

Our Commitment Is to Our Communities:
Mass Incarceration, Political Prisoners, and Building a Movement for
Community-Based Justice
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MINATION

Today's disaster goes back to forces set in motion by then-President Richard Nixon in 1969. As recounted many years later when Nixon's chief of staff H.R. Haldeman published his diary, "P[resident Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the *whole* problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to." (*The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House*, entry for April 28, 1969, emphasis in original.) Although the context was welfare policy, this conversation reveals the strategic thinking that led to the birth of the terrible twins that continue to take a grim toll today: the illegal, often lethal covert government attacks on the Black Liberation

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INTERVIEW
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President Clinton presided over a major federal expansion in the 1990s, at the same time that he worked to “end welfare as we know it.” So, he continued the Reagan demagoguery of turning the frustrations of white working-class people away from the corporate rulers and toward the despised, racially constructed “others”—pictured as Black, along with immigrants pictured as Latino—while Clinton deregulated the banks.

BF: You wrote about the widespread damage from the war on drugs. Could that initiative have been an honest mistake, a kind of

and beings have been killed, an estimated 100,000 as well as thousands in Central America and Colombia, driven by illegal lucrative drugs. There are more people using drugs than when I was a child. I can imagine a program like Head Start that is funded with a cost/benefit ratio that is cut back despite—or maybe because of—the success.

Children—a concern my son has articulated to me on—because it is so obvious that the system is crime-generative.

incarcerated today with “prisoners” back then will end up with an inflated ratio. My figures compared incarcerated then to incarcerated today.

Another possible source of confusion is the distinction between numbers and rate. *Rate* is figured relative to overall population; that didn’t mushroom quite as much because U.S. population also increased (from 203 million to 308 million) over those decades. The comparison is still stark, from 161:100,000 in 1972 to 707:100,000 today—a 4.4-fold increase. The rate is the best way to compare countries of different sizes, with the U.S. rate being over five times that of most other industrialized nations. Rate also gives

and profits from prison labor play

a direct dollars and cents explanation. Often policy flows from broad ideas. The Prison Industrial Complex has a strategic economic position of its own. There are now some vested interests in it, too tiny and insignificant when it was first set up in 1970 to be a driving force. The expansion of private prisons only ac-

BF: Right now many mainstream voices are calling for reducing the number of people in prison. Is this a major turnaround? Why are we seeing this change now? What are the prospects of significant reductions?

DG: Two vectors have converged from opposite directions. On the top, the passion for tax cuts for the rich and resulting fiscal stresses have pushed officials to look for budget savings. Previously prisons weren't up for such discussion. But the war's very success in beating back political and social insurgency gives them a little breathing room at the same time that crime rates (street crime, that is:

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I don't think there is a magic formula for avoiding co-optation. We have to do our best to formulate far-reaching demands, to always educate about the systemic nature of the problems, and to work to build movement momentum. People on the outside have been responding to courageous prisoners' struggles like the recent (suspended for now) extensive hunger strike against indefinite solitary confinement in California which was followed by similar actions in a few other states. These actions fit into an international context of resistance, with hunger strikes at Guantanamo Bay and by Palestinians in Israeli prisons.

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The mainstream discourse pits women's safety against releasing prisoners. Radical women of color have challenged that formulation, not only because they see the damage done to their communities by mass incarceration, but also because they understand that the state itself is a major abuser of women of color. Beth Richie's *Arrested Justice* goes into it in depth, and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (see page 28) has been a leading organization in this regard. (See for instance their excellent book *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, edited by Andrea Smith, Beth Richie, and Julia Sudbury.)

So some of the people hit hardest by individual violence are

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educators, initiators of parenting programs, jailhouse lawyers, AIDS activists. And it goes in both directions. The solidarity many prisoners showed me made a big difference in my ability to parry harassment.

At the same time, who is in prison and why is very political—it's all about race and class. Also, some people are in prison for resisting attacks on women, gays or transgender and gender non-conforming people. And prison struggles themselves have produced some outstanding political leaders.

