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EX-WORKER



PRISON
and
PRISON
ABOLITION

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PRISON

“One day of prison. Two days of prison. Three days of prison. A month of prison. The door closes and opens, then closes and opens again. Three months of prison. A year of prison. I need to know if others are thinking about me as much as I’m thinking about them. The days can’t go by fast enough now. Four hundred-eighty-two days of prison. Four-hundred-eighty-three days of prison. Four-hundred-eighty ... I’ve lost count. Fuck. It’s better that way. Counting is no good in prison. The arithmetic makes no sense whatsoever.”

This text is quoted in *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, a collection of writings partially by people locked up in Italian jails, published by MIT Press about the Autonomist Movement active from 1976 to 1978.

The State of the US Prison System

Alanis: Ask a warden how many people are imprisoned in his facility and without a doubt he’ll tell you the maximum capacity number.

Bulging under the tension of incarcerating 1.6 million adults in state and federal prisons around the country, many prisons in the US have had to create makeshift

living quarters for detainees. Inmates sleep in public spaces like gymnasiums and cafeterias, and cells which were designed to house only one person now house three. Marie Mason once lived in a gymnasium-sized control unit that housed up to 20 female prisoners, but recently, this space has been cut in half with a new wall. For years the United States has incarcerated far more people than any other country, today imprisoning some 716 people out of every 100,000. Over the past 30 years, the federal prison population in the US has jumped from 25,000 to 219,000 inmates, which is an increase of nearly 790 percent. As a result of harsh sentencing, the average age of prisoners is changing as well. Last year, some 95,000 juveniles under 18 years of age were put in prison, and that doesn't count those in juvenile facilities. "And between 2007 and 2011, the population of those over sixty-four grew by 94 times the rate of the regular [prison] population." In 2011 the Supreme Court labeled CA's overcrowded conditions in its jails 'unconstitutional' and ordered the state to release 30,000 prisoners by the middle of 2012. In response, California slowed down the admission rate, and had 15,000 fewer prisoners by the end of the year. The total state prison population dropped by about 70 percent due to California alone. Though the US prison population is shrinking slightly because of California, the number of inmates in federal lockup is increasing. Some prison reformists argue that the most important element in explaining the hefty incarceration numbers are "mandatory minimum" sentencing requirements at both the state and federal levels, which automatically requires certain prison sentences for certain crimes. Prison reformists argue that changing these policies can reduce prison populations, by reducing in lengthy prison terms that contribute to overcrowding. Bending under their own weight, in 2011 seven states weakened or repealed certain mandatory minimum regulations. That's kinda surprising actually since, these prison labor makes up a huge part of the American workforce.

Under the guise of "vocational training," inmates are often paid pennies or minimum wage—minus fines and victim compensation—to package Starbucks coffee, Nintendo Game Boys, and process more than 680,000 pounds of beef, 400,000 pounds of chicken products, 450,000 gallons of milk, 280,000 loaves of bread, and 2.9 million eggs (from 160,000 inmate-raised hens). The seamlessness of capital and state structures reaches an apex, when Texas prisoners slave over I mean, produce the cops' duty belts, gun containers, handcuff cases, human-silhouette targets and prison-cell accessories that cage them. Of course, in the

ever-expanding age of capital, it's also not surprising that many of today's lock-ups are not operated by the government, but by for-profit companies. And thus! Some people are making lots and lots of money off the booming business of keeping people in cages. But who are these people? Well, The Correction Corporation of America, which is the largest prison operator, imprisons 80,000 inmates in 60 prisons. GEO Group is the second-largest private prison operator in the country. And, Vanguard Group and Fidelity Investments, America's top two 401(k) providers, together own about 20 percent of both CCA and GEO. Let's not forget the people who make meager amounts of money off this centuries old custom of keeping human beings in cages:

Wardens, cooks, prison medical staff, county sheriffs, probation officers, parole board members, clergymen, state patrol and prison guards, court personnel, bailiffs, cops, and prison truck drivers. This people are also known as our neighbors, parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, siblings, strangers, acquaintances, or people you see on the bus or at the library. They are not friends; they are the state.

The State

Child: Mom, where do prisons come from?

Computer: The state.

Clara: Ya know, prisons are like micro-states. [Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*.]

Alanis: How can you say that? Like a state is like a thing. No one even knows what a state is. [Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*]

Clara: I don't think that's true.

Alanis: Now that I think about it, the state might not even exist.

Clara: It obviously exists. We struggle against it. How could we struggle so much against something that doesn't exist?

Alanis: At least, No one agrees then what it is.

