



# CONTEMPORARY ANARCHIST CRIMINOLOGY

**Against Authoritarianism  
and Punishment**

**Anthony J. Nocella II, Mark Seis,  
AND Jeff Shantz, EDITORS**

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PETER LANG  
New York • Bern • Berlin  
Brussels • Vienna • Oxford • Warsaw

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Nocella, Anthony J., editor. | Seis, Mark C., editor.  
Shantz, Jeff, editor.

Title: Contemporary anarchist criminology: against authoritarianism and  
punishment / Anthony J. Nocella II, Mark Seis, and Jeff Shantz, editors.

Description: New York: Peter Lang, 2018.

Series: Radical animal studies and total liberation; vol. 6

ISSN 2469-3065 (print) | ISSN 2469-3081 (online)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018021042 | ISBN 978-1-4331-5800-1 (hardback: alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-4331-5804-9 (paperback: alk. paper) | ISBN 978-1-4331-5801-8 (ebook pdf)

ISBN 978-1-4331-5802-5 (epub) | ISBN 978-1-4331-5803-2 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Criminology. | Anarchism. | Criminal justice, Administration of.

Classification: LCC HV6030 .C675 | DDC 364—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018021042>

DOI 10.3726/b14254

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.  
**Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** lists this publication in the "Deutsche  
Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data are available  
on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

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29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006  
[www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com)

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## 4. *“Freedom First”*: Pursuing Abolition Through Supporting Prisoner Resistance

COLLEEN HACKETT AND BEN TURK

This monster—the monster they’ve engendered in me will return to torment its maker, from the grave, the pit, the profoundest pit... They won’t defeat my revenge, never, never. I’m part of a righteous people who anger slowly, but rage undammed. We’ll gather at his door in such a number that the rumbling of our feet will make the earth tremble...

—George Jackson, *Soledad Brother* (1970)

### *Introduction*

On February 1, 2017, prisoners at Vaughn Correctional Center near Smyrna, Delaware took guards hostage and occupied a portion of the facility. Their public statement demanded education, rehabilitation programming, and budget transparency. They also spoke of conditions worsening since the recent presidential election and they expected that trend to continue and escalate under the Trump regime (Thompson, 2017). The uprising at Vaughn follows years of growing prisoner resistance, which reached a national level on September 9th of 2016, the 45th anniversary of the Attica rebellion. These revolts, protests, and strikes signal a return to militant post-civil rights era opposition to prison and white supremacy at large. The monster George Jackson spoke of was created by the white supremacist politics of confinement and carceral torture and, after several decades, that monster continues to haunt every cellblock, special housing unit, and supermax. Prison rebellions have great power to draw out the inherent contradictions between the racist origins of carceral power and the “postracial” liberal democratic society that purports to offer equality and fairness.

As anarchists, we assert that the capitalist, patriarchal, and white supremacist state construct carceral “solutions” to social problems in order to maintain status quo interests and to subdue ungovernable populations (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2015; Simon, 2009). The U.S. chooses to rely on prisons not due to a lack of awareness, but because the prison system ensures the maintenance and reproduction of exploitative social arrangements. Dominant approaches to prison abolition praxis tend to focus on shifting this reliance on incarceration by developing and demonstrating the superiority of community-based alternatives to prison (CR10 Publications Collective, 2008; McLeod, 2015). Prison abolition scholars offer nuanced understandings and theories on the shape of state power and repression in the United States, particularly as it is informed by settler colonialist logics of confinement and disappearance (Dayan, 2013; Muhammad, 2011; Nichols, 2014). The anarchist and prison rebels’ approach to abolition seeks to augment and accelerate these strategies through direct action. The praxis of leveraging this power is underdeveloped within the abolitionist cause, which would benefit greatly not only from increased awareness, but active support of and participation in prisoner-led resistance actions. We must not merely convince society to turn away from carcerality, but to remove the choice altogether; we must render carcerality impossible by amplifying prisoners’ ungovernability and creating a perpetual “crisis of legitimacy” for prison officials (Habermas, 1975; Irwin and Simon, 2013).