So there is a fluid, dynamic interaction between political prisoners and mass incarceration. We can't gloss over the ways some

the Black Liberation Army's conduct, the police, who functioned as Revolutionaries have the high-reventing civilian casualties. I used the term as a slander against them. The U.S. had Nelson Mandela until 2008. And recently the FBI shot Shukur on the top of their "domine of being shot by the police in the air.

some insurgents that do target

In my view, a political prisoner is anyone who's incarcerated as a result of her or his political positions or actions, usually as part of an explicitly political group. There's quite a range, including people we refer to as "Prisoners of War" because they were captured as a result of the just struggles for Black, Native American, Puerto Rican, or Chicano liberation; ex-Panthers who were framed (some are still in from the 1970s); anti-imperialists fulfilling our responsibility under international law to oppose racist and repressive regimes; working-class militants opposing capitalism; more recent environmental and animal liberation cases; nonviolent civil disobedience against nuclear weapons and/or drone attacks;

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BF: You spoke of Leonard Peltier's illness. Are other political prisoners having serious health problems? Have many died in prison?

DG: Sadly ... sadly many beautiful comrades have died in prison—not always, but often because of poor medical care compounded by the toll prison stress and diet can take. Just in New York State since I've been in, we've lost Kuwasi Balagoon, Nuh Washington, Jah Teddy Heath, Bashir Hameed—each one a thoughtful, caring human being with a lot to contribute.

Marilyn Buck, an inspiring example of a white person who was consistently anti racist, was released just a couple of weeks

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the continuity of struggles involved. The reality of political prisoners is a way—one of many—to give lie to the U.S. government's claim to being a beacon of human rights. And it's a very important and helpful way for today's activists to incorporate how the struggles against injustice have been going on for decades, and will have to continue for decades more.

BF: How has the world changed since you were last interviewed by "The Shadow" in 1991?

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People in the Global South are still waging crucial struggles, but we have less sense of revolution sweeping the globe. Within the U.S. we have an incredible range of organizing going on around a wide gamut of issues—from global warming to electronic surveillance and everything in between. And I must say that the young activists who write me are a lot less arrogant than I was, than we were, at that age.

But what's missing is the sense of a strong overall movement challenging the system as a whole.

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ORGANIZATIONS MENTIONED IN THIS PAMPHLET

Anarchist Black Cross Federation

www.abcf.net • info@abcf.net

The ABCF works to support political prisoners through building alliances and raising funds. If emailing the address above, include “prisonspam” in the subject to avoid being caught by the spam filter.

California Coalition for Women Prisoners

1540 Market St., Suite 490

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.

Decarcerate PA

P.O. Box 40764

Philadelphia, PA 19107

tel.: 267-217-3372

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New York State Prisoner Justice Network (NYSPJN)

3 Central Avenue
Albany, NY 12210

tel.: 518-434-4037

nysprisonerjustice@gmail.com

www.nysprisonerjustice.org

The New York State Prisoner Justice Network

is a grassroots group providing tools for

communication, coordination, and col-

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**No Surrender:
Writings from an
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Political Prisoner**

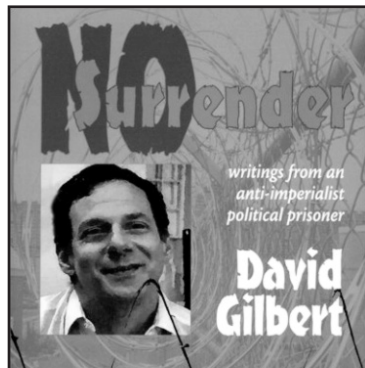
by David Gilbert

Published in 2004 by AG Press

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\$15.00

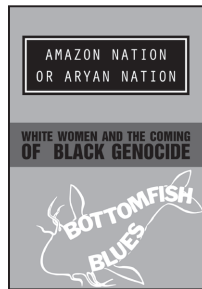
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The two main essays in this book come from the radical women's newspaper Bottomfish Blues, which was published in the late 1980s and early '90s; while a historical appendix on "The Ideas of Black Genocide