Clara: That's fair.

Clara: There are lots of theories about what's a state. When we look at how those theories have changed over time, we can see the State has become a system that works around us and through us, and possibly by understanding our footing we can start to map out resistance.

So imagine back in the day when peeps were trying to figure out how to overthrow the Russian Tsar.

The communists envisioned society as warring classes and the state was the exterior force that held these warring classes together, settling disputes from above. [Lenin quoting Engels, *The State and Revolution*.]

Like a parent settling a disagreement between two kids, the state gets to decide what kind of physical force is legit and what kind was not, and that meant in that interest of holding everyone together, the state gets to decide who lives and who dies. That's the law.

Okay, so imagine the two classes in conflict, just two big blobs bumping up against one another, now draw a big circle around them. That circle represents the decision making process of the state. Everyone within the circle is subject to the state's decisions. Everything outside the circle is outside of that law.

Any sort of criminal justice system exists within the circle. So although tensions between the class may run high from time to time and one side may get a little out of control, within the circle there's a pre-conceived way of dealing with the situation. If there's a law broken, there's a punishment; if there's a fight, there's a resolution.

Alanis: Then what could exist outside of the circle?

Clara: Well, sometimes states bend the rules. For example states issue emergency decrees, come under martial law, abandon constitutional civil liberties for protection of homeland security, and extend military authority to the civilian sphere. When instituted, these laws don't draw a new circle, but instead imagine a big hand picking apart bits of each blob and putting them outside of the circle. In this no-man's land coined the state of exception, State power is completely without restraint ...

Alanis: ... And armed with every resource that the blob-os within the circle has provided it. Grrrrreat.

Clara: Now that we have a basic diagram of the state let's look closer at how it functions.

Alanis: By diagram, do you mean the blobs and their circle?

Clara: Yep! Now we're gonna look inside the circle with the understanding that there's a big hand hovering over the blobs at all times ready to pluck bits of them away.

In the next phase of our state theory, Louis Althusser suggests that the state works in collusion the ruling class. Let's say one blob is bigger than the other. It's rich, it's popular, it's clearly in control, it's attractive and basically everyone thinks the big blob is really great. That's the ruling class.

So, it seems as though there's a grand system setup to favor the interests of the Big Blob. This grand system is known as repression, which includes all state action from the most brutal physical force, to open and tacit censorship.

How does the smaller blob not just totally freak out though under all this pressure? With the whole circle thing and now this grand repressive system thing? Althusser suggested that there are actually two state structures that work together to do what the state has always done: hold the warring classes together. So there's this repressive system that contains the government, administration, the army, the police, the courts, and prisons, but then there are ideological institutions that make everyone feel like they know what's going on and kinda create this social lube, whereby the state keeps order and the big blob stays on top.

So imagine this state as an electric chair: the repressive system is like the chair and the straps, and the ideological institutions are like the sedative that you take before.

Alanis: Wait, so, what's the electricity?

Clara: Oh, yeah, that's the state power coursing through you and the chair. Zap sounds

Clara: Speaking of executions, do you wanna talk about Foucault?

Alanis: Yeah.

Magic Wand Noise

In the middle of the 20th century Foucault's thoughts on this topic marked a divergence from preceding theories about the state and sovereignty. Foucault was more interested in how this whole state thing keeps happening, particularly in the wake of World War II. In different ways, both Althusser and Foucault looked at how the state has evolved from an institution that maintains order between the blobs by like taxation and handing out death penalties. And, Foucault arrives at something much more amorphous and spiritually penetrating; He kinda argues that the state doesn't even exist anymore. Instead, we live in societies of control.

For Foucault the classical notion of the sovereign power has receded and discipline advanced. In *Discipline and Punish*, we witness punishment as spectacle disappear. Now, the certainty of punishment, and not its horror, deters a person from committing a crime. Instead of a cleaved hand, conviction marks the prisoner.

Culpability exists in the motives, passions and instincts of the criminal. The supervision and direction of an individual's mind became the crux of punishment. When the penalty addresses the soul, rehabilitation is possible.

And, the power to punish becomes fragmented and shared among different points in society; everyone can have a hand in judging a criminal. Punishment grows into a complex social function predicated by a common body of Knowledge.