This contribution will outline the importance of emboldening prisoners’ resistance efforts against state-sponsored terror and patterns of degradation. Prisoners provide an informed and grounded analytic of state repression, carceral power, and resistance that is invaluable to abolitionist thought and strategy. We argue that prison uprisings, rebellions, and prisoners’ analytics are integral to constructing a more robust abolitionist ethic and praxis. Through this framework, we analyze the ways in which prisoners’ organizing efforts of the past decade have helped to propel the urgency of the abolitionist project, while signaling an opportunity for collaboration in making visible the inherent “cracks” of a system built on a long legacy of racialized violence. We first discuss the nefarious connections between prisons, slavery, and colonialism before transitioning into current efforts prisoners are making in resisting the white supremacist politics of confinement and pacification, specifically in how prison rebels are creating counterhegemonic civic spaces. We concretely discuss examples of prison rebellions and direct actions undertaken by prisoners in the last decade to illustrate our points.

### ***The Afterlife of Slavery and Colonization***

Slavery 400 years ago, slavery today. It's the same but with a new name.  
—Ruchell Cinque Magee, *SF Bay View* (2008)

The enduring legacy of white supremacy has persisted despite the abolition of more overt forms of racial control. Saidiya Hartman refers to this continuous haunting as the “afterlife of slavery”; racial terror transforms and its contemporary manifestations are “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (2008, p. 6). The insidious cause of this afterlife is the deep entrenchment of a racial calculus that hierarchicalizes social value based on one’s closeness to or distance from whiteness. The European colonizers’ constructions of the Indigenous as “savage” and the African slave as a “non-person” created a durable outsider status that has since been legally transmuted and imposed upon populations deemed undesirable, or in some cases, less than human (Fanon, 2008; Wynter, 2003). The residual echoes of the “other” are felt from the initial colonial contact with Indigenous Americans and Africans, through to the slave holds, plantations, “Indian” removal policies and reservations, Jim Crow segregation policies, boarding schools, Japanese internment camps, conversion therapy, redlining, and the war on drugs. The ghosts of slavery and colonization continue to possess American logics and institutional life, animating a carceral grid of captivity and disappearance (Deer, 2015; Hernández, 2017). Yet, this system of conquest extends beyond the original targets of settler colonialism and chattel slavery; it applies a “foundational eliminatory logic” for anyone who is unable or unwilling to conform to a white supremacist heteropatriarchal society, but especially Indigenous and racialized communities, along with houseless, poor, and/or queer populations (Hernández, 2017; see also, Nichols, 2014, Rodríguez, 2008; Simpson, 2014).

The white supremacist project in the United States, one fueled by racist logics and institutions, along with punitive (white) sentiments, now uses the prison system as its primary tool in enforcing an eliminatory logic. The penal leviathan is a result of a turn in the politics of domination, one that relies on carceral-punitive apparatuses—incarceration in particular—to criminalize those opposing state repression and ongoing racial terror. During the Civil Rights Movement, conservatives linked civil disobedience to criminality and “lawlessness,” rather than to a defined political movement (Alexander, 2012). With later liberatory struggles, like the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, the Black Liberation Army, the Brown Berets and related Chicana struggles, and the Weather Underground, the U.S. employed an aggressive assaultive against political dissidents through the FBI’s notorious

COINTELPRO (Churchill and Vander Wall, 2001; Abu-Jamal and Fernández, 2014). The state's disruption of civil rights and liberation movements set the stage for a much larger campaign of mass incarceration through the ideological framework of "colorblindness" (Alexander, 2012; Berger, 2014; Taylor, 2016). Under this façade, elitist political discourses marked the targets of carceral confinement as "deserving" of its consequences rather than victims of institutionalized racial control. Criminalization represents a pinnacle of state repression, attempting to control unruliness and prevent disruptions to "law and order" while maintaining status quo racial and class interests.

The state's ability to use criminalization to control social movements and "unruly" populations became a historical possibility because of the firm embeddedness of racialized violence within the democratic order of the U.S. (Dayan, 2013; Gilmore, 2000). The juridical fixture of racial terror is perhaps the most apparent with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, in which the U.S. abolished slavery except as punishment for a crime. And, though the analytic connections between slavery and prison are popularly being embraced by a more mainstream audience as of late, Black liberationists and their accomplices have acutely understood and observed the entanglement of anti-blackness in our legal structures soon after slavery was supposedly abolished, and up until the present day. As famed sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois notes,

Slavery was not abolished even after the Thirteenth Amendment. There were four million freedmen and most of them on the same plantation, doing the same work that they did before emancipation.... (2013 [1935], p. 166)

Du Bois and other slavery abolitionists understood that until the political order that legalized, condoned, and maintained chattel slavery was unmade, equity and liberation could not become a possibility. Yet in the aftermath of slavery, Black codes and the convict leasing program preserved racialized patterns of domination; the "nonperson" status of slaves—the legal dispossession of personhood—was transmuted to the "civil death" status of criminals (Dayan, 2013).

