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Locking Up Black Dissidents and Punishing the Poor: The Roots of Mass Incarceration in the US

Mumia Abu-Jamal and Johanna Fernández

This volume is a leap into the abyss that is the American Gulag. Our purpose is to explore the origins of the current system of carceral punishment, which began to mass-incarcerate poor and working-class African Americans and Latinos living in urban centers beginning in the late 1970s. We link the new characteristics of imprisonment as it then emerged to the campaign of state repression unleashed against the civil rights and black power movements in the 1960s. Some of those imprisoned are veterans of these movements, and are political prisoners. Although this important segment of the prison population remains absent from contemporary public debates on incarceration, the political atmosphere within which '60 s black radicals were criminalized is key to understanding the frenzied reaction to the black freedom movement that set the stage for today's hyper-incarceration of poor urban black and brown communities.

The politics of criminalization and the business of incarceration are important to the Left for numerous reasons. Prisons and policing are repressive mechanisms of the State that are critical to the maintenance of power, especially during periods of political and/or economic crisis. As Angela Davis explains in her interview with us, "systems of punishment" grew exponentially during two critical moments in the history of US capitalism. The first was the period of "post-slavery capitalism" that emerged at the end of the Civil War, and the second, during the last decades of the twentieth century, was that of deindustrialization and mass immigration produced by capitalist globalization and the evisceration of subsistence economies in third world countries. In both these periods, incarceration was deployed to "conceal and render invisible vast social problems that were a direct consequence

of the economic changes of those eras." Without the racialized scapegoating, social control, and political repression associated with the prison system, the ruling class would have faced more effective and fundamental challenges to its power.

The system of incarceration that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century is many times larger than that of previous periods. Before the 1960s, prison was reserved for the most heinous criminal offenders. Thereafter, incarceration was extended to a much greater range of offenses and a much larger section of the US population. What swelled the prison population was an exponential rise in the imprisonment of non-violent offenders, who for the first time in US history began to be dealt harsher and longer sentences for victimless crimes, mostly connected to drug use and the drug trade in poor urban communities of color. Sentences became significantly disproportionate to the crime committed. In this process, hundreds of thousands of poor African American and Latino men and women have been and are being separated from the fabric of society. These populations lose their rights to citizenship, and are torn from their children, families and community. Furthermore, they continue to be systematically blocked from reintegrating into society, as a result of social stigma and legal restrictions that deny prisoners access to a gamut of services and benefits, from public housing and voting rights to employment and the right to parent. The US began to incarcerate a disproportionate number of black Americans at precisely the moment when the legal barriers to their right to vote began to be lifted.

The problem is not just that the US, with less than five percent of the world's inhabitants, has twenty-five percent of the world's prisoners.[1] As troubling as those figures may be in a nation that ironically calls itself a free society, they do not suffice to convey the reality of imprisonment. In its absolute assault on life and freedom, prison transcends what people who are not behind the wall can imagine. The US is setting a new standard for desensitizing society to inhumane treatment, especially with regard to solitary confinement: locking up, isolating and torturing record numbers of people, for record numbers of years. By conservative estimates, approximately 100,000 US prisoners sit every day in solitary confinement in soul-crushing loneliness where men and women are known to slice their arms or burn

1. Adam Liptak, "US Prison Population Dwarfs That of Other Nations," *New York Times*, April 23, 2008.

themselves alive.[2] Because it methodically kills all that is human within us – our most basic need for social interaction – and drives prisoners to the abyss of insanity, solitary confinement is characterized under international law as a form of torture.

In detention centers across the nation, immigrants are being captured by the state without due process, and held for months and years in subhuman conditions. The most recent targets of American imprisonment are Guatemalan and Honduran children crossing the Mexican–US border. These are the grandchildren of free-trade agreements beginning with NAFTA, which unleashed a mass migration of small farmers when US corporations set up shop in Mexico and Latin America and destabilized their subsistence economies. The cruel imprisonment of these children relies on widespread fears whipped up by petty, ambitious politicians, and the deployment of a crude racism by TV, radio, and Internet chat rooms that depict these children as the enemy, and as "sick" and "dirty" "invaders."