in the Amerikkkan Mind" was written more recently, but only circulated



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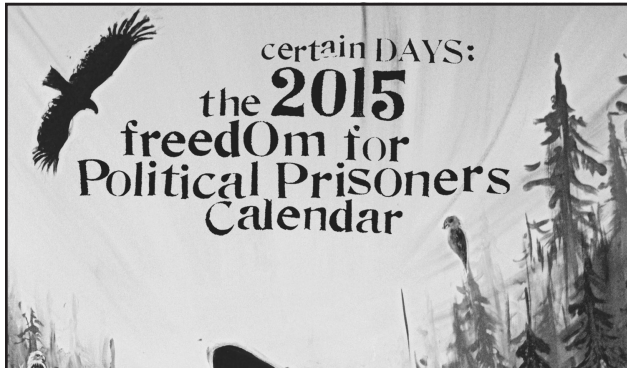
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The project has a non-exclusive focus on anti-patriarchal and anti-imperialist politics, framed within an anticapitalist perspective. A special priority is given the continuing struggles of political prisoners and prisoners of war.

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**The Struggle Within:
Prisons, Political Prisoners,
and Mass Movements in the
United States**

by Dan Berger

Published in 2014

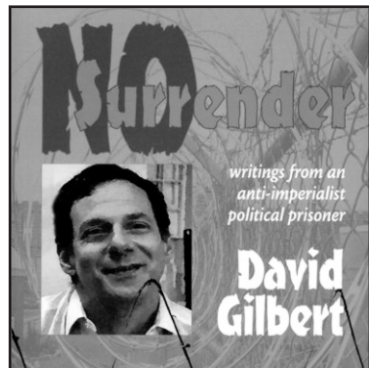
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*An accessible yet wide-ranging
historical primer about how mass*



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ORGANIZATIONS MENTIONED IN THIS PAMPHLET

Incite! Women of Color Against Violence

P.O. Box 226
Redmond, WA 98073

tel.: 484-932-3166
www.incite-national.org

*INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence
is a national activist organization of radical
feminists of color advancing a movement
to end violence against women of color and
our communities through direct action, criti-
cal dialogue, and grassroots organizing.*

New York State Prisoner Justice Network (NYSPJN)

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David Gilbert, a longtime anti-racist and anti-imperialist, first became active in the Civil Rights movement in 1961. In 1965, he started the Vietnam Committee at Columbia University; in 1967 he co-authored the first Students for a Democratic Society pamphlet naming the system “imperialism”; and he was active in the Columbia strike of 1968. He went on to spend a total of 10 years underground, building a clan-



There are all kinds of lessons, from the efforts to build a humane, democratic socialism in Venezuela to village-wide mobilizations against environmentally damaging dams in India to women-led struggles against neocolonialism and for food sovereignty in Kenya. Climate change is a stark reminder that we all live in one world, and we could do more to incorporate leadership from the South, such as the Cochabamba (Bolivia) Declaration on global warming.

For white activists today, we need to always be looking for ways to build solidarity with People of Color movements. The centrality of white supremacy underscores the value of the growing

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DG: Well, first of all, the Occupy movement was a breath of fresh air. It broke through a media juggernaut that totally misdefined the issues. After 30 years of mainstream politics totally dominated by racially coded scapegoating—directing people's frustrations against criminals, welfare mothers and immigrants—finally a loud public voice pointed to the real source of our problems. Their efforts to be more democratic and less sectarian than earlier movement generations were important, if uneven.

At the same time, a spontaneous and predominantly white movement will inevitably have giant problems of internalized racism and sexism. That will undermine us if we don't take it on in a

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BF: Who are the political prisoners in New York State, and what is their current status?

DG: New York State is holding several ex-Panthers and Black Liberation Army members, including Herman Bell, Seth Hayes, Jalil Muntaqim, Abdullah Majid, Sekou Odinga. My own case results from being an anti-racist ally of the Black movement. Mohamman Koti and Maliki Shakur have been in since the 1970s with cases related to the Black liberation struggle.