The force of the state doesn't come from physical weapons or material conditions of any kind, instead, power relations operate and exist through people. Power is not a property but a strategy visible in the relations between people. He would encourage thinking of the body politic as a series of routes and weapons by which power operates. And, this history of power dynamics has shaped genealogy of the soul. Now, "the soul is the prison of the body."
(*Discipline and Punish*, p. 30)

From here the Situationists, a surrealist group of autonomous Marxists, scrawled on the wall of the Sorbonne during riots of May 68, "How can you think freely in the shadow of a church?" in response, an anonymous comrade later wrote, "This impeccable question has wider implications. Anything that has been designed for economic or religious purposes cannot fail to impose anything but economic

or religious desires. A desecrated church continues to be the house of God. Commodities continue their chatter in an abandoned shopping centre.

The parade ground of a disused barracks still contains the marching of the soldiers. That is what he who said that the destruction of the Bastille was an act of applied social psychology meant. The Bastille could never have been managed as anything other than a prison, because its walls would have continued to tell the tale of incarcerated bodies and desires."

Radical Response to the Prison System: Prison Reform, Prison Abolition and Anarchist Black Cross

Child: Mom, how do we destroy prisons?

Clara: The contemporary prison abolition movement has deep roots in the abolitionist movement of the 1800s. Today there are more black people under correctional control, in prison or jail, or on probation or parole than were enslaved in 1850— a decade before the Civil War began. Academic and prison abolitionist Angela Davis:

"And we've come to think about the prison-industrial complex as linked very much to slavery, as revealing the sediments and the vestiges of slavery, as providing evidence that the slavery we may have thought was abolished with the Thirteenth Amendment is still very much with us. It haunts us, especially in the form of this vast prison-industrial complex, a prison system within the US that holds something like 2.5 million people, more people in prison than anywhere else in the world, more people per capita, as well. The rate of incarceration, one in 100 adults in the US is behind bars. And that's really only because of the disproportionate number of black people and people of color whose lives have been claimed by the prison system."

Clara: While in reality fewer than 1 in 100 Americans are in jail, among the population of young black men the ratio is closer to 1 in 4. Today, a young black man is more likely to be imprisoned than to get married or go to college. The

abolitionist movement continues today and calls for the end of the prison industrial complex, though many activists focus their energies on specific reforms such as eliminating the death penalty— for example, Mumia Abu-Jamal, a black nationalist who spent 30 years on death row, is an important figure in the abolitionist movement. Abolitionists also call for the shifting of resources away from punishment and toward education, housing, and social services that build up communities instead of tearing them down. These arguments are similar to those Frederick Douglass or W.E.B. DuBois might have made with respect to the abolition of slavery. Many prison abolitionists advocate replacing the contemporary prison system with other governmental structures, or even just reducing the role of prisons in society. But some organizations, such as the Anarchist Black Cross or ABC, seek the total eradication of prisons, with no intention of replacing them with other state-controlled systems, instead proposing a variety of community and individual processes. The first Anarchist Black Cross emerged out of the Tsarist government's repression of Anarchists in 1906. Once released, former prisoners provided clothing to anarchists exiled to Siberia under the banner Anarchist Red Cross. During the Russian Civil War, the ARC's name changed to Anarchist Black Cross to avoid confusion with the International Red Cross. The organization coordinated self-defense units against political raids by the Cossack and Red armies. Today, a number of autonomous groups scattered throughout the world operate under the ABC name, providing material and political support for a wide variety of prisoners.

Insurrection

Child: Mom, how do we destroy prison society?

Clara: Can I make an understatement?

Alanis: Yeah.

Clara: One key obstacle to destroying prisons is that it's not just the walls and barbed wire.

Alanis: It's not even just the guards and wardens.

Clara: We are all enclosed, surveilled and aware of all of this. "Imagine a city where you would be able to leave your apartment, your street, your

neighborhood, thanks to your individual electronic card that raises a given barrier; but the card could just as easily be reject on a given day or during certain hours; what counts is not the card or the barrier, but the computer that tracks each person's position—whether legal or illegal—and effects a universal modulation." If you're a prisoner, this is pretty easy to imagine.

Alanis: Hell, if you're an office worker or a postal employee!