The kind of dehumanization that is daily taken for granted in US prisons erodes standards of human freedom. The inextricable link between the rules governing incarceration and the standards of freedom in a country led Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky to observe, "The degree of civilization in society can be judged by entering its prisons." In his essay on prison abolition, Steve Martinot explores the structure of imprisonment from a humanistic perspective as a problem in philosophy. He argues that contemporary imprisonment remains a system of psychological control that imposes suffering on the individual in ways comparable to criminal acts such as kidnapping. Mark Taylor's essay "Christianity and Prison Abolition" explores the moral logic of Christianity and argues that within the narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus, a rebel against empire, we find the ideological apparatus that sustains and justifies mass incarceration and the torture mechanisms that form its bedrock.

Incarceration stands in direct opposition to the goal of human freedom and, as Angela Davis regularly articulates in her writings and speeches, raises deep political and philosophical questions about how society defines and responds to social problems such as crime –

2. Jean Casella and James Ridgeway, How Many Prisoners Are in Solitary Confinement in the United States," *Solitary Watch: News from a Nation in Lockdown* (February 1, 2012): http://solitarywatch.com/2012/02/01/how-many-prisoners-are-in-solitary-confinement-in-the-united-states/. See also Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

an exercise which is inevitably tied to the organization of society, its values, ethics, and priorities.

Silencing black dissent

The "law and order" politics crafted by conservative politicians in the 1960s to challenge the political legitimacy of the civil rights and black power movements had great consequences for the carceral state as it developed in the decades that followed. Beginning in the mid-1960s, fear of crime began to be used strategically by the New Right and Democrats alike to marginalize the influence of black radicals on a black working class that was mobilized against racism and economic inequality like never before in US history. In 1964, against the backdrop of the Harlem riots and the direct-action campaigns of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), crime became a national political issue in the presidential campaign. Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater fanned the flames of racialized fears around crime when he declared:

> Our wives, all women, feel unsafe on our streets. And in encouragement of even more abuse of the law, we have the appalling spectacle of this country's Ambassador to the United Nations actually telling an audience, this year at Colby College, that "in the great struggle to advance human civil rights, even a jail sentence is no longer a dishonor but a proud achievement." Perhaps we are destined to see in this law loving land people running for office not on their stainless records but on their prison record.[3]

Goldwater here was reformulating racial ideology for a new period. To build a case against black dissent, he consciously deployed a powerful tool of Reconstruction-era white supremacist propaganda: the fear of the mythic defiling and rape of white women by black men, which he linked to the civil disobedience activism of SNCC. In this new fusion, Goldwater combined fear of miscegenation with a manufactured moral panic against "abuse of the law," a designation reserved for black Americans.

In 1966, the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association (PBA) of New York employed a similar ideological strategy when it hired a public relations firm that crafted 30- and 60-second TV ads focusing on the vulnerability of white women leaving a New York subway

3. Quoted in, W. Chambliss, "Policing the Ghetto Underclass: The Politics of Law and Law Enforcement," *Social Problems*, vol. 41, no. 2 (May 1994), 184.

station at night and in the aftermath of a riot.[4] The objective of the ads, which featured the menacing gaze of black and Puerto Rican youth with switchblades and guns, was to defeat a longstanding movement against police brutality in New York and its referendum in support of an independent Civilian Complaint Review Board. The mass and deliberate deployment in the New York media of images depicting young men of color as predators had resonances in history with the 1931 criminalization of the Scottsboro boys, and paved the way for the 1989 framing of five innocent African American and Latino youth (now exonerated), known collectively as the Central Park 5, who were demonized in the media, identified as a wolf pack, and coerced by police to confess to the violent assault and brutal rape of a female jogger in Central Park. They were railroaded by the courts with the help of police detectives who coined the term "wilding" to describe the acts attributed to them.[5]

But the moral panic linking crime to black activism predated the 1980s. In 1968, for the first time in American history, twenty-nine percent of those interviewed for a Gallup poll said that "crime, lawlessness, looting and rioting" was one of the most important problems facing the nation.[6] The media, conservative think tanks, public relations firms, and politicians had joined law enforcement organizations including the Fraternal Order of Police in making crime the most important public policy concern in the nation. This logic was best captured by what President Richard Nixon said in early 1970s to one of his advisers: "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."[7]