A description of the modern carceral state would be incomplete without an examination of its white supremacist origins and the enduring continuity of racialized violence. The technologies and logics of domination slightly change their form, but the core function remains: racialized social control and the preservation of a white supremacist order. The Thirteenth Amendment allows slavery to live on through criminal punishments, which were aggressively ramped up in the civil rights and Black/Chicanx/Indigenous power era, leaving the United States with the sordid reputation of being the global

leader in incarceration rates. The prison system has its power in imposing the antebellum era notion of “social death” upon its captives. The “legal engines of dispossession,” enabled by white supremacy and mechanized by the criminal legal system, inflict this social death upon those deemed to be criminal, which is the “loss of status so extreme that life ceases to be politically relevant” (Dayan, 2013, p. 60). The official narratives that frame “criminals” as having poor moral character, being highly dangerous, and needing redemption and/or transformation legitimate the removal of criminalized peoples from the body politic in order to prevent “contamination.” This social death process marks a denial of civil and political personhood for the prisoner—which, when viewed in the aggregate, results in the dispossession of racialized communities to their self-determining authority and sovereign claims to governance. Yet, this legal disenfranchisement is not totalizing and, as described throughout the rest of this chapter, currently incarcerated prisoners are resisting this social death and creatively crafting new, collective forms of political personhood.

### ***Prison Revolts: Resisting Civil Death, Creating Political Spaces***

I urge each and every one of you to imagine yourself drowning... All your training goes out the window, but your survival instincts emerge. You were taught to not flail about when drowning, yet at the moment of drowning, you do flail. Was I not to flail? Was I supposed to accept death by suffocation in [this] sweat box?

—Greg Curry, *Repression Breeds Resistance* (2014)

On September 9, 2016, the 45th anniversary of the Attica uprising, prison rebels engaged in diverse protests against their captivity, exploitation, and the systems of capitalism and white supremacy. According to estimates gathered by prisoner supporters, there were over 57,000 prisoners affected by the action that impacted at least 46 facilities across the nation.<sup>1</sup> Solidarity Research calculated that the strike cost the California prison system alone \$636,068 in revenue each day (2016). The events of September 9th also broke through the typical media blockade around prisoner resistance, gaining coverage in mainstream national and local papers, as well as many alternative news sources (SPR, 2016a). This was by far the largest prisoner protest in U.S. history, and the first to be nationally coordinated. Prisoners’ actions were supported by robust outside protests. Solidarity actions around the 9th and days following included marches, blockades, noise demos, general assemblies, letter writing, phone calls to officials, and an attack on a local Democratic Party office in Bloomington, Indiana (It’s Going Down, 2016). The National Lawyer’s Guild, The Industrial Workers of the World, Critical Resistance, and various



other organizations endorsed and supported the strike and attempted to coordinate legal defense and public awareness campaigns for prisoners facing retaliation (SPR, 2016b).

The September 9th strike came after years of expanded mass organizing within U.S. prisons. In 2010, prisoners in Georgia staged a state-wide work strike (Dixon, 2010) which was the largest in history, until 2016. In 2011 and 2013 California prisoners engaged in massive rolling hunger strikes involving 30,000 participants (St. John, 2013). These protests inspired lasting prisoner unity in the CA prison system plagued with gang violence and racial divisions (Jamaa, 2017). In Alabama, prisoners initiated a steady stream of hunger strikes, work stoppages, and rebellions beginning in 2014 and continuing to the present. They also formed an organization entitled The Free Alabama Movement and outlined a strategy against prison slavery they called “Let the Crops Rot in the Fields” (FAM, 2015). The Industrial Workers of the World, at the urging of Black anarchist and former prisoner Lorenzo KomBoa Ervin, formed an Incarcerated Worker’s Organizing Committee (IWOC), which quickly burgeoned into a national organization taking a key role in the September 9th prisoner strike.