Clara: In 1989, the French government launched a reorganization of the French penitentiary system, called the "Program of the 13,000" in an effort to create this imaginary city. The declared aim was to create 13,000 new "spaces" for prisoners in order to alleviate overcrowding. It was a modern prison system promising security through new technologies capable of constantly controlling the prisoner in each of his movements in a discreet and aseptic way. Os Cangaceiros took up this challenge launched by the French government and, starting in April 1989, began a long campaign of sabotage at the construction sites, as well as managing to steal the new building blueprints. This group of antagonistic workers had emerged from May 68 already a collection of petty criminals, social outlaws and the willing accomplices of prisoners. The term *cangaceiro* was a pejorative used to refer to bands of poor peasants who inhabited the northeastern deserts of Brazil, wearing leather clothing and hats and armed with revolvers, shotguns and long narrow knives. As reflected by their title, Os Canagaceros lived simple lives and used simple tools. They wrote, "We don't just talk about violence; it is our element, our everyday fate...the conditions we are forced to live in... Our tools of action are those that any proletarian uses: sabotage and vandalism. We don't do symbolic actions; we create disorder, as workers in struggle commonly know how to do when they blockade roads and railroads, sabotage materials, television transmitters, etc..." The simplicity made struggle easy to reproduce, and within weeks similar eruptions had spread throughout France. After more than a year of sabotage, Os Cangaceiros obtained 10,000 addresses of residents in the vicinity of future prisons to whom they sent extracts of a voluminous dossier containing dates and information about the institutions of punishment that were being built. And in November 1990, they published the complete dossier entitled *Thirteen Thousand Escapes*. The dossier contained accurate technical documentation about the many prisons under construction or in the process of being restructured, with general outlines; information about materials used; fixtures; controls of access, doors and locks;

electric and hydraulic systems; sanitation; roofing; and external installations. And, above all, there are detailed little maps of every building and its particulars.

Alanis: So, as anarchists we see how civilization continues its mad path toward the enslavement, commodification and eventual destruction of all life on earth, and the state remains persistent in its repression of those who choose to act upon their desire to put an end to it. They know that every arrest, every jail term, every snitch in the world cannot stifle each of our irrepressible passions, for the informality of our resistance is strength, and they can never take away our solidarity of frustration and awakened hearts. They cannot preclude our desire for insurrection if we remain dedicated to supporting, through both aid and continued action, those in our communities who fall victim to the state's repression.

Clara: When some insurrectionary anarchists choose to couple their material support of prisoners with a personal hatred of prison society, this hatred has historically manifest in the form of fire and well-coordinated attacks on state facilities, and if everything goes according to plan, the timing of the assault will also publicize a corollary prison riot. But as Os Cangaceiros demonstrated, there are lots of actions that both enable prisoners to live subversively and reject the spectacle of the state.

Clara: We asked a supermax lockup prisoner who has been rebelling against the state prison system for over twenty years for his opinion on the role of insurgency inside and outside. I apologize for audio, but whatever open prison rebellion won't be polished either. This audio crawled through a few dozen feet of concrete and bulletproof glass to get here.

Imprisoned Comrade: Everybody got a little. You got inside you got outside, you got light hits you got hard hits. Um, the object should be to not only to expose the state for what it does but also to disrupt the contradictions... they just drug us ... and lynch us. Without there being repercussions without there being exposure.

Prison Rebellion

Clara: It's not all about us on the outside- amongst even the tightest government techniques, revolt lives.

Alanis: For example, in the early 1990s, Indiana state penitentiaries erupted in rebellion. Prisoners engaged in hunger strikes and took correctional facility staff members hostage. Though Indiana prisons have a long history of rebellion, during these years, the acts of individual prisoners began to link up.

Clara: This was their uprising- and it was spreading. Our comrade reads a passage of his own writing, describing solidarity between prisoners during this time. This excerpt comes from the book *Down: Reflections on Indiana Prisoner Resistance*. The DOC referenced herein stands for Department of Corrections, and MCC stands for Maximum Control Center.

Imprisoned Comrade: And something that people don't talk about much, is that one of the principle reasons the DOC gave in, caved in on MCC was that the destabilization and protests there was starting to have noticeable effects in other prisons in the state. You had lots of acts of solidarity that were unfolding in other prisons that were in support of what we were doing. And some of us had actually sent calls to guys in other prisons saying "hey we need some support down here, we need some help down here." And so the DOC realized they were getting ready to have a state wide crisis on their hands. There was a non-violent actions at Pendleton, a non-violent march at Pendleton, and as a response they locked them down for 9 months. So it was catching, it was like a prairie fire.

Clara: To download a pdf of *Down*, or would like read more insights from our comrades inside of Indiana prison, please visit <http://prisonresistanceindiana.wordpress.com/>.

Clara: In a closed society designed to annihilate subversion, rebellion behind prison walls is often met with escalated repression beyond the prison system's customary inhumanity. John Bowden is a prolific writer and a prisoner at the fore of prison struggle in the UK. He was originally sentenced with a 25 year recommendation life sentence for the killing of a man during a drunken party. In a public letter in 2007, John described his process of radicalization and the escalation in repression that follows from political action. "For more than two decades in prison I have pursued and fought for the cause of prisoners' rights and tried with every means at my disposal to highlight and expose the frequent and often horrendous abuses of power that I had witnessed and experienced. As

a consequence, my name had become synonymous in the minds of prison officials with sedition and defiance, and the spectre of something that has always frightened, enraged and driven them to use every method and means to eradicate and destroy it: prisoner power.”

