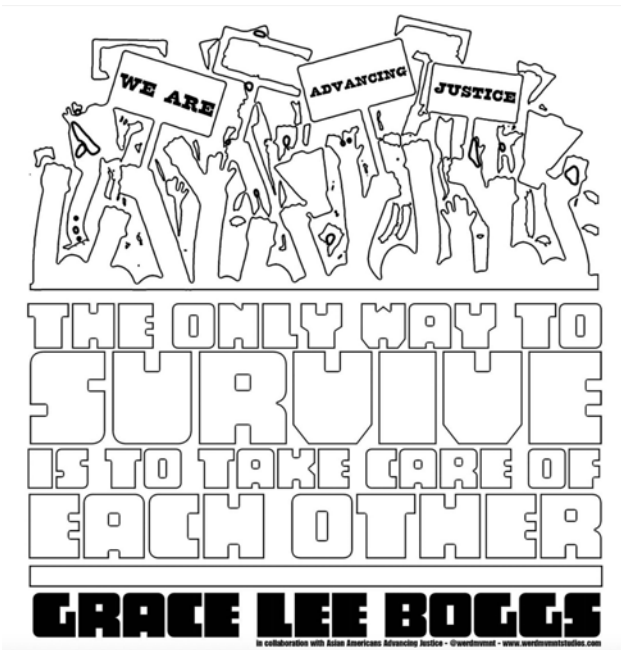
When asked to describe what bodily sovereignty would look like for me I would say: I am in total control of my mind and I have the right to say no to anyone who requests to access my body, no matter what consequences come with it. Like Martin Sostre I would not submit to anything that is unnecessary. Anyone can cause harm to the body but I will not let my mind be controlled. After reading Martin Sostre it opened my eyes and I realized there are so many that are still unaware and misguided to the system’s tactics. I will not be the state’s property. Anyone that I can educate I’m willing to do so. I’m in total control of my mind and body.

About the Author: Trenton Rush is a 21-year old writer, organizer and leader with **the REAL Youth Initiative**, a community of directly impacted young people in Chicago, Illinois, working towards the abolition of prisons. He has also organized with the *Final 5* campaign — a coalition dedicated to the closure of the final five youth prisons in Illinois. Trent is committed to spreading awareness about the abusive conditions inside of prisons and inspiring people to struggle toward abolition. Critical Resistance has partnered with REAL Youth Initiative to receive a bulk order of *The Abolitionist* and distribute 50 copies of each issue of the newspaper to imprisoned youth in Illinois for use in their political education workshops.

DEAR ASH WILLIAMS,

(Contributing author of the feature analysis article of Issue 39),

I am writing in response to your summer 2023 cover article in *The Abolitionist*. I would like to share a bit of my personal story in hopes that you may parlay it into an article for the next issue of *The Abolitionist*, or some other writing project. My case is a prime example of repro-



Coloring Care Package by William Estrada, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

ductive (in)justice. I am currently serving a 20-year sentence for homicide by breastfeeding, the only case of its kind in the world. I had been prescribed opioid pain medications long-term for well-documented chronic pain issues from injuries sustained in a near fatal motor vehicle accident. I did not tell my prescriber when I was pregnant, because I did not want to suffer in pain if they knew. Also, as a former registered nurse, I had seen firsthand how chronic pain patients are often vilified and dehumanized when treated as “criminals.”

My daughter, Lexi, was born healthy in 2010. At six weeks old, she came ill with a fever and upper respiratory infection and passed away in her sleep. Nine months after her death, I was arrested and charged with child neglect, homicide by child abuse, and involuntary manslaughter. Though investigators never tested anything of my person — not my blood, breastmilk, hair or urine — they maintained I must have been abusing my prescription medications. In 2014, I was convicted on three different charges and sentenced to 20 years in prison. I have since lost both my husband and father to cancer and my baby sisters to liver failure. I’ve lost my home, my savings, our family business, and missed out on countless milestones and memories with my other children. I have been gone for more than half of my youngest son’s life; he is now essentially an orphan.

I assure you, **no mother has ever breastfed her child with the intention of causing harm.** I truly believed that breastmilk was the best form of nourishment for my child with additional benefits of bonding and developing stronger immunity. Parents have fought for the choice to vaccinate their children or not. Regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, South Carolina’s governor Henry McMaster actually said parents have the right to decide what they decide is the best medical decision for their child. *Why then, was that right not afforded to me?* At my trial, the state’s experts admitted that there had never been documented case of a mother transferring a lethal level of opioids through breastmilk, but stated, “there’s a first time for everything” (sorry, but that is not science or evidence).

My case is an attack on women and mothers everywhere, and a threat to families and our ability to decide what is best for our children. On September 19 and 20 of 2022, I went back to court before Judge Mark Hayes for a post-conviction relief (PCR) hearing. My new lawyers presented experts and testimony (uncontested by the state) that due to my daughter’s illness, she became dehydrated and suffered renal failure. The Director of Pediatric Nephrology from the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston testified and provided a reasonable degree of medical certainty that my daughter’s cause of death was renal failure — but for the renal failure she would not have died. Nonetheless, while the judge ruled that my trial lawyer was ineffective for failing to offer this alternative cause of death, he dismissed my PCR case, claiming that he was not convinced it would have changed the outcome of my trial! The state has decided to make me some kind of “poster

Continues on next page

child” for prescription drug abuse, despite the lack of any evidence or science to support their claim. I was trying to care for my daughter in the manner that I believed in my heart of hearts was best and have been most unfairly and harshly punished, and by extension, so has my family.

I hope to hear from you and look forward to telling the world my story.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Greene

Write to Stephanie at:
Stephanie Greene #359489
Leath CI 2809 Airport Rd
Greenwood, SC 29649

NEW KITE IN RESPONSE TO ISSUE 37 ON HOUSING JUSTICE (PRINTED JUNE 2022)

Revolutionary Greetings Comrades,
I send my forever thanks and gratitude for *The Abolitionist* back issues 37 and 38 that you sent me back in March. I already had a copy of #38 but was able to pass it on to another possible (?) comrade. Issue 37 on Housing Justice struck my core though. Having experienced homelessness chronically for many years off and on in several cities (San Jose, Santa Cruz, and Oakland), I have been and continue to be appalled at the state’s responses to the so-called war on poverty/homelessness. The fact that these capitalist-imperialist pigs call it a “war” and use terms like “assault” and “combat the homelessness problem” (like our homeless comrades are enemy combatants!) shows you clearly where their heads are at, and what their agenda really is. For example, look no further than the front page of the *San Jose Mercury News Early Weekend Edition*, May 14, 2023. Tomorrow (May 15), San Jose will begin one of their infamous encampment sweeps along a four-mile stretch

of Coyote Creek (a creek that runs under the 880 and 101 highways, through the North Side/downtown area towards the East Side and Happy Hollow Zoo), to prep for a planned flood protection project, with zero promises of helping (their idea of help) our displaced comrades find “shelter” (the “shelters” in San Jose are equal parts full and foul). Having lived along Coyote Creek many times personally, I am all too familiar with the abuse, neglect, and lack of care that is always shown to our city’s most vulnerable humans by the San Jose Police Department (SJPd), Caltrans, and other city workers. I am not overstating when I say that SJPd preys on the homeless population here, and I and many others have collections of horror stories of abuse and harassment at the hands of pigs.

I remember as well, when living in Oakland, the city’s answer to their “problem”: fenced-in, razor wire-ringed tiny home villages plagued by the security guards / off-duty pigs and a miasma of dreariness (specifically the one I’m referring to that I remember is the one under the freeway by the Greyhound station and social security office downtown). And now San Francisco has chosen the extremely militarized route of sending in the National Guard under the guise of combating the fentanyl problem, which anyone who has spent time in the Tenderloin of San Francisco and/or around Civic Center BART station (which I’m sure are two major areas of interest) can tell you are places that drug users congregate to safely use substances in the company of people that can (and DO!) save those that may go into an opioid overdose. This is in lieu of the safe-injection/use sites that San Francisco ultimately wasn’t able to bring into existence. *What would San Francisco rather people do? Use by themselves back at their tent/squat, possibly overdose with no one around and then have paramedics find and move their body days/weeks/months later?*

And anyway, the dialogues and scripts are almost identical between the city and the National Guard’s stated agenda (only go after the

“big dealers” and “suppliers”) and that of the so-called war on drugs (read: “war on oppressed communities”) which we all know was part of what led to the buildup of the beast that so many of our family members, friends, comrades, and many of my fellow readers currently or formerly found themselves in the belly of: the prison industrial complex. As was voiced throughout Issue 37, the only SOLUTION to help our homeless comrades out of the streets is giving them what every human being should be entitled to: a roof of their own over their head. Not a shelter roof, not a “tiny home” roof, not a canvas tent roof in a “city-sanctioned encampment.” A roof of their own in a place of their own, they lay back behind their locked door in their bed in their room and say with a sense of awe and satisfaction, “Look at me. I finally made it out.” Until the incompetent fucks in their gated communities and city council meetings and halls of “power” realize this concept, that to those of us in the struggle has seemed all too obvious to not understand, the vast amounts of money that the plutocrats (in their “three-piece psychology and 1950s techno-brains”) throw at their “services” to “combat” homelessness will never make any progress, and will continue to show disrespect to the dignity and personhood of our oppressed comrades living in the streets.