Prisoner resistance is complex and myriad. Though in this chapter we focus on mass prisoner movements that are collectivized and either statewide or national, we want to acknowledge that we are not capturing the entirety of prisoner resistance. Much of the academic and activist literature, as well as media accounts, focus on uprisings that take the form of hunger strikes, work stoppages, or violent rebellions. We want to make it abundantly clear that we do not believe this is the only type of prisoner resistance or set of oppositional tactics. Diffused and informal acts of defiance are everyday occurrences. We assert that simply surviving in the brutal prison context is a political act, which becomes a useful framework when considering the resilience of prisoners with neurodivergence, those with different physical abilities, and those experiencing gendered oppression, such as women and trans prisoners. Yet, there are also many instances of incarcerated subpopulations resisting the prison system through political channels that are underemphasized: forming study groups, making resistance art, and raising public awareness about women’s, trans, and LGBTQAI issues in prison (Law, 2012; Black and Pink, 2017). Though the scope of this paper cannot allow a more in-depth inquiry into these different political efforts, we welcome more support efforts and scholarly inquiry into the wide array of prisoner resistance with a particular focus on gender, sexuality, and ableist oppression.

Carceral-punitive apparatuses seek to inscribe an “otherness” onto the bodies of those captured within its cages, prompting prisoners to employ

a “strategy of visibility” (Berger, 2014), whereby they utilize the power of the pen—and at times, the sword—to reassert their human dignity and substantive need for human relations within and beyond the prison walls. In affirming their subjectivities through rhetorically connecting with collective movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter and trans liberation projects, prisoners demand the recognition of their political subjectivities (Hasan and Keith, 2015). The recent string of uprisings demonstrate the ways that prisoners continue to collectively resist the ontological and social death that comes from the terror of state control over prisoners’ bodies, labor, and identity (Cacho, 2012; Rodríguez, 2008).

Much like the civil rights and Black power era of prison organizing, contemporary prison rebels use a framework and analytic of slavery in their critique of the prison regime and their conditions of confinement (Berger, 2014). This rhetoric of enslavement was particularly salient in the historic September 9th, 2016 prison strikes that demanded prisoners to stop working on prison plantations and to—literally and metaphorically—“let the crops rot in the field” (FAM, 2015). We will discuss how prisoners’ frameworks first focused on forced labor and abysmal working conditions before we move to prisoners’ understandings of prison slavery as also being about the state’s attempts at controlling and warehousing bodies and also about the state’s attempt to strip prisoners of their political voice.

### ***Slavery as Forced Labor: Work Stoppages and Strikes***

Many of the prisoner demands from the last decade focus on improved working conditions and wages (FOM, 2016; Dixon, 2010; IWOC, 2016). Pay for prison labor ranges from an average of \$0.93 per day to none at all (Blau and Grinberg, 2016). This is often central to media coverage of the strike, and can lead to an assumption that prisoners are organizing for better jobs and better pay within their captivity, but it is important to recognize this rhetoric in terms of strategy as much as goals. The Free Alabama Movement has been explicit about this from the start, stating “The numbers support our contention that “MONEY” is the motive...[t]herefore, an economical response is our most effective strategy” in an article that lists five broad demands, four of which are aimed at reducing sentences and releasing prisoners (Amun, 2015). Refusing labor is often a tactic employed to gain freedom and basic human rights. This is a Call to End Slavery in America, the title of the call to action for September 9th, illustrates the broader goals of a work stoppage:

Our protest against prison slavery is a protest against the school to prison pipeline, a protest against police terror, a protest against post-release controls.

When we abolish slavery, they'll lose much of their incentive to lock up our children, they'll stop building traps to pull back those who they've released. When we remove the economic motive and grease of our forced labor from the US prison system, the entire structure of courts and police, of control and slave-catching must shift to accommodate us as humans, rather than slaves (SPR, 2016d).

This analysis understands that by withholding labor power, prisoners assert themselves as full subjects and demand a place in the political economy of a nation built on its ability to deny them such.