Clara: Links to the writings of John and other prison rebels can be found at crimethinc.com/podcast/4.

“Prison has its own smell. A smell that gets all over you and follows you around. I’ll never manage to get it off me. Yesterday marked two calendars in prison. Two fucking years. I don’t get any sleep. I’ve forgotten how to smile and now I can’t dream. “Clink clink” in the night. They wake me up for a search. Maybe they’ll find the shanks? Seven hundred-fifty-one days of prison. Are you satisfied, my dear judges? Pigs. Seven-hundred-fifty-two days of prison, pigs. Seven-hundred-fifty-three pigs. Coming and going and off I go. Coming and going and off I go. My cell is three meters by three meters. From the second floor window I see 20% of the sky over the top of the fucking prison wall. I walk through the yard like an automaton. I walk kilometers in a yard measuring just a few meters. Boredom and boredom again. Today I vomited up my very soul. I vomited bars, walls, solitary confinements, years of prison, judicial sentences. I vomited three years of prison. I don’t want to count anymore. I completely close my eyes and think. I think about my comrades, whom they’re keeping far away from me in other prisons. I think about fires on the prison roofs. I think about everything prison has tried to make me forget. I think about a smile, a caress, a journey that doesn’t end over there where the wall ends, a glance that isn’t trapped behind the fucking prison bars. I stop thinking. I open my hand. I look at the metal file I have. Now I know. I know exactly what I have to do. Let’s go then, once again. This time with feeling. Until the end. Long live Anarchy.”

PRISON ABOLITION AND COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY

Alanis: In recent episodes of the Ex-Worker, we've laid out an anarchist critique of the prison system and the police, and we've explored some of the ways folks have stayed safe without cops. But we still need to imagine what a world without prisons could look like, and how we might address conflicts and harm without relying on the state to lock people up.

In this episode, we speak with Rachel from the organization Critical Resistance, discussing the difference between abolishing prisons versus abolishing the entire prison industrial complex, the movements that have coalesced around this vision, and some of the strategies folks have used to promote accountability outside of the state. We learn more about Creative Interventions, whose toolkit we discussed previously, about community organizing work going on in Oakland, and about ways that all of us can begin to imagine a world without prisons in our everyday lives.

Alanis: I'm here today with Rachel, who's a part of Critical Resistance here in Oakland, California. Thank you so much for speaking with us!

Rachel: No problem, I'm happy to.

Alanis: Could you talk a little bit about Critical Resistance and how you got involved?

Rachel: Sure. So Critical Resistance is a national grassroots organization that has as its mission the abolishment of the prison industrial complex. And the organization grew out of a conference that was held in Berkeley, California in 1998, and spawned from there into a network, until in 2001 we decided to form an organization. So we have chapters in New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Oakland, and I work here, based in Oakland California.

Alanis: Can you introduce us to the concept of prison abolition and tell us a little bit about what that means?

Rachel: Sure. So Critical Resistance actually works for prison industrial complex abolition. For us that is actually a pretty substantial distinction. In our understanding, even if we were to abolish the institution of the prison and the practice of imprisonment, we would still be grappling with really fundamental issues of punishment, vengeance, and retribution, that maintain social, political, and economic inequities that we think are part and parcel of what we describe as the prison industrial complex. So for us it's pretty key to think about the whole system, and when we think about abolishing the entirety of the prison industrial complex, what we're talking about is stripping away the use of imprisonment, policing, surveillance, the courts, and the kind of attendant apparatuses that keep them propped up that really maintain social, political, and economic inequities. And the abolition of that is both kind of the stripping away of that in its entirety, but it is as much about building up the kinds of worlds that we want to live in and the kinds of environments we want to live in. So it's both reductive, in the terms of trying to tear things down, but it's also additive, in terms of trying to be thinking about new ways of relating to each other, new ways of relating to our physical environment, and new ways of relating to our social environment. And all of that really has a lot to do with increasing equity, increasing self-determination, increasing liberation; so it's at its core, prison industrial complex abolition is actually a fight for self-determination.

Alanis: So we know that the prison system doesn't keep us safe; we know that it's racist, brutal and inhumane; and we know that it's a tool of social control by which the state preserves an oppressive and exploitative society. But for many of us, even when we know all of these things, it's still hard to imagine how we could live without it. How can we discuss prison abolition and prison industrial complex abolition with broad groups of people in a way that gives some sense that it could really happen?