The deployment of hysteria around the issue of crime and the association of crime with black rebellion helped consolidate public support for legislation designed to suppress political dissent. In 1968 Congress passed the H. Rap Brown law that made it illegal to cross state lines and engage in speech that encouraged rioting. The Chicago 8 and the defendants in the Wounded Knee occupation, who were members of the American Indian Movement, were

4. Philip H. Dougherty, "Advertising: Civilian Review Board Fight," *New York Times*, October 18, 1966.
5. The 2012 documentary film about the Central Park 5 is among those cited below, in Inez Hedges' survey of prison films.
6. Chambliss, "Policing the Ghetto Underclass" (note 3), 184–185.
7. "Haldeman Diary Shows Nixon Was Wary of Blacks and Jews," *New York Times*, May 18, 1994.

prosecuted under this law.[8] That same year, passage of the Safe Streets and Crime Control Act legalized wiretapping and bugging by federal agents and local police without a court order; legalized on-the-spot search and seizure by police – in essence enacting stop-and-frisk; and exempted law enforcement from having to meet the requirements of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.[9] This meant that police departments could continue to receive government grants and funding in the presence of racial discrimination.

Coupled with repressive legislation, the ideological law and order campaigns advanced by conservative politicians, among them Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Mayor Frank Rizzo of Philadelphia, and J. Edgar Hoover, sought to destroy the radical flank of the Black Power movement, including notably the Black Panther Party and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. These organizations were targeted in part because of the resonance of their message with a growing number of rebellious black urban dwellers. Some of the most effective black radical leaders argued that at core American racism has never been about exclusion or discrimination alone, but rather about the systematic super-exploitation and control of certain groups to advance the interests of Capitalism and Empire. In the 1960s, they argued that black people had more in common with the oppressed people of the world, with the Vietnamese, and with white workers (however misguided by racist ideology) than with the growing ranks of black elected officials who were beginning to manage the urban crisis. Thus the Black Panther Party in Chicago in 1969 advanced the notion of solidarity on the basis of shared class interest by organizing the Rainbow Coalition, which included poor white migrants from Appalachia in the Young Patriots Party, and Puerto Rican and Chicano youth in the Young Lords Organization, an organization that was conceived as the Puerto Rican counterpart to the Black Panthers.[10]

8. Bruce A'Arcus, "Protest, Scale, and Publicity: The FBI and the H. Rap Brown Act," *Antipode*, volume 35, issue 4 (September 2003): 718–741. On the Chicago 8, see Ron Jacobs, "The Chicago Conspiracy Trial and the Patriot Act," *Counterpunch* (September 25, 2003): http://www.counterpunch.org/2003/09/25/the-chicago-conspiracy-trial-and-the-patriot-act/
9. Chambliss, 184–185; Michael Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007): 180.
10. Johanna Fernández, "Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics: The Young Lords, Sixties Radicalism, and Community Organizing in New York City," in Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside of the South, 1940–1980* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2003): 255–285; Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race*

These black radicals paid dearly for their ideas and specifically, for their position on the issue of armed resistance and self-defense, which posited that oppressed people had a right to defend themselves from violent attacks at the hands of racist white Americans and the police. Incarceration was the punishment deployed by the state against African Americans for their mass rebellion during the civil rights and black power movements.

In their co-authored essay, Dequi Kioni-Sadiki and political prisoner Sekou Odinga highlight the movement to free political prisoners in the current public debate on mass incarceration, and denounce liberalism as a sell-out to the real-life freedom interest of the Black Nation. Comrades in the Jericho Movement from beyond and behind the prison walls, Sadiki and Odinga explain the centrality of armed resistance, tracing it to the armed struggles for black freedom from the very inception of America, citing as examples Cinque, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, and many others, known and unknown.

Laura Whitehorn, once a political prisoner herself, writes about the primacy of movements to free political prisoners and the connections between repression of dissent and mass incarceration. As a white woman activist, she spent nearly a quarter-century in some half-dozen prisons. Her conclusion: "What I saw in prison was the genocide of African people." Somewhat similarly, Nyle Fort examines the writings and political analysis of the imprisoned journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal as an indispensable complement to the analysis put forth by Michelle Alexander in her best-seller *The New Jim Crow*.