A prisoner work stoppage does not merely impact the prison factories, denying profits to either private companies or state industries that operate within the prison, it also shuts down the facility itself. Relatively few prisoners work in the factories, instead fulfilling most of the jobs needed to clean, maintain, and operate correctional facilities, along with feeding and caring for other prisoners—particularly those who are aging or unable to care for themselves. During a work stoppage, correctional officers must take over prisoners' jobs. They do so resentfully, and at great cost to the prison. The correctional officers will do the work exceptionally poorly, both as retaliation and because of the sudden expansion of job responsibilities. This adds images of unsanitary conditions, inadequate meals, and cruel negligence to the public narrative of the strike (Speri, 2016a). Prison administrators also resort to paying officers overtime or bringing in work release prisoners to replace the strikers (Turk, 2016a). The costs of these responses, in terms of finances, public legitimacy, and ability to maintain order are unsustainable in any correctional institution. Anarchist prisoner Sean Swain argues that a well-supported prisoner work stoppage lasting more than 30 days would likely bankrupt most state budgets (2007). This is the economic impact prisoners hope to leverage by refusing slavery and withholding their labor power (Turk, 2016b).

### *Slavery as Physiological Evisceration: Fighting with the Body*

The analytic currency of slavery offers more than just a critique of coerced work and conditions of work. Prisoners also contest the ways in which their enslavement involves state control over their bodies. In commemorating the September 9th strikes, the editors of True Leap Press remark on the function of physiological evisceration through imprisonment:

While the economic dimensions of the prison industrial complex are indeed important to recognize and challenge; its primary function is to warehouse and disappear poor and working class Black (and in many regions Brown and Indigenous) people. Its purpose is to immobilize and liquidate white America's "undesirables" from society—to render Black and Brown people civilly and socially dead. (2016)

One egregious example of corporeal exploitation include the practice of non-consensual tubal ligation procedures done by the California Department of Corrections between 1997 and 2010, which effectively sterilized up to 250 women prisoners, most of them Black and Latina (California Coalition for Women Prisoners, 2013). This state control of reproductive systems strongly resembles eugenics programs that centered women as the bearers of societal “contamination.” It additionally harkens back to the institution of slavery in that it encompasses more than just slaveholders demanding forced labor; rather, the slave’s body becomes subject to inhumane medical procedures and the slaveholders’ own personal objectifications.

This project of liquidating undesirable bodies extends into the belly of certain prisons. Secure housing units (SHU), administrative control (AC), supermax prisons, and other forms of segregated housing create more tightly confined spaces that are essentially “prisons within prisons” (Gómez, 2006). Prisoners confined in long term solitary confinement experience a “living death,” with expanded restrictions on movement, access to space, communication, visitation, food and other commissary items, reading materials, legal resources, income opportunities, education and religious programming, and medical assistance. In segregation, a prison rebel’s protest options, like everything else, are severely restricted, leading prisoners to engage in desperate acts that put their own lives and well being at risk (Swain, 2015; Mai-Duc, 2015). Segregation often involves steady harassment, surveillance, threats, and psychological torture until the prisoner is broken down to involuntary neuro-biological responses. Prison authority aspires to have absolute control of captive bodies in a project of disappearance, liquidation, and rendering the target socially dead. Every year, approximately 185 state and federal prisoners commit suicide and an unknown number attempt suicide (Noonan et al., 2013). Given the invasive and destructive aspects of prison authority, we must admit these desperate and tragic acts, including suicide, are also a form of resistance that ought to inspire an urgent devotion to not merely phasing prison out, but ending it categorically and immediately, regardless of social costs. At times, prisoners only have their bodies to fight back with.

An example in a Wisconsin prison illuminates the practice of corporeal resistance. In June of 2016, more than thirty prisoners in the AC unit in Waupun Wisconsin declared a hunger strike. Afraid to use the phrase “hunger strike” because of Wisconsin Department of Corrections’ (WI DOC) reputation for harsh reprisals, they called it a “food refusal protest” which they named Dying to Live (FFUP, 2016). WI DOC quickly lived up to their reputation. After only ten days of refusing food, prison officials had deterred most of the hunger strikers. To break the few remaining, they sought and re-