Rachel: In my years of doing this I have found that it's actually much more commonsensical than it might appear from the outside. A couple of things are core for me. One is to remember that imprisonment did not always exist as a practice. And it was actually meant to be a reform, right, for corporal punishment, or for executions, public executions. So it's not a natural feature of our landscape, it's not a natural feature of our social relationships; it's something that's developed in human history relatively recently. So, not pre-existing which means it could not exist in the future. And while there are fundamental distinctions between the abolition of the prison industrial complex and the abolition of an institution such as chattel slavery, there are some parallels. In terms of thinking about slavery, for instance, there was the sense that not only could that institution never be abolished, but it would mean the demise, the economic demise of the entire country. Although that institution lasted for hundreds of years, it ultimately was done away with in its formal sense. So we also have historical models that demonstrate to us that things that we thought were never possible to do away with have been undone. So that's I think a core thing.

And I think we also know from living and talking to each other in the world that this is a system that fundamentally fails us. And that is a distinction, I think, from saying that the system is broken. One of the core things that we also say is to make a distinction between an abolitionist approach and a reformist approach... is to understand that reformers understand the system to be broken. Reformers have an approach that this system, that there's something broken inside of it. and with the correct fix, the system could work well. Abolitionists, on the other hand, understand that the system actually works precisely as it's meant to. It cages, controls, disappears, kills precisely the people who it is meant to. Does that mean that other people don't get swept up in the wake of that? No. Absolutely, other people get swept up in the wake of it. But it also does a very

precise job of caging, imprisoning, controlling, disappearing the people it's meant to. So rather than trying to make it work even more efficiently to do that, we understand the need for it to be ground completely to a halt.

When I say that the system fails us, I don't mean that it's broken. I mean that it does not allow us to live healthy, empowered, self-determined lives. And I think anybody who's had any contact with somebody who's been locked up - whether that's jail, whether that's prison, whether that's a detention center, whether that's a psychiatric facility - understands how harmful cages are. Similarly, people who experience repeated police harassment, violence at the hands of the state, sentencing procedures, nonstop surveillance, also understand how harmful those practices are. So I think when we talk about the common sense that's implied in maintaining the prison industrial complex, it's one that is a strain of propaganda that has a lot of money, resources, power behind it and a high level of investment in convincing us that we need this thing. So some people call that hegemony; some people understand that as a way of convincing us that we need something that ultimately hurts us; but most people I think understand that the first call doesn't need to be to the cops; the first response doesn't need to be to put somebody in a cage. I feel like that's much, much more people's everyday common sense than the reverse.

Alanis: One of the things I find exciting about the prison abolition movement is its potential to unite many different struggles and movements of folks who are impacted by prisons, from anti-racist movements, to struggles for immigration justice, queer and transgender struggles, the peace movement; so many folks have a stake in dismantling our prison system. At the same time, as you pointed out, there are very powerful forces who have a stake in preserving the status quo, and a lot of resources to do it. Can you speak a little bit about strategy for how to struggle towards a world without the prison industrial complex?

Rachel: So I think the easiest way for me to describe how Critical Resistance does it is to talk about our work in three frames: three frames we've started to use over the years to describe how we do what we do. And they are dismantle, change, and build. The concept of dismantling I think is pretty straightforward, and I spoke about earlier. So we try to shut down prisons and jails, prevent any new cages from being built. We do that by trying to strip away power from policing apparatuses, whether that is trying to get more cops off the street, trying

to prevent the range of tools that they have at their discretion, whether those are tanks or things like civil gang injunctions; trying to reduce the level of surveillance that people are subjected to on a day to day basis; so stripping away, dismantling all of those pieces. And the point is also to keep them dead; not only to make sure a cage gets closed, but to make sure that closed cage gets decommissioned, or gets turned into something else and can't get reopened with the turn of a key.

The change work that we do is really about transforming our relationship to power and punishment and each other and the lived environments that we inhabit. and a lot of that is about doing that kind of common sense shifting that I was just talking about. So understanding that we can, through our language, shift how we think about imprisonment, policing, surveillance. So, do we use the word "inmate"? Do we use the word "peace officer"? Do we use the word "corrections"? Do we think about offenders? How do we imagine the word "crime"? And not just making changes in the language as kind of a turn of phrase or a flair of speaking, but to really shift and expose the power that inhabits those different words. So it's clearly not a "peace officer"; this is someone who guards you, or keep you in a cage, or beats you on the street with a stick. So keep thinking about whose language are we using, toward what end? So that's one little example of change work.