The struggle continues, but make no mistake comrades: As Buenaventura Durruti said in 1936, “We are going to inherit the earth. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie may blast and burn its own world before it finally leaves the stage of history. We are not afraid of ruins. We who ploughed the prairies and built the cities can build again, only better next time. We carry a new world, here in our hearts. That world is growing this minute.”

In love & solidarity,

Greg Messenger #20023642
Santa Clara County Main Jail
150 W. Hedding St
San Jose, CA 95110 ♦

INSIDE-OUTSIDE FISHING LINE: Psychological Warfare by Any Name

A cross-wall conversation between Felix Sitthivong, JoJo Ejonga-Lihau, Ralph Dunuan, and Tomas Afeworki with Mar Golub and Jess Ho of The Abolitionist Editorial Collective

Editors’ Note: *This issue’s Fishing Line continues to focus on the use of control units as a technique of political repression. More of a “fishing net” than a single line, the column brings together multiple conversations between members of The Abolitionist Editorial Collective and four imprisoned organizers and activists in Washington state: Felix Sitthivong (Washington Corrections Center); Ralph Dunuan (Washington Corrections Center); Tomas Afeworki (Stafford Creek Corrections Center); and Jonathan “JoJo” Ejonga-Lihau (Stafford Creek Corrections Center).*
Together we discuss the challenges and possibilities of inside-outside organizing, the use of solitary confinement as punishment, and how control units continue to operate under the guise of administrative segregation, service provision, or medical “care,” despite legislative victories prohibiting their use as punishment. At one point in the conversation, a speaker refers to a revolutionary leader and imprisoned intellectual of the radical prisoner movement. Because some state departments of corrections use 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 his initials GLJ. Long live GLJ!

The Abolitionist: As context for our national and international readership, **in 2021, Washington Department of Corrections (WDOC) announced that they would no longer place people in solitary confinement as punishment.** Governor Inslee praised the decision, saying, “Disciplinary segregation has been proven to be ineffective in our state correctional facilities and ending their practice as a form of discipline is the right thing to do.” This might sound like an important victory – *but has it made much difference for folks inside?*

Tomas: I was put in solitary in 2021 after witnessing guards beating a young Black brother who was supposed to be on video visit. They refused to let him get on the call even though his people paid for the visit, and then started beating on him when he complained about it. I had my people contact **Columbia Legal Services.** After that, the fireworks started: They put me in the hole and denied me showers, denied me phone calls, denied me medical care. This was in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. And when my people started calling, then they shipped me to another prison. These types of things are still happening. They never stopped. They use isolation — and routine transfers — as repression and psychological warfare, to cause mental deterioration, and keep you away from the community and your loved ones. That’s what it’s all about.

Ralph: I’ve been incarcerated for 25 years. 10 years and seven months of that time has been in solitary confinement. When I first entered into the solitary confinement unit, the staff that escorted me told me, “Now we’re going to break you.” And they did try. Those units are specifi-

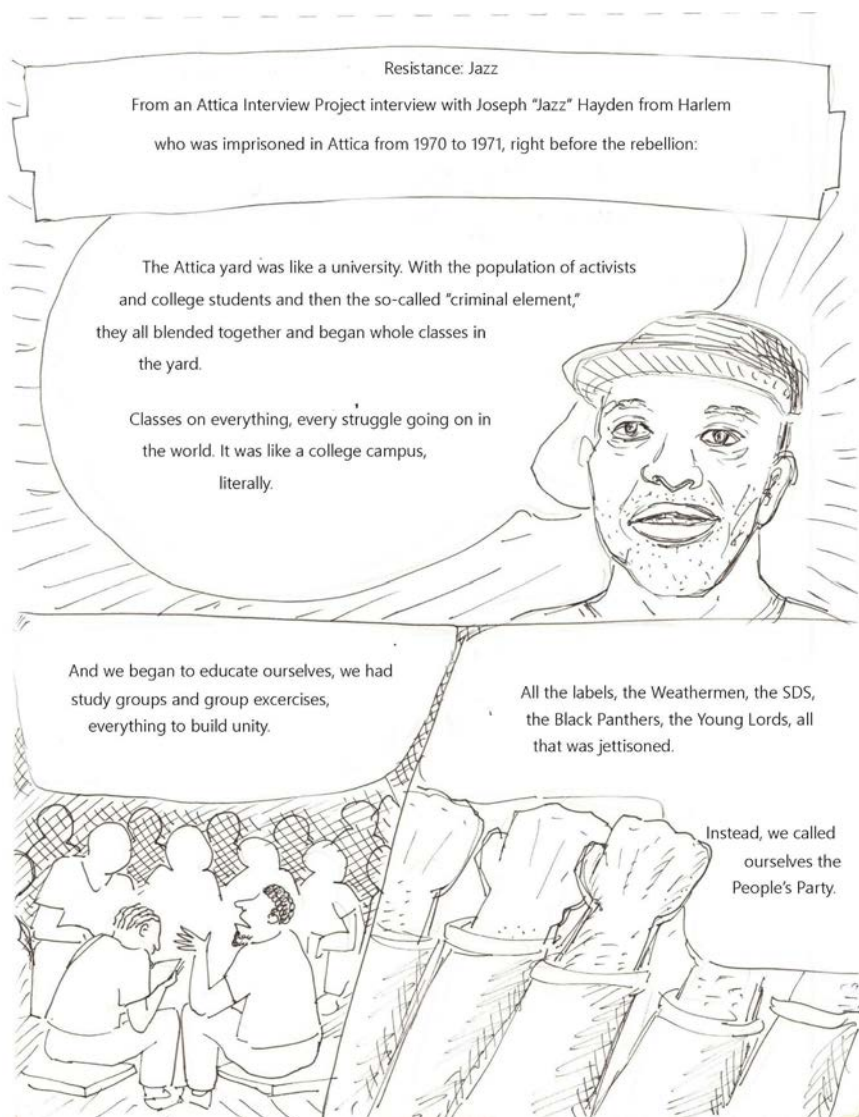
cally for mental warfare. The things that they put me through in those units were not easy to deal with. They stripped me naked for 30 days in a cold cell in eastern Washington in November, with no heating or ventilation, or they’d put me next to someone who would bang on the doors for hours on end, for days or weeks. I didn’t talk to anyone for almost six months, so lost my voice. I didn’t know you could lose your voice if you don’t talk to people for months on end. I had to relearn and use my voice. Every day was a battle, because they are trying to break your will and determination to be human. Now they’re saying that they don’t use it for punishment. This is also not the case. It is pure mental warfare.

JoJo: Now they just call solitary confinement by different names. I think it’s important to note that the 2021 WDOC decision happened because DOC heard that prisoners were working on legislation to try to eliminate the use of solitary confinement, so they launched a preemptive strike to try to convince legislators not to pass the legislation — they would take care of it themselves.

The Abolitionist: *So, they still use isolation as a way to intimidate and control; they just stopped calling it “punishment”?* This is the real meaning of reforms that DOC Secretary Cheryl Strange calls “a key step in becoming a human-centered organization” – where punishment is dressed up as “care.”

JoJo: Yeah. When I was in medical isolation, we were locked in our cell 23, 24 hours a day. Most people who tested positive for Covid went to the gym where they had TVs and showers and people could still walk around and be together. But some of us who were vocal about criticizing the administration ended up in the IMU (Intensive Medical Unit). We had dirty cells. They didn’t give us bed sheets. The cells were literally dirty. They had shit on the ground and urine on the floor. They didn’t clean it or nothing, and we weren’t able to. They wouldn’t give me show-

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Page from Critical Resistance's Attica Interview Project Zine, "Repression, Resistance, Social Transformation," published in 2016 to celebrate the Attica rebellion's 45th anniversary and advance calls for the prison's closure. Artwork by Anu Biswas.

ers for the first seven days, and after that I was only allowed to shower every four days. Medical isolation is actually worse than being in community segregation or solitary confinement or administrative segregation. People in the hole have more freedom than in IMU. They could go outside for an hour, get some fresh air. We were on 24/7 lockdown. We didn't get any phone calls for a week. My mom called and they lied to her. They told my mom that I wasn't in IMU and maybe I just didn't want to talk to her. She wasn't hearing from me; she was worried, and they didn't even tell my own mother that I was sick. I ended up doing 21 days there.

The Abolitionist: It's kind of a meaningless dichotomy: Solitary as punishment versus solitary for any other reason, because the solitary itself is the punishment, and whatever the justification, it is torture. A practice of repression, it's still being used as punishment to stop prisoners from organizing and working together in positive ways.

Felix: Well, whatever the rule is, there's nobody to hold them accountable. No matter how many rules are on paper, if nobody impartial is overseeing them, they're going to continue to do whatever they want to. I was sitting in solitary confinement for my political beliefs, for my advocacy work, and my next-door neighbor was sitting in solitary confinement under investigation for drugs. Somebody else was sitting in solitary confinement for certain mental health issues. Regardless of what they call it, it means the same thing. We were all in the same conditions of extreme isolation.