Joseph Ramsey's essay assesses the importance of these movements through the life lessons and social analysis of political prisoner Assata Shakur in her 1987 autobiography, *Assata*, which details the evolution of her political consciousness, the 1973 shootout with police that left her near death, her surprising liberation from prison, and her free life in Cuba.

The largest carceral boom in US history

The ideological attack on black radicals and civil rights movement workers that we see in these essays, whereby politicians stirred up a

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Rebels and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011); Jakobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

racist, moral panic around crime and linked it to black activism, was the scaffolding on which the modern edifice of mass incarceration was built. Out of the campaigns deployed by politicians, police departments, and the FBI to distort and destroy the activities of the Black Liberation Movement emerged the largest carceral boom in US history. Heather Thompson's essay on Attica depicts one of the first chapters of this history. She argues that Attica's fall to the mega-violence of the state opened the door to state repression for decades to come, not only in New York, but also nationally.

The mass expansion of incarceration was part and parcel of the attempt by the state to restore social control – a process which customarily follows on the heels of social uprisings. In this instance, however, the decline of the movements of the '60 s, coinciding with the economic recession and oil crisis of 1973, gave way to a more extreme conservative backlash. Historically, when the state is incapable of meeting the basic needs of its citizens, it responds by asserting its authority with force. That has been the experience of urban communities of color since the 1970s. The War on Drugs became the lynchpin in the massive expansion of American prisons. The policy disproportionately targeted black and Latino urban communities, imposing different sentences according to the kind of drug used, such that in the 1980s and 1990s offenders apprehended with crack, a drug found mainly in the inner city, received ten times the sentence of those arrested for cocaine possession, who are disproportionately white. As a result, although African Americans make up only fifteen percent of illicit drug users and are mostly petty dealers, they represent seventy-five percent of all drug-related imprisonment.[11]

In the context of the deepening crisis of de-industrialization, the state moved to massively incarcerate poor African American and Latino communities – now deemed economically dispensable – for fear of their possible resistance. Today, unemployment figures remain at depression levels for African Americans and Puerto Ricans, among others. Yet, as Vijay Prashad highlights in his essay, "Towards a Happy Ending," the answer of neoliberalism to decades of jobless economic recoveries has been unforgiving punishment consecrated with the rhetoric of personal responsibility. He examines the stark disconnect between the propaganda of the ruling elite and the lives lived by millions dwelling in the twilight of empire, an era of

11. For a thorough analysis of the racial disparities in the application of the War on Drugs policy, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-Blindness* (New York: New Press, 2010), 49–69.

mass economic dislocation, the crumbling of the welfare state, and the end of the American Dream.

While mass incarceration addressed the problem of redundant labor in urban centers and functioned as a tool of social control, it served ideological purposes as well. During this period, crime became the new code word for black people, Latinos, and increasingly, for immigrants. These groups became the perfect scapegoats in the context of growing class stratification in US society. In response to the broader national economic crisis, US capital shored up its profits through a draconian project that cut wages, eliminated health benefits, and busted unions. The hysteria around crime on which mass incarceration was erected served as an important ideological tool, a kind of a palliative for disgruntled white workers and the middle class during this long period of economic austerity.

In addition, in the 1980s and 1990s the building of prisons became its own jobs program for working-class whites in the nation's remote rural and poverty stricken areas. As Law and Order politics dominated public policy debates, attention was diverted from the most significant development in late twentieth century society: the decline of the American Dream. During a period that witnessed an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the bottom of society to the top[12] – crime, the War on Drugs, exaggerated claims of welfare fraud, and the scapegoating of immigrants were posited as the major public policy problems of American life.

The unrelenting criminalization of African Americans and of poor Latino communities over the last 35 years – the idea that these undeserving "Others" were taking advantage of the system and digging Americans deeper in a financial hole – was integral to the politics of neoliberalism, deployed by Democrats and Republicans alike to justify the dismantling of the public sector (education and public hospitals), the elimination of the welfare state, and the deregulation of industry and the economy – essentially all of the working-class gains of the New Deal and the Great Society. In "Class, Race, and Hyperincarceration in Revanchist America," Loïc Wacquant analyzes two major trends in the post civil rights movement era: the elimination of social welfare programs and the unprecedented class-polarization on the one hand and, on the other, the replacement of social programs with an unprecedented buildup of a "carceral Marshall Plan" that found hundreds of billions of dollars to erect, expand and tighten the

12. Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999).

most repressive features of state power, creating a prison complex that is now the third largest employer in the nation.