Another example of change work can be to look at what generates safety in our neighborhoods, for example. So in terms of the anti-policing work that we've been doing here in Oakland, one of the things that we did work on for years in a coalition of really powerful allies was to stop the use of civil gang injunctions in the city of Oakland, California. And so we're really, really proud of that. And that doesn't mean that people don't still get policed in this city aggressively; but again, stripping away that tool. Then, in terms of doing that work, fundamentally shifting common sense about who is dangerous in the neighborhood. So for instance people named on the gang injunction in east Oakland here, the city council, the city attorney, the police chiefs, referred to as "bullet magnets," as "the worst of the worst", as "a menace"; they referred to this neighborhood as "a battered woman" and "a war zone." Scandalous language to be using about the place where people live and work and thrive. And so a couple of the people who were named on the injunction have been worked in collaborate with the rest of the coalition to do projects in their neighborhood. So they do mural projects

with local artist collectives, they've started community gardens, they done block parties. And each of these individual acts isn't necessarily anything super spectacular. They're great acts to do with your neighbors; they're very productive things to be doing in your neighborhood. But the goal of them is not just to have a pretty green space or a lovely picture on the wall. It's to create opportunities to talk with the neighbors, to engage the neighbors in planting or into painting and having conversations about what makes them safe, what do they value in their neighborhood, and what generates real safety. And so these people who the people called the worst of the worst, the most dangerous, are shifting the terms of what generates safety and who is dangerous. Do you feel more danger when the cop comes into the neighborhood to cruise and maybe deport you, maybe come in your house, maybe arrest you? Do you feel more danger when somebody who the city calls a gang-banger comes and says, "Hey do you want to come to a block party?" So that's just a small example again of changing.

And in terms of building, I think the everyday practices we do in our organizing work, to try to organize as horizontally as possible, to try to work in broad-based coalitions, to try to think in terms of alternatives to imprisonment, alternatives to policing, alternatives to surveillance that increase community power and self-determination are really about the building. so, again, some of that is intellectual work, but some of that is also campaign work. Though, in terms of that policing example, one of the things that the Oakland chapter is doing now is taking that same space - basing out of a community garden, basing out of a community center, where there's pre-existing campaign work - and saying, ok, what would make you feel safer? and starting to grow little projects, you know, block by block, that could address the real harm and fear that people have in their neighborhoods and create a buffer against which they don't have to call the cops when they feel that fear rising up. So, it's slow work; the building work is really, really slow work. And I think people who are critical of the long-term vision of abolition want a quick fix. And think we know that the state offers us all kinds of quick fixes that ultimately only further compromise our safety and our power. So we're not invested in quick fixes; we're not invested in smoke and mirror shifts. We're invested in the long term, and building power over time so that it's sustainable.

Alanis: Can you introduce us to some of the ways folks have imagined accountability outside of the state, and what sorts of models or strategies folks have experimented with?

Rachel: There are a pretty wide variety of things that people are trying. In terms of interpersonal harm, I think that's the place where most of the experimental projects have been happening. And there are a very, very wide variety of them, ranging from more traditional restorative justice or conferencing circle models to what some people call transformative justice to what people call community accountability and kind of everything in between. And in terms of the work around interpersonal harm, there are a lot of projects that are aiming at trying to make resources, tools, experiments in intervening, preventing and eliminating interpersonal harm. And in terms of Creative Interventions, that was a community resource that was generated really to help people develop tools to do that. And to think about what are some of the steps that are really common, even though each situation of harm is really different, what are some of kind of the common practices, common orientations, common tools that people could use to develop their skill, but also to develop their confidence. Because I think a big part of responding and kind of piercing the walls of the prison industrial complex is understanding that you can do differently, that you can challenge that kind of imposed logic that the cops have to be called first, or that you're putting someone in abject peril if you don't call the cops first. When in fact we know - and partly how Creative Interventions was developed is from communities that cannot call the cops. So in the case of Creative Interventions, a lot of those were migrant and immigrant communities, where the threat of deportation or the threat of someone being taken out of the household was destabilizing enough, or there were language barriers, or there were cultural barriers that prevented them from being anything but afraid of calling the cops. Also queer and trans communities and gender non-conforming communities for whom a lot of experience in confronting the police and other elements of the state really is and enacts even more violence than in their interpersonal situation.

