

CR10

STRATEGY &
STRUGGLE TO
ABOLISH THE
PRISON
INDUSTRIAL
COMPLEX



ON THE WEEKEND of September 26-28, 3,500 people gathered in Oakland, California to hasten the death of the prison system. Marking the tenth anniversary of the prison-abolition group Critical Resistance, this conference, "CR-10" drew a diverse assemblage from around the country — diverse in terms of age, race, gender, sexuality, and political experience.

Activists, scholars, and former prisoners were all represented — three categories by no means mutually exclusive. Comprising three days of workshops, discussions, and films, the conference promised to assess the first ten years of the organization, evaluate present conditions, and consider future directions for the movement.

At present there are 2.3 million people in American prisons or jails. Whether measured in numerical terms or on a *per capita* basis, this is more than any other country. And it is seven times as many as in 1970.

Most of these prisoners are people of color: 40% are Black and 20% Hispanic. A Black man has a 32% chance of being incarcerated during his lifetime; an Hispanic man has a 17% chance; for a white man, the figure is 6%. This fact suggests one function of mass incarceration: the defense of white supremacy in the post-civil rights era.

As the prison system has expanded, as it has become increasingly integral to both our political and economic systems, as it has developed into what CR calls "the Prison-Industrial Complex" — the idea of abolition has become simultaneously more remote and more important.

Ten years ago, in 1998, Critical Resistance became a national organization almost by accident. As one of the founders, Ruthie Gilmore, explained it to me, CR started as a loose coalition of people who were already fighting the prison system; they decided to host a conference called "Critical

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Addressing Abolition, Violence, Race and Gender

Critical Resistance at 10 By Kristian Williams

Resistance," and ended up forming the organization that inherited that name.

Since then CR has grown to an organization with hundreds of members and branches in nine cities. CR has also shifted the discussion among activists, establishing abolition as a legitimate point on the political continuum. It also challenges us to find other solutions to crime.

These two contributions became the largest preoccupations of the CR-10 conference, at least from what I saw: uncertainty about the relationship between prison reform and prison abolition, and the search for alternatives to incarceration.

Tony Platt, a criminologist and one of the organizers of the 1972 "Tear Down the Walls" conference, remembers, "The prison movement of the early seventies paid almost no attention to crime. Crime was romanticized as a sort of pre-political form of rebellion. . . . The issue of violence within communities was not given a priority."

This naiveté cost the movement dearly, allowing the right wing to monopolize the issue of crime, leveraging it for political support and using it to reframe issues of poverty and race.

Tensions With Feminism

Worse still, in the '70s, at exactly the time when feminists were pressing the authorities to take violence against women seriously, the anti-prison movement largely ignored the experience of survivors of crime.

Tensions between the anti-racist and feminist strands of the left were exacerbated, and feminist strategy increasingly came to rely on state intervention. Platt credits the 2001 "Critical Resistance-Inciter Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex" for trying to realign the two tendencies.

That statement, jointly released by the two organizations begins:

We call on social justice movements to develop strategies and analysis that address both state and interpersonal violence, particularly violence against women. . . . It is critical that we develop responses to gender

violence that do not depend on a sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic criminal justice system. It is also important that we develop strategies that challenge the criminal justice system and that also provide safety for survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

The statement goes on to enumerate the many ways both the anti-prison movement and the mainline feminist movement have — largely because of the fissure between them — marginalized women of color.

On the one hand, "the mainstream anti-violence movement has increasingly relied on the criminal justice system" without fully considering the impact of increased policing and incarceration on communities of color. On the other hand, "because . . . [prison abolitionists] have not always centered gender and sexuality in their analysis or organizing, we have not always responded adequately to the needs of survivors of domestic and sexual violence."

Women of color inhabit an intersection between racism and sexism, so analyses that only focus on one type of oppression tend to leave them out. Feminists cannot afford to forget about racism, and they cannot rely on racist institutions. They need to consider the way the state reproduces inequality and examine the real effects of a state-centered strategy. At the same time, prison abolitionists cannot be sanguine about crime, or ignore its victims; they must find alternate solutions to violence and help ensure community safety.

By pushing for dialogue, the CR/Incite! statement greatly benefited both of the movements it addressed, making clear the absolute need for an analysis that takes account of both race and gender. Such an analysis needs to address both interpersonal and state violence. The statement, while rightly critical of the two movements, actually provided a basis for unity: It demonstrated that the feminist anti-violence movement and the anti-prison movement share a common task.

Indeed it seems that the anti-prison movement has taken the challenge seriously. Of the 167 workshops listed in the CR-10 program, 13 dealt in a direct way with find-

ing alternatives to incarceration and other state violence. These included: an Incite! workshop specifically for people of color on "Community-Based Responses to Violence;" a presentation by the Audre Lorde Project on their efforts to use "community accountability strategies" to address both hate crimes and police brutality; a roundtable discussion on existing alternatives in place in California; a presentation by Creative Interventions on "Community Accountability Strategies for Intimate Violence;" and a workshop by Generation Five on responses to child sexual abuse. Of course, the question of alternatives also arose in workshops not specifically focused on the issue.

Facing Hard Questions

Yet while talk about long-term strategies and the need to develop alternatives was spotlighted, consideration of immediate reforms has been sidelined. This ambivalence is similarly reflective of lessons drawn from past mistakes. After all, the modern peniten-

tiary was itself started by reformers — promoted as a humane alternative to corporal punishment.