Ralph: Also, they never stopped using long-term solitary confinement as a punishment for infractions. What they do now is put you on Administrative Segregation (AdSeg) for an investigative period. But they can always extend that period by saying they aren't done with their investigation. They might extend it for 45 days only to determine that you weren't even meant to be in there in the first place. They use this to promote anxiety and fear to disrupt our organizing. Two of my comrades are in isolation now because of their organizing around cultural groups and trying to defend our autonomy to meet and promote cultural identity and awareness. DOC put him in segregation on trumped up charges because of a conversation one of my comrades had on the phone to one of his loved ones. **That's how they disrupt organizing.** They write up these outrageous infractions in order to justify long investigation periods. It's still being weaponized. That's

what these places were designed to do. They were designed to break us down in order for the facility to have more control over prisoners.

Tomas: Even though they claim to have eliminated the use of solitary confinement as punishment, they're still doing it all the time. They'll say, "Oh, these individuals were threatening officers," or "these individuals were the ringleaders behind the protests," or simply fabricate reasons. They'll show a video of somebody but it isn't even the person they put in the hole. But you don't get to see the videos. You don't get to see the evidence. It's just automatic. Because that's what it's all about: isolation. In the 1960s and early 1970s, GLJ*, his brother Jonathan, and all them revolutionaries – they were dealing with the same thing. It's called **"target isolation."** When you organize, especially with community, or express radical political views, they will block your phone numbers, restrict phone calls, take away your JPAY messaging so you won't be able to contact anyone out there. That's blocking somebody from their lifeline. Like GLJ said, fascism is actually already here. Don't blame Trump. He's just an expression of the truth that existed even before him.

The Abolitionist: *How can this inform our efforts as a movement as we try to challenge the use of solitary confinement by regulating it — to reduce the justifications for sending someone to the hole, or reduce the maximum amount of time someone can be held in solitary? Do you think that's where campaign work and energy needs to be directed, or are there other demands that need to be voiced or fought for?*

Felix: I've always been skeptical of legislation. I've participated in legislative work, but I'm always skeptical of legislators. As long as we allow them to control and dictate the way that we organize, we're going to get the same answers. Any legislation that **the Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Awareness Group (APICAG)** has supported in the past, they have to be grounded in empowering the community and stripping power away from the state. We will ask for the stars, the moon, and the sun, because I think our communities deserve that. But a lot of people are more worried about their access to these legislators rather than holding them accountable. A lot of people make concessions up front, because they are worried about their access. They play politics — they've shown that — while I'm just sitting in solitary confinement.

Tomas: Honestly, can you imagine the Jewish people going to Hitler and saying, "Oh, can you change the practice of fascism? You know, can you make it a little bit kinder on me?" Because this is what we're doing when we ask our oppressors to make our cells more comfortable. **What we need to do is fully embrace our struggle,** but there's a lot of confusion about what the struggle is. If the struggle is not to uproot and abolish slavery and oppression in their entirety, then we're in the wrong struggle. This is something that Assata Shakur, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and even Martin Luther King Jr when he came back from Africa — this is something that they recognized. Or we can talk about how apartheid ended in South Africa. It wasn't because the people were begging for something to be changed. We're not trying to fix the prison

industrial complex (PIC). We're talking about abolishing a whole set of complex, overlapping systems and interests.

Ralph: There is no reforming solitary confinement. We need to become aware of the harm that it causes to human beings and really have the courage to stand in solidarity for the abolition of solitary confinement and, ultimately, the PIC.

The Abolitionist: *Can you tell us more about what's been going on with the Cultural Awareness Groups (CAGs) at Stafford Creek and other WA prisons?*

JoJo: So, these cultural groups have been in existence for a long time. **The Black Prisoners Caucus**, Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Awareness Group, and **Nuestro Grupo Cultural** — we've been doing the work and helping provide programming that DOC doesn't want us to provide. We're connecting prisoners to the community. We do advocacy work and a lot of us are very outspoken against the DOC. Within WDOC policy, prisoners can be critical of DOC staff. It's in their own policy. We have a right to communicate with the media. We have the right to publish. But the DOC has become very hostile to CAGs and shut us down so that they could control the programming. They call it **PEAR — the Pro-Equity Anti-Racism initiative** — but it is really an attack on our culture and traditions because they don't like what we have to say.

Ralph: Until recently, we've been able to have autonomy over these spaces to come together and learn about our cultures and communities. To learn about where we come from and who we are — not just who they tell us we are. The cultural groups came into existence within the Washington State prison system to promote cultural awareness and positive change, and to address the needs of non-English speaking peoples behind the walls. We build community and do educational programming. These groups have become a safe space to address institutional harms and work towards healing imprisoned people while becoming more conscious of systemic issues.

Felix: DOC was pushing back against CAGs within Washington State, and in particular at Stafford Creek where I was doing my time, because they feared our autonomy and the community connections that we were making. Ultimately, they shut down my group, which is the APICAG. When we raised grievances and started to get the community involved, they started dropping arbitrary infractions and eventually I found myself in solitary confinement with allegations of threatening staff. I ended up beating all of the infractions, yet administration still felt compelled to place a "prohibited placement" order on me, which essentially bans me from Stafford Creek for five years. They shipped me out in an emergency transfer to another solitary confinement, at WCC in Shelton, which is where I currently am right now.

The Abolitionist: And Felix, I know that you've only been out of the hole for a day or two [at the time of this interview]. How are you doing?

Felix: Honestly, like, I'm just trying to get grounded again. I think initially, I was super drained. But once I got over that, I'm just energized again and ready to get back into the work.

The Abolitionist: *So, what are the next steps for you all in this struggle?*

JoJo: My goal is to eliminate solitary confinement. I'm not gonna stop until we get to that point. We gotta make sure legislators do what they promise, hold them accountable. The courts and legislative process — none of the tools we have are perfect, but they can still be used to put some limitations on the scope and expansion of the PIC and to do some harm mitigation. I've been reading this book by Mariame Kaba, *Let This Radicalize You*, and I really think we need to reject cynicism by making allies, building relationships, and doing political education.

Felix: The next steps are to educate our people on the frontlines wherever we go. Whether I'm

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at Stafford, Shelton, or the moon. We’re going to let them know that there are ways for us to be able to resist. Not out of violence, but through radical love and resistance. That’s what we’re about. I mean, they taught us to hate ourselves, but our radical love of ourselves, each other, and our community is what’s going to get us out of this. For us, it starts with building a base no matter where we are. Then finding solutions that empower us, that don’t strengthen carceral systems. Sometimes people want to work with the administration, because they think it’s going to give them access (or they aren’t aware of other options for making change) — but what they’re actually doing is giving them ammo to co-opt our space and push us out, push our community out, or tighten their oppressive hold over our lives. We have to always demand that the power stays with us and that we have our own independence, that we have agency and decision-making power. These are things that we have to do as organizers, and sometimes (often) there are consequences. But there are also consequences of inaction. For me personally, I made that choice, because not speaking my truth is worse than sitting in the hole for however many months my oppressors would love to stick me in the hole for.

About the Authors:

Felix Sitthivong is a journalist, organizer, member of Empowerment Avenue, and advisor for the **Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Awareness Group (API-CAG)**. Through APICAG, Sitthivong has organized immigration, social justice, and youth outreach forums and has designed Asian American studies courses, an Intersectional Feminism 101 class, and an Anti-Domestic Violence program. His **“On the Fence Line”** column appears regularly in **The International Examiner** (Seattle). He can be reached via Securus (WA #354579) or by mail at:

Felix Sitthivong #354579
Washington Corrections Center
PO Box 900
Shelton, WA 98584.

Ralph Dunuan is an imprisoned member of the **Native American Circle group, Tribal Sons, the Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Awareness Group, and No New Washington Prisons**. He is lead organizer for Liberation Media Northwest and the host of **C.H.O.I.C.E.S.**, a podcast about issues affecting PIC-impacted communities. His writing and organizing focus on promoting peer-led cultural education, exposing the social inequities of the prison system, and changing the draconian sentencing practices of Washington State. He can be reached via Securus (WA #801445) or by mail at:

Ralph Dunuan #801455
Washington Corrections Center

PO Box 900
Shelton, WA 98584.

Tomas Afeworki is an imprisoned author, artist, and community organizer working to end systematic racism and discrimination. With **Fly Start Foundation** and **BoundArtist**, which he co-founded, Tomas hopes to inspire those currently oppressed through the power of artistic expression. Readers can learn more about his case at www.freetomas.com or check out his artwork at www.boundartist.com. He can be reached via Securus (WA #826367) or by mail at:

Tomas Afeworki #826367
Stafford Creek Corrections Center
191 Constantine Way
Aberdeen, WA 98520.

Jonathan “JoJo” Ejonga-Lihau was born in Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Following in his family’s tradition, JoJo is a committed activist and organizer, working on social justice, human rights, and criminal justice issues in Washington State. As a Black Universalist, JoJo believes in a unified effort to confront and address the issues that threaten humanity, justice, integrity, and the dignity of all persons. You can read more of his writing at www.liberationmedianw.org. JoJo can be reached via Securus (WA #366372) or by mail:

Jonathan “JoJo” Ejonga-Lihau #366372
Stafford Creek Corrections Center
191 Constantine Way
Aberdeen, WA 98520. ♦

CRITICAL RESISTANCE (CR) UPDATES AND & MOVEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

CRITICAL RESISTANCE (CR) UPDATES

CR NATIONAL:

2023 has been a busy year for Critical Resistance (CR). This year marks 25 years of strategy and struggle to abolish the prison industrial complex (PIC) since CR’s first conference in 1998, which we celebrated with a large fundraiser in May at San Francisco State University (as shared in Issue 39 CR Updates). Throughout the summer and into fall, CR has continued to bolster our chapter work locally in Oakland, Los Angeles, Portland and New York, while also conference organizing at different regional, national and international convenings. Additionally, the national organization is moving in solidarity with struggles to stop Cop City in Atlanta and stop apartheid Israel’s war on Gaza.