All of us have been in prison for over 30 years, Seth, Herman, and Jalil for more than 40. Whenever one of those three goes to the

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DG: There are a few reasons. In both cases, there's compelling evidence of innocence. Mumia was under the threat of execution for decades, and the barbarism of the death penalty helped mobilize international protests. Also, Mumia is a superb journalist—the volume and quality of what he produces is amazing—and he also has a top-flight support organization.

Leonard stands as the most salient example today of the U.S.'s long and brutal campaign of genocide against Native Americans. Also, just turned 70 and after some 37 years in prison, he has serious health problems, including diabetes and high blood pressure.

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rate and government property. The Black Liberation Army's conflict was with armed professionals, the police, who functioned as an occupying army in the ghettos. Revolutionaries have the highest standards about avoiding and preventing civilian casualties.

The establishment has inverted the term as a slander against anyone who fights the ruling classes. The U.S. had Nelson Mandela on their official "terrorism" list up until 2008. And recently the FBI put Black freedom fighter Assata Shakur on the top of their "domestic terrorism" list—for her crime of being shot by the police while she had her hands raised in the air.

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BF: How else does the criminal justice system affect women?

DG: While women are about 11 percent of prisoners, that means there are 250,000 behind bars, and their numbers have been growing at a much faster rate than men. About two-thirds of female prisoners are mothers; being torn away from one's children is wrenching. A very large percent of women convicts were previously subjected to physical and/or sexual abuse—and now find themselves subjected to constant surveillance and frequent pat down searches by officers, often males.

But probably the most extensive impact on women goes back

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(page 28) has been a leading orga-
instance their excellent book *Color*
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vulnerable than themselves. But we need to recognize that the criminal justice system, by removing parents, taking potential wage-earners out of the local economy, and promoting the breakdown of family and community ties, generates a lot more violent crime than it prevents.

Those sincerely concerned about real harm need to pursue a more holistic and community-based approach, which will do a lot more to promote safety and security. I don't think abolition means letting every single prisoner out tomorrow. At the same time as we build the outside communities, we need real constructive programs for people who've been damaged

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many white prisoners buy into white supremacist ideology as a way to feel they're better than other people, even while racism is in fact the underlying reason for their current plight. Conversely, the only period of positive reforms for prisoners as a class flowed directly out of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.

Naturally, those on the top are only considering minimal reforms, to save a little money and to clean up a sullied image, in the interest of maintaining the overall repressive, punitive nature of the system. They'll be ready to revive the "tough on crime" demagoguery if they feel they need it. So it's up to us who are or stand with the oppressed to take this opening to generate a movement that

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BF: What role do private prisons and profits from prison labor play in this expansion?

DG: We on the left tend to look for a direct dollars and cents explanation for every development, but often policy flows from broad strategies to maintain class control. The Prison Industrial Complex has nowhere near the size nor the strategic economic position of the Military Industrial Complex. There are now some vested interests that play a role, but they were too tiny and insignificant when the hyperexpansion of prisons began in 1970 to be a driving force. Even after all these decades of expansion, private prisons only ac

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Globally, thousands of human beings have been killed, an estimated 70,000 in Mexico alone, as well as thousands in Central America, from the violence spawned by illegal lucrative drugs. The result of all this carnage: today more people use drugs than when the war was launched. Could you imagine a program like Head Start or Food Stamps still getting funded with a cost/benefit ratio like that? Actually, they are getting cut back despite—or maybe because of—their proven effectiveness.

Let's talk for a minute about children—a concern my son has studied, advocated about, and educated me on—because it is so heart-rending and also is a key way the system is crime-generative.

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
WITH NY STATE**



communities. And now women are being locked up at an unprecedented rate, with 250,000 in prison or jail. Having either parent absent can be traumatic and damaging for the children left behind. As the mania for mass incarceration spread, many poorer white people got swept in too. On that day when Nixon complained to Haldeman about “the blacks”, there were less than 300,000 human beings incarcerated in the U.S.; today the number is 2,300,000.

The only way to turn around the damage done by crime is to have community-based justice. On the one hand that involves developing an economic vibrancy that provides constructive ways to make a living and to meet community needs such as housing

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COMMUNITY-BASED JUSTICE AND SELF-DETERMINATION

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