More recently, the drive to eliminate indeterminate sentencing began as a reform effort and produced the policy disaster of mandatory minimums. Naneen Karraker, one of the organizers of the 1998 Critical Resistance conference, looks back on that effort with regret: "In retrospect, [it was] a very bad decision, because rather than having fewer people in prison for a shorter time, the legislators made it so that there were more for a longer time."

There is always the danger that reforms will extend the life of the institution, add to its legitimacy, or even increase its power. How do you balance that against the chance to alleviate some portion of the real suffering experienced by people who are in prison now?

One workshop was provocatively titled, "Are the fight for reform and the fight for abolition mutually exclusive?" During the

session, a young Black woman working for reforms said, "I'm looking for real world advice, not just CR-10 conference advice, on how we accomplish the just, not just the possible."

There are hard questions here, questions that cannot be neatly put aside with platitudes or abstractions. At the opening plenary, Andrea Smith of Incite! advocated "revolution by trial and error," explaining "If we really knew how to end oppression we would have done it by now."

Angela Davis called for both hope and urgency. She argued that, despite the increasing numbers of prisoners, "we've moved further toward the goal of prison abolition. . . . We have come a long way in the last ten years. But we are not yet there. And so impatience is important. Impatience."

She concluded, "Abolition is not a never-to-be-realized utopian dream of the future. Abolition is our collective practice. So we say, Abolition Now, Abolition Now, Abolition Now!" §

Teachers Union Repels SEIU Raid — continued from page 8

The defeat of the SEIU raid is to be welcomed. SEIU sought by its raid not only to replace FMPR as the teachers' representative, but also to replace FMPR's style of militant and democratic unionism with its own brand of top-down, management-friendly brand. But the rank-and-file teachers rejected SEIU's bureaucratic approach.

Indeed, the FMPR's "Vote NO" campaign defeated SEIU by virtue of the very grassroots militancy which SEIU, in collusion with the government, had sought to weed out. Thus militant and democratic unionism emerged victorious in both practice (as a winning strategy) and in the realm of ideas (as a quality which teachers desire in their union).

The victory over SEIU is also heartening in that it demonstrates how a relatively small, but extremely dedicated band of labor activists and reformers can in fact make headway against a much larger and more powerful foe. At the same time, the 2008 strike calls for a sobering assessment, as does the present situation of the FMPR and the teachers they represent. These are the new and daunting challenges for the FMPR in 2009: to win back exclusive representation of the teachers and a strong contract.

Into this mix, the incoming administration of Governor Luis Fortuño, faced with a growing fiscal crisis, has escalated the anti-labor offensive by proposing to freeze the economic provisions of all public sector collective labor agreements. Undoubtedly the government hopes that a divided labor movement will not be able to put up an effective resistance, and if necessary, that it can neutralize the more amenable unions with a few concessions.

The FMPR and the unions closest to it, grouped in the Coordinadora Sindical, have led to the creation of a Frente Ampio de Solidaridad y Lucha, which has attracted community and other groups opposed to government austerity and new regressive tax measures. Meanwhile AFL-CIO, CTW and the CPT unions have also come together to oppose the proposed measures. While in light of this anti-labor offensive mutual attacks have been toned down, there is little

contact between the leaders of the opposing wings.

It will be difficult to combine the modulations of a radical but realistic labor movement and the broad coalition it leads, on the one hand, with the need for joint actions of all labor organizations. But if it wishes to emerge beyond its present difficulties, it is this fine line that Puerto Rico's labor movement must now tread. §

Health Care Unions At War

THE SERVICE EMPLOYEES International Union (SEIU) and its former section United Health Care Workers-West (UHW) are at war after SEIU's leadership ordered the seizure of UHW's headquarters. UHW's elected officers, deposed in the SEIU takeover, are forming a new union, the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW).

The longstanding dispute between SEIU and UHW leadership began with differences over how contracts would be negotiated. In particular, UHW President Sal Rosselli disagreed with SEIU President Andy Stern over whether UHW should give up the right to strike or to publicly criticize employers in order to obtain an employer's acceptance of union organizing.

The health care union fight escalated over the past year. At the April, 2008 *Labor Notes* conference. Instead of taking the opportunity to debate their differences with the California Nurses Association, SEIU agents attempted to smash their way into the banquet hall to "protest" the presence of CNA leaders.

Last summer, the SEIU convened trusteeship hearings against UHW, presided over by one-time U.S. Labor Secretary Ray Marshall. In a bizarre ruling, Marshall rejected the SEIU's stated reason for the trusteeship — that UHW had set up a nonprofit organization to finance its conflicts with the International — but nonetheless recommended trusteeship for the UHW's refusal to accept the splitting off of 65,000 long-term health care workers from UHW jurisdiction.

Ultimately the SEIU engineered a mail referendum among the union's 300,000 California health care workers — in which fewer than 24,000 actually voted — following which, on January 9, the SEIU International Executive Board voted to create the statewide "long-term care" local. UHW was placed under formal trusteeship after it refused to accept this carveup without a membership vote.

Meanwhile the Change to Win coalition, launched with great fanfare by the SEIU leadership as a breakaway from the AFL-CIO, is getting ready to fold its tent. §

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