Mass incarceration or hyperincarceration?

The term mass incarceration was popularized by Angela Davis in her now classic study *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003) and through her activism. More recently, Michelle Alexander has mainstreamed the phrase in her book's subtitle, *Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-Blindness*. With clarity and brilliance, however, Wacquant takes issue with the term, arguing that hyperincarceration more accurately and precisely describes the phenomenon, which instead of incarcerating the mass, national population, is a high-intensity targeting of the black working and lower class.

We think that Wacquant is basically correct here, but we accept the more common usage so long as the meaning is clearly understood. The talented artist, writer and prison revolutionary Kevin "Rashid" Johnson succinctly echoes Wacquant's focus with the title of his essay: "Racialized Mass Incarceration," which in effect addresses the concern as to who is truly targeted by the imprisonment industries (and their allied fields: policing, judging, legislating, sentencing).

In its unprecedented expansion, hyperincarceration is one of the major institutions within which racism operates structurally in American society today. The incarceration policies documented by Michelle Alexander, by imprisoning masses of black and Latino youth, destroy the fabric of communities of color and undercut their capacity to regenerate massive democratic movements.

Seeds of a movement

In 1998, with the stepping-up of protests against prisons, the death penalty (including the threatened execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal), police brutality, and racial profiling, a group of radical scholars and activists convened a conference, "Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex." That emerging movement was set back by the chill on social protest that befell the nation after September 11, 2001, but the political and theoretical work of Critical Resistance remains important to the project of ending mass incarceration. The genesis and objective of both the conference and the organization that popularized the term Prison Industrial Complex is detailed in our interview with Angela Davis.

In 2004, the orange-colored photos that came out of the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad raced around the world as testament to a sadistic component of the American character that many were unaware of. The photos of naked Arab men, some posed with laughing, jeering US women, were the height of humiliation for Muslims. Perhaps more chilling than the naked human pyramids was the sheer glee in the faces of their captors. These manifestations of contempt, hatred, disrespect – and conquest – have domestic roots. The dehumanizing treatment of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib had its awful precedents in prisons and police stations across the US. Many of the Americans working in the prisons of Iraq in 2004 were police officers or prison guards in their civilian lives. Charles Graner, one of the soldiers convicted of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, had been a prison guard at SCI Greene in Pennsylvania, the Supermax facility where political prisoners Mumia Abu-Jamal and Russell "Maroon" Shoatz sat on death row. In many ways, the horrors of Abu Ghraib would have been unimaginable if prisoners had not been routinely dehumanized at home.

In addition, the mass surveillance of communities of color by police over the last half-century had begun to form the basis on which the widespread spying of the National Security Agency would be legitimized. In his essay, "Militarism, Mass Surveillance and Mass Incarceration," Suren Moodliar illustrates how the state "pioneered a formidable information processing and administrative machinery" to "discipline" and control African Americans and immigrants from Latin America, and how this normalization of the state's surveillance apparatus has justified its mass deployment against US citizens.

Beginning with Abu Ghraib, a series of events in the last decade have underscored what many increasingly agree is one of the most important human rights crises of our time. These include: the economic crisis that began in 2008, which strained state budgets and led to a call for the release of prisoners; the publication in 2010 and mainstream success of *The New Jim Crow*; the convergence of the Occupy Movement with protests against the execution of Troy Davis in September 2011 and the shock expressed across the world following his execution; the release to general population of Mumia Abu-Jamal after almost 30 years on death row in October of that same year; the murder of Trayvon Martin in February 2012; and the opposition to New York's stop-and-frisk policy that had been brewing for years. The convergence of these unforeseen developments has led to a shift in consciousness and growing sentiment that was recently captured in the conclusion of a *New York Times* editorial: "The American experiment in mass incarceration has been a moral, legal, social, and economic disaster. It cannot end soon enough."