Dismantle Change Build Webinar: “Building and Winning Abolitionist Campaigns”

Since 2020, the term “abolition” has entered the mainstream. As a result, more people and organizing formations are eager to identify as abolitionist, and CR saw a need to demonstrate to an international audience how abolitionist organizing must focus on making material change by **shifting our conditions through campaign work**. CR therefore hosted a well-timed webinar titled **“Building and Winning Abolitionist Campaigns”** on June 29, 2023. This virtual gathering served as a platform for seasoned organizers to share their insights on PIC abolition. The discussion revolved around the growing significance of abolitionist strategy in resisting policing, imprisonment, and state violence, particularly as abolition gains prominence in mainstream discourse. Speakers included CR co-founder and former staffer, **Rachel Herzing**, who shared valuable lessons from CR’s past campaign in the **Stop the Injunctions Coalition** against gang injunctions in Oakland, California; **Judah Schept**, who delved into the fight against a **new federal prison in Letcher County**, Kentucky; and **Sharlyn Grace**, who shed light on efforts to pass robust **bail reform in Illinois**. These seasoned organizers discussed the importance of robust, sustained campaigns and coalitions to achieve material change and tangible blows against the PIC.

From International Conferences to a New Podcast—Distributing The Abolitionist Newspaper far & wide

This summer into fall, CR’s *The Abolitionist* Editorial Collective launched a robust distribu-

tion effort for Issue 39 of *The Abolitionist* on reproductive justice. Distribution covered a wide variety of events, from an international conference in Hamburg, Germany, to the Northern CA Regional Primary Care conference at Planned Parenthood in San Francisco, to a heartwarming 10th-anniversary potluck for CR’s Pacific Northwest chapter in Portland, to the Socialism 2023 Conference in Chicago, Illinois hosted by Haymarket Books.

With issue 39, CR also began an exciting **new collaboration with the Beyond Prisons Podcast**, a **new podcast show called “Over the Wall: The Abolitionist Hour,”** which examines each new issue of *The Abolitionist*. The first episode—**“Beyond Abortion: Reproductive Justice and Abolitionist Struggle”**—which aired in September examined Issue 39 and its presentation of reproductive justice and PIC abolition, right in time for a webinar launch event for the issue featuring a panel of contributing authors and organizations later that month. The webinar—**“Our Bodies, Our Freedom: Abolishing the PIC Post Roe”**—brought together hundreds of abolitionists, former prisoners, family members of imprisoned people, anti-prison and anti-policing advocates, social workers, reproductive justice workers, healthcare workers, doulas, educators and more to explore the timely intersections between reproductive justice and PIC abolition. Between tabling and speaking at conferences, to the podcast and webinar—**Issue 39 had one of the most robust and successful distribution efforts of The Abolitionist newspaper’s 19-year history.**

Abolition Means No More War: Solidarity with a Free Palestine!

PIC abolitionists have always understood the work to dismantle the PIC to be connected to global movements against war, militarism, and colonialism. Since apartheid-Israel has escalated its ongoing war on Gaza in early October, we’ve seen mass mobilization for solidarity with the Palestinian people as they face one of the deadliest assaults by the Israeli military in its history. **CR has been mobilizing quickly nationally to spread solidarity with Palestinian liberation and calls for an immediate ceasefire.** Through media and communications organizing, CR has worked fast to circulate different written pieces. This includes a new solidarity statement, situating Hamas’s October 7 action against Israel within a larger context of ongoing war and struggle for liberation from the apartheid state, as well as a piece challenging Israel’s war propaganda and western media’s

complicity in genocide. Throughout this escalation, western media has proven to be completely unreliable, spreading Israel’s strategic misinformation and disinformation to legitimize its genocidal campaign by portraying Palestinians as terrorists, less than human, and deserving of annihilation.

“PIC abolitionists have always understood the work to dismantle the PIC to be connected to global movements against war, militarism, and colonialism.”

On November 1, CR organized a **webinar** called, **“Abolition Means No More War: Free Palestine Now!”** with Haymarket Books, featuring Dr. **Angela Y Davis**, **Lara Kiswani** (Executive Director of the **Arab Resource and Organizing Center** or AROC), **Stefanie Fox** (Executive Director of **Jewish Voice for Peace**), and **Nadine Naber (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence - National)** in a discussion moderated by **CR’s Campaign Director Mohamed Shehk**. Together, the panelists and moderator examined the relationship between the PIC and Israel’s occupation of Palestine, and **why abolitionists must strongly mobilize in this time**. The webinar was a major success, attended live online by thousands of people, with over 6,000 registered for the event, and in less than a month received over 15,000 views. This event was also **a benefit for Middle East Children’s Alliance, (MECA)** who is distributing humanitarian aid on the ground in Gaza, and allowed **CR to raise over \$30,000 in humanitarian aid and supplies for MECA**.

Additionally, CR members across our chapters have participated in and supported organizing for mass protests and events in Washington DC, Portland, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco, as well as direct actions—including blocking and delaying a US military ship at the Port of Oakland **from making its way to Israel** transporting weapons through the Port of Tacoma in Washington state. On November 3, CR members in the Bay Area joined our movement partners AROC, Jewish Voice for Peace, Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Bay Area, International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN) and others **at the port before dawn and sounded the alarm for hundreds to show up in protest of**

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US military aid to apartheid Israel. We held down the port for **nearly 10 hours**, setting up pickets and blockades at the gates into the port and onto the dock. Swarms of militarized police showed up, first starting with dock security and the coast guard, followed by Oakland police, federal agents and Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE). **Three brave people boarded the ship**, clinging onto the ladder onto the ship for nearly five hours until they were removed. Protestors sang freedom songs and chanted while observing the safety of those aboard, and pleaded with the workers to walk off the boat and refuse to load weapons for Israel. **One contracted worker heard our cries and walked off the job** after the workers aboard held a meeting on the ship to deliberate their compliance.

Police violently broke through our peaceful blockade at one of the gates, harming a few protestors. In the afternoon, the ship left the dock once the protestors aboard were arrested. We continued to rally and make sure our people remained as safe as possible. **In a few hours, we raised tens of thousands of dollars for a defense fund** in anticipation of charges against some protestors, needs for after-care, and to pay the dozens of parking tickets the city of Oakland distributed to deter resistance. The three arrested were released that evening, but remain under military investigation for potential maritime law charges.

Together we successfully organized press to cover the protest, blasted the news throughout our people’s media online, and effectively warned our comrades in the Pacific Northwest to mobilize. **Between both blockades from Oakland to Tacoma, we slowed down the shipment, cost the US military money, and drew massive global support for cutting the supply chain of weapons to Israel.**

From November 11-17, San Francisco hosted the **Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit**, where the world’s top corporate profiteers convene to establish international trade deals. The **No to APEC Coalition organized “The Peoples’ Counter Summit and Mass Mobilization Against the APEC Heads of State and CEO’s Summits,”** which CR attended, participated in protest safety teams, and facilitated a workshop on militarism, imperialism, and the PIC. November 16, because Joe Biden was in San Francisco attending the APEC summit, CR members joined over 100 **Bay Area residents in occupying and shutting down the San Francisco Bay Bridge**—demanding “Genocide Joe” order an immediate ceasefire. About 100 people were arrested and dozens of cars were towed from the bridge, though we were able to still garner strong media coverage of the action and shut down the traffic flow of the Bay Area for a day, calling attention to the war on Gaza. Everyone arrested was quickly cited and released and protestors are providing mutual aid support to one another to cover the financial costs of the action.

As Nadine Naber of INCITE! offered during our “Abolition Means No More War: Free Palestine NOW” webinar, “May this be the time when we finally fuse decolonial abolitionist movement strands and hearts forever, without exception, everywhere, and stand against carcerality and militarism whenever and wherever they are practiced.”

“May this be the time when we finally fuse decolonial abolitionist movement strands and hearts forever, without exception, everywhere, and stand against carcerality and militarism whenever and wherever they are practiced.”



Bay Area residents blocking a US military ship from departing for Israel with weapons. Photo by Brooke Anderson.

CR NEW YORK CITY (CRNYC):

Over the past six months, the CRNYC chapter has intensified its focus on recruitment, internal political development, and coalitional organizing within the context of **the New York Dignity Not Detention (DND) campaign**. The DND campaign, centered on ending contracts between ICE and county jails, has become the chapter’s primary organizing target. During the course of 2023, the campaign achieved a significant milestone, securing 41 sponsors in the NY State Assembly and 22 sponsors in the NY Senate, a result of a successful lobbying effort during the 2023 legislative succession. This chapter’s members have been ardently working on creating public materials for the campaign, with a particular emphasis on outreach to labor organizations and unions in NYS. Furthermore, they have been fostering inside-outside collaborations with individuals detained by ICE to fortify the campaign. As a testament to their growth, CRNYC has also welcomed three new members.