In terms of what we've tried, I think we've seen people build teams around situations of violence to support people who have survived violence, but also, in terms of the model we use at Creative Interventions, to surround the person or people who have been doing the harm. So thinking about what are all the factors at play, where is the harm and the danger most real, right, and how can we

address that up front? But ultimately how can we engage in a practice of community accountability that holds more than just two people responsible for making change, but that is really aimed at changing environments and shifting behavior. And so thinking how can we build teams that support people through that process. How can we hold people accountable rather than pushing them out of our communities either into a cage, or shunning them, or expelling them, but really holding them close and understanding what's at play in the violence that they're doing. and what kinds of accountabilities does the community want from them. And so we've used that in situations of organizational harm, where there's power at play; we've used that in really serious situations of violence in domestic situations, but we also started experimenting both through that project but mostly through a project that grew out of Creative Interventions which is the Story Telling and Organizing Project, to collect stories of ways that people were doing that, to intervene in state violence. So what happens when someone is confronting violence at the hands of the cops, or at the hands of the courts?

That all seems really theoretical; and part of the reason why I think the Story Telling and Organizing Project is so important is because it's a collection of stories of things that people have tried. They range from people holding public events to talk about violence to really small things like double-clubbing a car so that the person who's abusing the other person can't access the car until they account for their behavior, to creating separation physically between people so that they can come back together later, to developing safety plans... I mean, there's a wide range of stuff that happens. And I think the main thing is to try something; I can't say that enough.

In terms of thinking about alternatives to imprisonment, I think there's already a lot of stuff at play. So there's all kind of alternative sentencing that's happening; there are things like drug courts; there are things like family court. Some of them are just replications of the system that's in play right now; and some of them are actually interesting experiments about how to keep people out of cages. And then there are all kinds of models from outside the United States, that are really interesting but also work, right? So there's like open air things where people go and they spend their day there doing work in the service of the state; they go home at night to their families. Sentences tend to be really small. There are situations where there's community justice, where if you harm somebody's family you are indebted to their family for a period of time that the community deems

necessary. There are big long conferencing circles where people have to account for their behavior over time and face community consequences. I think it really depends on the scale and the kind of cultural environment that you're talking about; what's going to play? What's going to have traction with people? Because the ultimate goal really is to get people to shift their behavior, right? but also for all of us to shift the environments that we live in so that people don't face really substantial abuse as children, people are not subjected to years and years and years of houselessness or precarious living situations; people who do not want to be using drugs have options about how to not, right? And so it's both environmental, I think, and these individual interventions that can be helpful.

Alanis: For folks who are listening to this podcast and wondering how they can start challenging the prison industrial complex in their own lives and start organizing towards new ways of imagining accountability outside of the state, what are some ways that folks can get started in their everyday lives?

Rachel: I think there are a couple of really simple ways that people can begin. In terms of disengaging from our attachment to policing, one of the very first things that you can do is not call the cops first. If your neighbor is making a lot of noise, to actually speak to your neighbor rather than calling the cops. If you hear altercations, to actually take the risk to try to intervene and stop them. And to not kind of inure yourself or just dull yourself to the stuff that's going on around you. I think those are really small but really important, and over time they add up; they build your confidence to know that you can help shift power.

In terms of imprisoned people, I think that supporting any efforts of imprisoned people to organize is incredibly important. And we know that there will not be any day without prisons until imprisoned people have the ability to fight on their own terms in the strongest ways possible. And right now what people can do is put pressure on the state of California to meet the demands of the people who are on hunger strike, who have been on hunger strike- I believe today is their 44th day of hunger strike, a very substantial number of days, getting very very dangerous for people physically. And the state of California refuses to negotiate with them under any circumstances. So that's something to do. Call the governor of the state of California, Jerry Brown. Call the head of the department of Corrections here, Jeffery Beard, and demand that they minimally negotiate around the conditions of confinement within segregated housing units and

administrative segregated units (solitary confinement) here. And further, I think people can engage with people on the inside by writing letters, by sending pieces of information in to them, by breaking down some of the isolation that imprisonment is meant to keep in place, and by understanding what the options are for people on the inside to do their own organizing, whether that's sharing information among themselves and helping facilitate that, whether that's getting educated in systems that still allow people to have classes, really helping facilitate that.

And then I think in terms of the outside world, thinking about how we relate to each other. Are we operating in really punitive and punishing ways, whether that's with our kids, or in our personal relationships? And how are we imagining how we relate to punishment? So I think there are very small steps that people can take every single day and they should take every single day to build that muscle up.

Alanis: Rachel, thank you so much for speaking with me.

Rachel: My pleasure.

“Mom,



***how do we destroy
prison society?”***