The latest and most dramatic challenge to the nation's racialized system of punishment surfaced in Ferguson, Missouri following the murder of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson. The refusal of the people of Ferguson to back down from their protests despite a militarized police assault on their community, was the lynchpin in a galvanized mainstream conversation that tied the hyper-policing of black and brown communities to gross economic deprivation produced by deindustrialization and by the spatial isolation of those communities that has been continuously enforced through discrimination in housing.[13]

For those living in American ghettos, repression has been the major and most consistent public policy response to their economic problems. Of special interest is the growing ideological power of the police, whose massive daily roundups function as the first point of contact and indispensable conveyer belt in the system of hyper-incarceration.

The political and legal logic that has governed the everyday deployment by the police of abusive authority is the subject of Steve Martinot's essay on police impunity, in which he observes, "If an officer makes a demand on a person that is humiliating, and the person refuses in defense of their sense of self-respect and dignity, they can be charged with disobeying an officer and arrested – that is, criminalized for their self-respect."

The upheaval in Ferguson was politically important because at each juncture in the crisis, the state tried but failed to browbeat or dissuade people from dissenting in the streets. In fact, in each case, the State's arrogant display of power – from the imposition of a curfew and the hyper-militarized response to the protesters to the naked attempt to criminalize Michael Brown as justification for his murder – fueled more rebellion and had the opposite effect than intended. The rebellion thus challenged the ideological sway that police power has been carefully crafting since the days of its subversion by the Black Panther Party. Ferguson also underscored the militarization of the police – a byproduct of the bloated military-industrial complex produced by the Cold War, wherein the Pentagon has for years routinely funneled hundreds of thousands of pieces of military equipment to police departments across the country.[14] The police crackdown in Ferguson was captured in media images of armored

13. "The Death of Michael Brown: Racial History behind the Ferguson Protests" (editorial), *New York Times*, August 12, 2014.
14. Radley Balko, *The Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013).

police that resembled Robocop hunters of black urban life and sources of racial terror.

After the Vietnam War, many officers took jobs as police chiefs in counties across the US and brought to the policing of civilian populations the criminal wartime mentality and practices acquired in Asia. Thus torture techniques learned in Vietnam were used by Chicago police to elicit confessions from predominantly black death-row defendants. The discovery of these tortured confessions by journalism students at Northwestern University in the mid-1990s led to a moratorium on the death penalty in Illinois. The use of a military-grade firebomb in the attack on the MOVE house in Philadelphia in 1985, which killed 11 MOVE members (including five children) and burned down 61 homes, destroying an entire African American neighborhood, is another example of this phenomenon.[15]

While incarceration has, to date, been the major public policy response to urban crisis, what is needed is a movement that calls for jobs with dignity at a living wage and a comprehensive community revitalization program that will address the crisis of decaying urban housing, gentrification, and the destruction of public education. We need mass movements to shift the priorities and culture of American society from punishment and control to the rebuilding of vibrant communities. This means bold projects that shut down prisons and explore alternatives in their place. It means mainstreaming the notion of rehabilitation. Restorative justice programs are perhaps the most compelling examples of alternatives because within them we find the seeds of prison abolition. In his article on abolition, Steve Martinot proposes releasing all prisoners convicted of victimless crimes, and doing away with solitary confinement and the sentence of life in prison without parole, especially among those sentenced as teenagers, and moving these persons to "therapeutic institutions . . . to be rehabilitated from the absolute torture of never seeing the outside world again." Martinot also recommends eliminating the widely used system of plea bargaining, and releasing those imprisoned on this basis, given the fact that "there are no records of guilt, no trials, no evidence, no witness testimony, nothing but a confession (usually acquired through threats)."

We draw hope for the building of this movement from existing efforts. Laura Whitehorn is joined by prison activist Mujahid Farid in reporting a local initiative in New York to begin opening the doors

15. "Let the Fire Burn: The MOVE Bombing 29 Years Later," *PBS* (May 12, 2014), http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/let-fire-burn-fallout-29-years

of freedom to elderly and ill prisoners. We are also inspired by recent victories including the releases of political prisoners Lynne Stewart, Marshall Eddie Conway, Sekou Odinga, and Sekou Kambui, among others.

The world's leader in imprisonment has opened fissures in society that may never be healed, unless we dare to heed those who have contributed to such work. From their various life perspectives, as prisoners, professors, activists, revolutionaries, they have lived, seen, studied, and interpreted this phenomenon up close. But as Marx famously noted, as critical as it is, analysis alone is insufficient for the task before us: "philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it."

Our goal is abolition.