CR PORTLAND (CRPDX):

CRPDX marked a significant milestone in September - a heartfelt **celebration of a decade of anti-policing activism in Portland**, hosting an end-of-summer birthday potluck event held at Peninsula Park on Sunday, September 17. The event provided a platform for postcard writing to imprisoned comrades, receiving updates on CRPDX’s recent activities, and discussions about their future anti-policing campaign. Attendees learned about how to get involved with CRPDX, signed up for volunteering, and requested membership information. Importantly, the event underlined inclusivity and accessibility, stressing that anyone willing to participate can join in the fight for a more equitable and just society. Taking the baton from CR members in the Bay Area, **CRPDX also boosted calls to Pacific Northwest ally organizations and movement partners to “Block the Boat” at the Tacoma Port**, and end US military aid to Israel.

CR LOS ANGELES (CRLA):

Since late summer, CRLA has been doing **parking lot outreach days as part of the CURB prison closure campaign**. Their objective is to garner support for **closing the California Rehabilitative Center (CRC) prison in Norco**, with a particular focus on the families and communities of those imprisoned at the facility. During their inaugural event on Saturday, August 26, the chapter made significant headway. Their outreach day was met with a warm reception, and the chapter was able to make connections with families and distribute flyers for future outreach and power building opportunities. To enhance their outreach efforts in the future, CRLA is in the process of recruiting more Spanish speakers, delving into understanding the prison’s demographics better, and nurturing relationships with the community beyond these outreach days.

CR OAKLAND (CROAK):

On August 29, CROak chapter members participated in the **“No Tech for Apartheid” rally and action**, demanding an end to Google’s lucrative \$1 billion cloud contract with the Israeli government and military. The rally and action was organized by the No Tech for Apartheid Coali-

tion and took place during Google’s Cloud Next conference in San Francisco. The action was a powerful demonstration of support for Amazon and Google workers in their mission to end the “Project Nimbus” contract. Participants at the event highlighted the importance of not allowing their labor to support Israeli apartheid and expressed unwavering solidarity with the Palestinian people’s struggle for freedom. This activism reverberates on the international stage, drawing attention to the moral imperative of opposing complicity in human rights abuses.

The Oakland chapter has also recently held a 6-month work planning strategy session and welcomed 4 new members to the chapter, in addition to **advancing the CA Prison Closure campaign’s labor strategy with CURB**, and **providing tactical, safety and media support for Palestinian solidarity actions** throughout the Bay Area.

MOVEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

*The following movement highlights were compiled from various news sources, including movement partners’ email and announcement listservs and mainstream and independent press, such as **Democracy Now, Al Jazeera**, and more. An imprisoned subscriber of The Abolitionist, **Jeffrey McKee**, submitted the update on a new Jailhouse Lawyers Speak chapter in Washington state (Thank you, Jeffrey!).*

NATIONAL

A Landmark Moment in Labor History: UAW Strikes for Workers’ Rights

In a monumental development within the history of the labor movement, **the United Auto Workers (UAW) have ignited a simultaneous strike against the titans of the US auto industry**: Ford, General Motors, and Stellantis, the parent company of Chrysler. UAW President Shawn Fein delivered the groundbreaking announcement, revealing a meticulously planned series of strikes pinpointing specific facilities, with the prospect of further locations joining the action in the days ahead. The primary aim of this historic strike is to redress the power dynamic between labor and management, particularly in light of the combined profits, a staggering \$21 billion, generated by these automakers in the first half of 2023. This strike represents an extraordinary transformation of workers transitioning from a defensive posture to an assertive offensive stance. Workers are uniting to reclaim the contract benefits relinquished during the 2008 financial crisis, sending a resounding message that will inform the labor landscape. This strike underscores the demand for of equitable labor practices and the collective voice of workers in shaping their destinies.

WEST COAST:

FCI Dublin Lawsuit

On August 16, 2023, eight survivors of staff sexual abuse and retaliation at the Federal Correctional Institution Dublin (FCI Dublin), a federal women’s prison in California, along with the **California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP)**, took a significant step in their fight against FCI Dublin. They filed a class action lawsuit against the Bureau of Prisons, FCI Dublin officials, and several individual officers. This legal action exposes systemic issues in preventing, detecting, investigating, and responding to staff sexual abuse. Survivors have reported severe abuse, including rape, sexual assault, coercion, and harassment. The demands seek to address ongoing retaliation against those who report misconduct, remove staff with substantiated abuse claims, provide access to healthcare, support survivors’ release requests, and allow third-party monitoring, among other critical measures.

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California AB 280: Reforming Solitary Confinement

State Assembly Bill (AB) 280 aims to reform solitary confinement in detention facilities. This legislation mandates that facilities develop and publicly share written procedures for solitary confinement, with specific restrictions on involuntary placement for vulnerable populations. However, it’s important to note that while the bill emphasizes “rehabilitation” by requiring at least four hours of out-of-cell programming per day and sets limits on the duration of solitary confinement, it stops short of full abolitionist reforms. This bill doesn’t challenge the use of solitary in any form or draw connections to the long-term, harmful effects of solitary on any individual, for any period of time. Most recently, the bill has been stalled due to threat of veto from Governor Newsom.

Jailhouse Lawyers Speak in Washington Prisons

A small group of current and former WA prisoners established a chapter of Jailhouse Lawyers Speak in WA. www.jailhouselawyer-speaknw.org. JLSNW drafted a proposed list of demands that was distributed to about 300 WA prisoners representing all the main prisons for comment and vote. After receiving feedback, the Collective Demands are now published on the website.

These demands represent all WA prisoners as one group and can be cited to as core demands in addition to specific demands of a peaceful protest. Now that the collective demands have been established, JLSNW will be filing a legal challenge to the prison administrative codes that prohibit peaceful protests (i.e., work stoppages, hunger strikes, sit-ins). These administrative codes are contrary to the state constitution regarding “the right of petition and of the people to peaceably assemble for the common good shall never be abridged.” JLSNW will be represented by a local law firm as a class action. JLSNW with Prison Lives Matter (www.supportprisonlives.org) is researching and coordinating similar legal challenges in the state PLM is currently established in.

US SOUTH:

Kentucky—Stopping a New Federal Prison

In Letcher County, Kentucky, local organizers are continuing the fight against the previously defeated massive prison plans in the county. A sign-on letter is being circulated, urging the removal of language in Section 219 of the House FY24 CJS Appropriations Bill. This section pertains to the construction of a new federal prison in Letcher County, Kentucky, and contains provisions that bypass environmental review processes, restrict public comments, and prevent legal challenges to the prison’s construction or operation. The letter highlights concern about potential environmental impacts, such as endangering a bat habitat and public health, as well as the precedent set by exempting federal projects from environmental protection laws. It also underscores the importance of allowing local communities and stakeholders to have a say in such significant developments, particularly one costing over \$500 million in taxpayer dollars. The letter calls for the preservation of citizens’ democratic rights in the regulatory process and judicial review of agency decisions regarding the prison.

Atlanta, GA—Stop Cop City Indictments

Over 60 organizers and activists involved in the “Stop Cop City” movement in Atlanta, Georgia, are facing severe repression. They have been indicted with “organized crime and racketeering” charges, alleging a “criminal conspiracy” to stop the construction of a \$90 million police training facility in Atlanta known as “Cop City.” Many of these protesters had previously been arrested for their involvement in the movement to Stop Cop City, and some now face “domestic terrorism” charges. The charges even extend to allegations related to mutual aid groups’ reimbursements for food and supplies, which prosecutors claim constitute racketeering and mon-



November 16 solidarity action for immediate and permanent ceasefire, San Francisco Bay Bridge, CA.

ey laundering. These actions represent a clear escalation of an authoritarian crackdown on the movement to Stop Cop City and broader organizing efforts across the left. This development threatens the constitutional right to protest and highlights the challenges faced by activists in the South.

Most recently, organizers called for a week of action in the city beginning November 6 and concluding with a mass mobilization to retake the cleared forest on November 13 – a pivot in tactics after the city has actively sabotaged a successful referendum campaign to put Cop City on the November 7 ballot, and doxed the over 100,000 individuals who signed the petition demanding that the city let the people decide when it comes to a decision around the Cop City project moving forward or not.

INTERNATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS:

Global Demands for Ceasefire: Free Palestine Now! End the War & Occupation of Gaza!

The 75-year Israeli-settler occupation of historic Palestine has taken a devastating turn with Palestinians in Gaza enduring sustained, relentless Israeli bombing and violence from constant airstrikes and a ground invasion in the north, alongside simultaneous intensified vigilante and military attacks of Palestinians in the West Bank after Hamas took military action against apartheid Israel on October 7. In the first week of escalation, the all-out military siege on Gaza involved Israel dropping over 6,000 bombs on the open-air prison in six days, nearly as many bombs as the US dropped in one year of war on Afghanistan. The death toll of Palestinians in Gaza alone surpassed 10,000 in one month of a genocidal campaign to wipe Gaza off the map. As Israeli military forces began a ground invasion in northern Gaza, pushing Palestinians south, evacuation orders terrorized Palestinians with nowhere to turn as hospitals, schools, churches, mosques have been bombed. The people of Gaza have run out of food, clean water, and medical supplies, while the internet has been cut off several times due to constant shelling. Doctors, nurses, and healers on the ground have reported the medical system in Gaza has completely collapsed.

The situation has led to a full siege of Gaza. The Israeli military has declared “full control” of the Gaza fence and has conducted attacks on over 200 locations within the Gaza Strip. Millions of people—of all races, faiths and religions including anti-Zionist Jewish people—have mobilized around the world, demanding an immediate ceasefire, an end to the war, an end to apartheid Israel’s occupation, and an end to all military aid to apartheid Israel. Despite the war drawing international grief, urgency and solidarity, in an unsurprising move US President Joe Biden and European leaders continue to condemn Hamas’s actions, excusing continued Israeli violence, control, and repression of Palestinians. The Biden Administration is continuing the US’s unconditional military support, providing troops, tech, and countless of millions in military aid and weapons to the far-right Israeli government. Israeli officials and western media have been employing Islamophobic tropes and

focusing on unverified claims while downplaying the documented suffering and genocide of Gaza residents.

Palestinian trade unions made a global call to end all complicity with the Israeli war machine and to stop arming apartheid Israel on October 16. Since, organizations, activists and workers around the world including CR have heeded that call. Workers in Barcelona, Belgium, Greece and beyond have already vowed they will not handle ships containing weapons destined for Israel. Brave Arab-women-and-youth-led and anti-Zionist Jewish organizing, solidarity from unions, and direct action continue to sweep the globe to interrupt military aid to Israel. This has included trade unions in the United Kingdom blocking an arms factory in Kent to protestors blocking entrances to the Colt gun factory in West Hartford, Connecticut.

7 Million People in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are now Displaced

According to Democracy Now reports sourcing the International Organization for Migration, a record nearly 7 million people have been displaced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) due to ongoing conflict and violence, making it one of the largest internal displacement and humanitarian crises in the world. In 2022, insecurity in the country was exacerbated by a spike in violence in the eastern provinces of Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu, which displaced hundreds of thousands of people and claimed the lives of many more. The Congo’s eastern region has been the worst hit due to fighting between dozens of armed groups. Local communities have led protests against UN peacekeeping troops, saying they’ve failed to prevent escalating violence. Just last month, at least eight UN peacekeepers in eastern Congo were suspended over allegations of sexual assault. The DRC is world’s largest producer of battery material cobalt and a major copper producer. The DRC now heads toward a tense presidential election between different rival political and military groups.

Sudan—Brink of Collapse

According to Al Jazeera and Refugees International, Sudan is on the brink of collapse as forces loyal to two rival generals are battling for control of the resource-rich North African nation. The fighting in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) starting in mid-April 2023 has caused a regional humanitarian crisis. In South Sudan, the return of large numbers of South Sudanese – who had fled earlier violence in their own country – is causing what is in effect a mass, uncoordinated, and unplanned spontaneous repatriation movement. The violence has displaced more than 3 million people, including 2.2 million inside the country and more than 700,000 who have sought refuge in neighboring countries. More than 170,000 people have now crossed into South Sudan, which was already facing some of the highest levels of displacement and humanitarian need in the world.

Mexico: Nationwide Abortion Decriminalization

Mexico’s Supreme Court has taken a groundbreaking step by decriminalizing abortion nationwide. This decision expands on an earlier ruling that allowed the procedure on a region-by-region basis. The court has declared the federal penal code criminalizing abortion unconstitutional, making it legally accessible in all federal health institutions across Mexico. Furthermore, the decision also strikes down bans on medical providers, including midwives, who perform abortions. Although abortion remains illegal in 20 of Mexico’s 32 states, women can now legally seek abortions in federal hospitals and clinics. This ruling represents a crucial advancement in women’s reproductive rights and reflects a growing trend in Latin America toward broadening abortion rights.♦

ABBY THROWBACK:

For this issue’s “Abby Throwback” we reprint the following resource—a set of excerpts from a toolkit called “**Friends Make the Best Medicine: A Guide to Creating Community Mental Health Support Networks**” by the **Icarus Project**. This resource was originally published in **Issue 19 of The Abolitionist, winter 2013**, which focused on the theme of mental health.

The **Icarus Project** is a grassroots collaborative network of people living with and/or affected by experiences that are often diagnosed and labeled as psychiatric conditions. Icarus believes these experiences are mad gifts needing cultivation and care, rather than diseases or disorders, and thus works to provide a viable alternative to current methods of approaching and treating mental health. The Project advocates harm reduction, alternatives to the medical model, and self-determination in treatment and diagnosis.

CREATING MUTUAL AID GROUPS AND LISTENING SPACES

By The Icarus Project

Wildness has no walls. Sand mixes with salt-water, leaves drift into streams, and rain seeps through stone. When we lose ourselves in the pain of madness, it is really the walls of isolation that make us suffer. We want someone to understand, someone to see us, someone to be with. Like tenacious green tendrils that reach their way across any barrier and through any fence, our wild emotional selves are seeking a way to find others. Breaking through the walls and making a connection can mean all the difference in the world.

Mutual aid and support groups are a way to bring down the walls that isolate us. No one in the group is above anyone else: Mutual aid means we listen to and support each other as a community of equals, without paid professionals or staff to define who we are or get in our way. Each of us is an expert on our own experience, and each of us is the center for our decisions—and we are not alone.

When we gather together with people who’ve been through what we’ve been through, people who share some of the mysteries and suffering that get labeled “mental illness”, we discover new maps through crisis, learn new tools to stay healthy, and weave communities of solidarity to change the world. We discover something at the heart of the dangerous gift of madness: Caring for others is often the best way to care for ourselves.

LISTENING SPACES

There is a wide diversity of group models to draw on, and we encourage you to experiment to find the best fit for you. All of these approaches, however, share the same essential principle: Create a space for listening.

In nature, stillness, silence, and sky create a vast container for what is essential to emerge. Step into wilderness and you encounter a hushed patience and gentle holding that is rare in the noisy, sped-up, clash and clamor of our urban lives. Corporate monocropped culture suppresses true listening and imposes labels, rigid habits, and preconceived notions. Real support and caring means breaking down habitual ways of interacting, and meeting each other in spaces of true, effective listening.

KEY ELEMENTS OF LISTENING SPACES

- Don’t talk over others or interrupt. If someone interrupts, gently ask them to stop. Take turns. Raise hands or go in order.
- Don’t rush through or go too fast. Create a calm, quiet space without interruptions or distractions.
- Allow periods of silence while we find what to say.
- Let the speaker decide when they are done. Don’t jump in. If time is an issue, the group should decide on what’s fair and stick to it.
- Don’t react or speak up automatically. Watch how your reactions to what others say reflect your own experience, not that of the person speaking. Give yourself time to respond from a deeper place.

- Ask permission before giving advice or responding directly to what someone said. Sometimes people just want to be listened to.
- When someone responds to you or gives advice, allow yourself to take what is helpful from options presented, and leave the rest, rather than defending yourself if you disagree.
- Listen as a receiver, not as a critic. Imagine different perspectives and experiences, rather than assuming they’re just like yours.

FACILITATION AND SELF-FACILITATION

With their roots in effective listening, groups can nurture healing and community through facilitation. Facilitators help the group listen more effectively; they pay specific attention to the overall needs and direction of everyone involved, not just their own individual needs. The facilitator should avoid bias, and if they are too involved with a particular group topic then someone else might be better in the role. It helps when two people facilitate and when facilitators reflect group diversity such as gender, age, and race. It is also good to pair more experienced facilitators with less experienced ones, and to offer new people a chance to learn facilitation skills.

Importantly, everyone should keep overall group needs in mind, and everyone can assist the group through self-facilitation.

KEY ELEMENTS OF FACILITATION AND SELF-FACILITATION

- Create a clear agenda or plan for how to spend your time together.
- Keep track of time so people can “wrap up” their feelings without feeling cut off or not heard. Closing the meeting respectfully is as important as beginning it.
- Remind everyone to respect group confidentiality so sensitive information does not leave the room.
- Check in with the group’s energy level and focus, and re-direct the conversation if it is becoming scattered or bogged down. Suggest breaks, exercises, games, or agenda and time revisions when necessary. If conversation is lagging, ask questions, tell a story, or get up and do some stretching. Sometimes if the group is stuck, the facilitator can ask a clarifying question, reframe an issue, or connect points to earlier discussion.
- Offer choices, especially around whether people do or don’t want feedback after they speak.
- Consider using “I” statements when speaking, such as “I feel” and “I want”, to stay focused on your own feelings and needs. Talking about other people or gossiping takes focus away from your own experience.
- Encourage defining problems within the concept of “dangerous gifts” and unique mysterious talents rather than seeing ourselves as flawed or diseased.
- Use a common vocabulary and minimize jargon.
- Be on the lookout for repeating patterns in each other’s lives to identify root causes. Investigate how past experiences shape present realities. Did something from childhood happen this way, or an early work or school experience? The past can help explain the present, but stay focused on present problems.



By Nicole Rodrigues, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

- Reflect upon the political dimension of personal problems, and reframe problems within a framework of a crazy-making society instead of blaming the person suffering. Hold people accountable for behaviors but don’t criticize who they are as people.
- Focus on the things we can control and let go of things we can’t, but don’t give up on visions of change and revolution!
- Keep an experimental attitude and a willingness to explore new perspectives and options.
- Learn what triggers you and how to cope with them. Recognize the buildup, escalations, and de-escalations in crisis periods.
- Remember that the group is not a promise that problems will be solved, but a space to address problems safely.
- And finally: Know when to bust out! Nature isn’t always neat and orderly. Sometimes wild conversation, spontaneity, and “breaking all the rules of facilitation” is exactly what the group needs in the moment. A skilled facilitator and skilled participants can feel when the chaos and cacophony that erupt are refreshing and true to the group spirit, and go with it. Then comes the time to reel it all back in and return to the basic structure of taking turns and listening carefully.

INCLUSION AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The Icarus Project is a space for people who understand bipolar and other mental health diagnoses from outside the mainstream view of disorders, illness, and conformity. Groups need to be welcoming and inclusive, where diverse perspectives and life choices are respected and honored according to the principles of harm reduction and self-determination. For example, people who take psychiatric drugs and people who don’t take them are both welcome. People who use diagnosis categories like “bipolar” to describe themselves, as well as people who define themselves differently, are also welcome.

WAYS TO CREATE GROUP INCLUSION

- Invite newcomers to introduce themselves if they want to.
- Practice “stepping up, stepping back” so we can each contribute to equal participation.
- Give priority to people who haven’t yet spoken.
- Encourage quiet people to speak, but don’t require them to or put them on the spot.
- Be careful to not dominate the discussion, speak in capital letters, restate what others say, or speak for others.
- Allow each person to define their problems the way they want. Don’t label or judge others.
- If you disagree with someone, ask questions to better understand their point of view. This is not a time for arguments or for trying to convince others you’re right.

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- Respect different views and choices, such as diagnosis, medication, recreational drugs, nutrition, medical care, holistic health, exercise, spirituality, lifestyle, and other decisions. Change is difficult! People grow at their own pace, and you may not really know what is best for another person, because you are not them.
- Accommodate limitations and access needs, such as wheelchair accessibility and deaf interpretation. Be aware of how choices about where to hold meetings might affect people; institutional settings like clinics or health centers can trigger painful memories, or people might be chemically sensitive to places with toxic substances (fresh paint, new furniture, or new carpets).
- Identify and discuss how power and privilege play out by understanding how white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, heterosexism, ableism, and all other forms of oppression affect each of us.
- Intervene in situations where people are making oppressive comments. Re-focus on the agenda and remind everyone of the need for group safety. Recognize the intention behind someone's word choice, and give them an opportunity to correct themselves or recognize how their words might be offensive. It can help to say, "When I just heard you say that, some people might feel you used an inappropriate or disrespectful term. Can you re-word that statement?"
- Remember that including marginalized voices and overcoming oppression helps everyone's liberation.
- Put together a resource list of local low-cost/sliding scale health care practitioners who are open to non-mainstream views of mental health and recovery.
- Help people advocate for themselves with their doctors and health care practitioners; accompany them to appointments.
- Advocate for people struggling for justice: Publicize human rights violations, connect people to patients' advocate organizations, visit hospitals, contact area media, and write letters to the editor.
- Connect each other with legal aid resources, housing, community gardens, free food, and other needs.
- If a person is disruptive or needs a lot of attention, consider pairing them up with someone one-on-one, so they can get the focus they need and the rest of the group can continue.
- Sometimes interpersonal mediation one-on-one is better than a group trying to solve a problem between two people. Set aside interpersonal issues or conflicts that take a lot of group time to deal with outside of the group.
- Share info about activism, community events, and recreation so people can meet outside the group.
- Learn ways to help people when things start to come crashing down. Consider creating a crisis plan where people name their early warning signs and describe the support they want if they start to go into crisis.

MUTUAL AID AND ADVOCACY

When we listen to each other effectively, we begin to understand our needs and how to meet them. Icarus groups can become places to nurture community networks of mutual aid and advocacy, help each other through crisis, deal with the mental health system, and learn about new options and resources.

MUTUAL AID MEANS

- Ensure people can make their own best decisions by having solid facts about the drugs they take, their diagnosis, and options. Psychiatric drugs are toxic and have huge dangers pharmaceutical companies don't talk about, and diagnostic labels are often misleading and disempowering. At the same time, holistic health doesn't work for everyone, and going off drugs can be risky. Share lists of books, websites, and articles that have information correcting mainstream misinformation.
- Compare experiences with herbs and holistic health, medications that are helpful, and different treatments.
- Share advice and knowledge about how to reduce and go off medication safely if people want to.

- **Reading/Discussion Group:** The group chooses an article or book to discuss each meeting.
- **Emotional Support Group:** Participants gather because they share a particular problem/theme, such as chronic pain, being a veteran, or suffering grief and loss.
- **Hearing Voices Group:** Small gatherings across England and Europe where people discuss the experience of hearing voices and share ways to cope in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

Empower yourselves to explore different options and create your group the way that works best for everyone participating.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Revealing intimate information makes people vulnerable. Groups build trust when this vulnerability is respected and cared for. Your group should agree to a confidentiality policy and make sure to practice it. Some options are:

- **General Experience Only:** Members may discuss what they and others say and do with people outside the group, but only generally, meaning without any names, details, or clues about the specific people or events. This is a common policy used in the NYC Icarus group and Freedom Center; it supports discussion of sensitive topics such as abuse, criminal behavior, and suicide, while allowing participants to take what they learn to the rest of the world.
- **Personal Experience Only:** "What's said here stays here." Participants may discuss what they themselves say and do with people outside the group, but may not talk about, or even refer generally, to what others say or do. This is a more restrictive policy used for groups like 12-step groups, which focus specifically on difficult topics such as addiction and abuse.
- **Full Disclosure:** Group participants are free to talk about anything that happened in the group. While common for activist organizations and public events that want to get the word out freely, this approach should be weighed carefully for groups providing mutual emotional support.
- **Total Non-Disclosure:** Anything said or done is not repeated, nor even alluded to generally, to anyone outside the group. This can be useful for a closed group focused on a very sensitive topic, where participants want to go very deeply into personal issues over time.

Every group has different needs, so while General Experience Only is the most common support group policy, the group should set its own policy. Make sure to explain the confidentiality policy at the beginning of meetings, perhaps as part of the preamble. ♦

UNTIL ALL ARE FREE: POLITICAL PRISONER UPDATES

*In this issue's political prisoner updates, we highlight **spring through fall 2023 news regarding a few political prisoner cases**. This column is in no way a complete list of all political prisoner cases. As a prison industrial complex abolitionist organization, **Critical Resistance fights for the release and freedom of all prisoners**, whether recognized as political prisoners or not. We resist the use of imprisonment as a tool for political repression and control across our communities. Free them all!*

FREE ALL PRISONERS OF THE WAR ON PALESTINE!

Over 2 million Palestinians in Gaza have been imprisoned by the 16-year-long blockade by apartheid-Israel, due to the southwestern-most part of historic Palestine—roughly the geographic size of the city of Detroit—functioning

as an "open-air prison". As apartheid Israel's ongoing war on Gaza has intensified since October 7, the living conditions inside the open-air prison have severely worsened due to constant bombing, an unfolding ground invasion, and a complete control of any and all supplies or aid coming through the blockade (as mentioned in this issue's Movement Highlights column). The Israeli government claims all of its intensified military action is justified revenge for Hamas' action on October 7, when the armed Palestinian governing political party in Gaza struck Israel and took 200 Israeli hostages, most of whom are military and political officials, in order to conduct a prisoner exchange with the apartheid regime. Israel imprisons thousands of Palestinians in jails and prisons run by the Israeli Prison Services (IPS) as punishment for resisting Israeli military rule, including women and children. Over 1,100 Palestinians are imprisoned under administrative detention, or indeterminate im-



Palestinians celebrate the release of dozens of prisoners from Israeli administrative detention. Photo courtesy of Sky News, November 25, 2023.

prisonment without being charged or presented with evidence.

In only two weeks, Israel doubled its prison population of Palestinian prisoners in the IPS from

Continues on next page

5,000 to 10,000. In mid-October, amidst the escalation in Israel’s war of occupation against Palestine, the IPS cut off electricity and water to prisoners in Israeli jails, a practice of collective punishment Israel uses often, this time as retaliation for the October 7 action. The IPS also shut down all the sections of the jails, taking food supplies and cooking utensils from all the cells, installing more cellular and Wi-Fi jammers in prisons, carrying out mass inter-prison transfers, isolating prisoners, raiding cells on a daily basis, and maltreating and assaulting prisoners, especially if assumed to be affiliated with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The prisoners have also been deprived of watching TV, receiving visits, going to infirmaries, and walking in prison yards.

In the heart of the enduring Palestinian struggle, a powerful movement is unfolding within Israeli prisons. Palestinian prisoners are uniting in an indefinite hunger strike with a clear message that the world must recognize the oppression they face daily. Abolishing administrative detention is at the core of their demands. In response to Israeli authorities confiscating their personal belongings, prisoners are now boycotting regular medical checkups. This courageous act shines a spotlight on the unbearable conditions they confront as they fight for their fundamental rights and, ultimately, their liberation.

Critical Resistance stands with millions around the world in solidarity for a free Palestine, and demands the release of all political prisoners enduring apartheid-Israel’s prisons and jails and for the complete dismantling of its racist and militarized systems of control. **Free ‘em all and Free Palestine!**

REST IN POWER, DR. MUTULU SHAKUR!

The lifelong Black liberation revolutionary and healer died at age 72 on July 10 after a long battle with multiple myeloma, a blood cancer that can damage the bones and kidneys. Shakur was released from prison last year after more than 35 years behind bars on Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) charges for his alleged role in the Brinks armored-truck robbery and assisting Assata Shakur in escaping prison. He gave priceless work to movements for Black liberation and Black mental and physical health, working with the New Afrikan Independence Movement as a teenager and, in the late 1960s, with the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), a Black Nationalist group that promoted ideals of Black self-determination and socialist change nationwide. Shakur was also a member of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika, which sought to establish a Black state in the South, as well as an independent New Afrikan Republic. He also worked closely with the Black Panther Party. Shakur was an acupuncturist who practiced holistic medicine and worked to strengthen his community, specifically working with Lincoln Detox, an addiction treatment program founded in 1970 in the South Bronx by the Black Panther Party. **Mutulu Shakur, Presente!**

RUCHELL “CINQUE” MAGEE

On October 16, freedom fighter and jailhouse lawyer Ruchell “Cinque” Magee joined the ancestors at 84 years old, after 67 years behind bars. He had recently regained freedom on July 28 by way of California’s new compassionate release law, effective January 1 of this year. Magee, who was a victim of long-term denial of justice for racist, baseless accusations similar to those levied against Emmett Till, spent years in Louisiana’s Angola work farm / prison and was later reconvicted of manufactured charges in California, when persecuted for his involvement in the Marin County Courthouse fight, where he was the sole surviving revolutionary. After years of justice denied, we joined his supporters in gratitude that he did not die behind bars and for the lifetime of critical contributions to fighting the PIC he leaves us with. **Cinque, Presente!**

SIMÓN TRINIDAD

Colombian patriot and former revolutionary and negotiator with the Revolutionary Armed

Forces of Colombia (FARC), Simón Trinidad is facing a fresh escalation in his case as the Colombian government moves to make an example out of the FARC’s political organizing. Arrested in 2004 and extradited to the US, Trinidad is currently serving a 60-year prison sentence in the United States for charges of conspiracy to hold hostage three American military contractors operating in Colombia. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace, Colombia’s special tribunal for the prosecution of participants in the armed conflict, will assume 116 investigations into crimes in which the 73-year-old economist and former “foreign minister” of the now-defunct guerrilla group was allegedly involved. **The US must free Trinidad!**

ED POINDEXTER

August 31 of this year marked 53 years behind bars for former Omaha Black Panther and target of COINTELPRO Ed Poindexter. Several organizations that support prisoners’ rights are reporting Poindexter’s left leg was amputated below the knee late this summer owing to his deteriorating health condition. Neither his family nor his medical power of attorney were notified of the amputation. Poindexter has diabetes and receives dialysis five days a week. He underwent triple bypass heart surgery in 2016. Now, he urgently needs to be granted compassionate release before he loses his life to medical neglect behind bars. **Free Ed and free ‘em all!**

LEONARD PELTIER

In October, Indigenous organizations and their representatives and allies called on the US government to release longtime American Indian Movement prisoner Leonard Peltier during the 139th session of the United Nations Human Rights Committee in Geneva, Switzerland. Dr. Changrok Soh of South Korea, vice-chair of the Human Rights Committee, agreed with Indigenous representatives in Geneva that Peltier’s long imprisonment raises grave concerns and asked the US delegation to clarify what they are doing to address the fact that “‘death by incarceration’ continues to disproportionately impact Black and Indigenous Peoples in the US.” A representative of the Department of Justice said the US government cannot answer the question, as there is a pending clemency petition for Peltier. At 79 years old, Peltier is the longest-serving political prisoner in the US, with 48 years behind bars under two life sentences. He continues his fight from a maximum-security prison in Florida. **Free Leonard Peltier!**

STOP COP CITY CO-DEFENDANTS

On September 5, as 61 people were named in a state RICO indictment filed in connection with the yearslong campaign to Stop “Cop City,” several of the defendants are also facing separate charges of domestic terrorism, attempted arson in the first degree, and money laundering by Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr. **The massive indictment seeks to set a dangerous precedent for the criminalization of organizing**, including the targeting of bail funds, mutual aid fundraising, the use of anti-police slogans, and forest defense. Importantly, the indictment cites May 20, 2020 as the start date of the conspiracy activity related to stopping Cop City—the day that George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police—creating a clear strategy on the part of the state to connect the 2020 uprisings with the building of the police training center and the related opposition. Massive support all across the country is growing for the co-defendants and the ongoing push to stop the construction. **Stop Cop City!**

A TRIUMPH AMIDST ADVERSITY: KEVIN RASHID JOHNSON’S CANCER TREATMENT RESUMES

Kevin Rashid Johnson was moved into solitary confinement at Virginia’s Sussex 1 State Prison on June 30, 2023. Prison officials cited an investigation as the reason for his isolation as Rashid

was deprived of all his belongings and his daily radiation treatments for prostate cancer were abruptly halted. These treatments had been systematically delayed for over a year and a half, with prison authorities allowing the cancer to spread without intervention. Appeals for public support launched demanding the resumption of Rashid’s life-saving treatments, removal from solitary, and the return of his property. Rashid was transferred back to general population in August. Despite this injustice, Rashid expresses his heartfelt gratitude and resilience to his supporters for their unwavering care and fight, emphasizing that when they dare to struggle, they dare to win.

ED MEAD PRESENTE!

On November 6, 2023, lifelong abolitionist, writer, fighter, and **former political prisoner Ed Mead joined the ancestors** while at home on his 82nd birthday, after almost a decade of battling late-stage lung cancer. Spending much of his youth in reform “schools” and detention centers along the Pacific coast, Ed became politicized in prison in the 1960s. He was a founding member of the “GL* Brigade” (see editors’ notes on pages 4 and 20 for explanation of why the full name of the Brigade is abbreviated), a revolutionary guerilla underground organization based in the Pacific Northwest in the mid-to-late 1970s. Ed spent 35 years of his life in prisons, 18 of which were for his political actions.

While in prison for his part in armed struggle, Ed helped to form **Men Against Sexism (MAS)** at Walla Walla State Penitentiary in Washington. With other comrades, **Ed helped to put an end to prisoner-on-prisoner sexual assault** and other forms of abuse at Walla Walla. He also helped to form the **Committee to Safeguard Prisoners’ Rights** at Arizona State Prison. He was a seasoned jailhouse lawyer and a committed organizer within the prison walls.

Once released from prison in 1993, Ed worked tirelessly with revolutionary organizations and prisoner support groups, including but not limited to the **Prairie Fire Organizing Committee**, the **Attica Brothers Legal Defense Committee**, the **Seattle chapter of the National Jericho Movement**, **All of Us or None**, and the **National Lawyers Guild**. Ed’s movement contributions were foundational to Critical Resistance’s early years and played a major role in inspiring CR to develop its political orientation to prisoner solidarity organizing, including CR’s work with Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition.

“Regardless of when a general change in political consciousness may come to the US, the fact remains that the march of history and the forces of progress are on our side. Through the process of our struggle we will make important changes right now, changes that will also help to propel that much needed rise in consciousness right here in the belly of the beast.” — Ed Mead (1941–2023)♦



A photo of the GL* Brigade in 2010. Ed is in the foreground, to the left. Above, fromleft to right, is Mark Cook, bo brown, and Janine Bertram. Courtesy of Ed Mead’s support team and The Freedom Archives.

CALL FOR CONTENT

Help shape the content of *The Abolitionist*

Make your voice heard in our paper!

Write a piece for either our Features section **OR** one of our columns!

The Features of Issue 41 will focus on **environmental justice**; it will be our first issue of 2024 and will print in June. Issue 42’s Features will focus on **anti-war organizing**, and will be released by early December 2024.

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

- **Issue 41 Submission Deadline: Friday, March 1, 2024.**
- **Issue 42 Submission Deadline: Friday, August 2, 2024.**

There are many ways for you to shape the content of *The Abolitionist*, including submitting a piece to our Features section or supporting one of our columns:

1. Write a piece for our Features

- Pieces can be in many different forms of writing — from the theoretical to the reflective and action-oriented — but they will all share a common focus, theme, or topic of consideration. **Check the box above for Issue 41 and 42’s Feature focus!**
- **2. Submit content for one of our columns**
- 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.** It can relate to the Features or any 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 41 or 42, 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 on study for abolition** to respond to in future issues of the column.
- Send a **Kite to the Editors**.

Some approaches to writing Kites to the Editors:

- Elaborate on something you agreed with in an article and explain why you agreed.
- Elaborate on something you disagreed with in an article and explain why you disagreed.
- 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 needed in this political moment and to which you would like Critical Resistance to respond.

Send submissions for the Kites to the Editors section to:

The Abolitionist Paper
Attn: Kites to the Editors
P.O. Box. 22780
Oakland, CA 94609-2301

Please make sure you read our Submission Guidelines (below) 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 - Submission
PO Box 22780
Oakland, CA 94609-2301

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:

SEND US YOUR WRITING AND ARTWORK!

We accept articles, letters, creative writing, poetry, interviews, and art 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 imprisonment (or before!)
- 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 (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 the way you would like us to print it.** 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 (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 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.** As institutional mail can be slow, purposefully delayed at times, or even disappeared, please note in your submission the phrases or sections you would like the editorial collective to print untouched.

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