ceived judicial approval to force feed the prisoners (Hall, 2016). The hunger strikers persisted, enduring dozens of painful and high-risk violations of their bodily autonomy. Prison staff shoved tubes down restrained prisoners' noses and poured liquid nutrition into their stomachs against their will. When the method failed on Joshua Scolman because of a deviated septum, the DOC doctor threatened to surgically install a feeding tube directly to his stomach (Swan, 2016). He quit the protest instead. Once prison staff determined that administering three force feedings a day would be too laborious, they began a regimen of refeeding, where the prisoner would be allowed to starve and severely dehydrate for a few days and then be force-fed a large quantity in one sitting, which shocks the system (Turk, 2016c). Force feeding is not medically necessary after only 10 days, and the refeeding regimen WI DOC subjected prisoners to risks heart failure and increases dehydration and serious injury (Inglis-Arkell, 2015). This specific case demonstrates that the prison regime is ideologically opposed to allowing prison rebels to exercise authority over their own lives and will stop at nothing to assert its exclusive dominion in controlling prisoners' bodies.

### *Slavery as Voicelessness: Asserting Political Personhood*

The third way in which prisoners frame their captivity as slavery is demonstrating how the prison regime attempts to deny them their voice through the use of various social pacification tools, brute force, censorship, and managerial democracy. By infantilizing criminals as not knowing what is "good" for them or demonizing criminals as evil or dangerous, the prison regime attempts to undermine the legitimacy of prisoners' political personhood. Many prisoners assert their capacities for political agency, often through writing treatises and political analyses, forming study groups, and issuing demands. Kinetik Justice, Dhati Khalid, and Melvin Ray, for example, formed an impromptu study group in Alabama prisons, hearkening back to the civil rights era emergence of prisoner-led ethnic studies groups. This was the genesis of the Free Alabama Movement (*The Thread*, 2016).

Prisons are sites where any form of protest or organizing is considered illegitimate. Prison authorities have broad freedoms to monitor and censor communication via the mail, phone, and visitation. They can move prisoners into isolation and cancel education and religious programming with the creation of a potentially fabricated disciplinary report. Despite these restrictions, prisoners continue to organize and brazenly risk punishment to assert their political personhood and pursue their organizing efforts. Siddique Abdullah Hasan, a survivor of the Lucasville Uprising, who has been incarcerated for most of his

life and has spent the last 23 years in solitary confinement battling his death sentence is, despite these deprivations, a skilled political organizer. Hasan was the first prisoner to risk publicly speaking about his role in planning the September 9th national work stoppage and protest (Hasan, 2016). He, like the Free Alabama Prisoners mentioned above, has suffered greatly to maintain and expand his organizing access and capacity. Starting with a 13-day hunger strike in 2010, undertaken with two other death sentenced Lucasville Uprising survivors, in which he won access to partial contact visits (after 19 years without touching another human who wasn't putting handcuffs on him), access to the law library, increased recreation and phone time, Hasan and his comrades have steadily expanded their ability to contact the outside world (Democracy Now!, 2011). By pushing the boundaries and being as persistent as the prison machine designed to wear people down, Hasan has successfully had his voice featured in numerous national media outlets, including the popular National Public Radio show “On Point” and an episode of the Netflix documentary “Captives” (Ashbrook, 2016, Blake, 2016). In response to these efforts and other forays into public political venues, Hasan has been sanctioned repeatedly, responding with hunger strikes (Speri, 2016b; Sonenstein, 2017). From mid-August 2016, until the end of May 2017, Hasan will have had phone access restricted for 210 out of 280 days based on conduct reports that were either fabricated or improperly filed. During that time he responded with two hunger strikes, refusing food for a total of 45 days.

This assertion of political personhood can take the form of confrontational insurgency, one that strikes back “against the respectable, non-scandalous, legitimated forms” of protests (Rodríguez, 2016). At Holman Correctional in Alabama, prisoners made gains through a diverse array of tactics, between March and November of 2016. Between the Free Alabama Movement's non-violent approach of work stoppages, less organized uprisings, occupations, and arsons, as well as frequent attacks on staff including the stabbing of multiple guards and one warden, Holman was on the leading edge of crisis in the prison system (Blinder, 2016; Denton, 2016). At the end of September, an entire shift of correctional officers refused to come to work, leaving the prison administration to perform daily operations themselves. Kinetik Justice described the situation for Democracy Now!:

Right now the commissioner is passing out trays. Warden Peterson is pulling the cart. Deputy Commissioner Cullum: passing out trays. Every cell, he passing out the tray. I can't believe this. To they black slide-in shoes, brown knitted pants, white tweed shirt with the collar bust open, sweatin at the temples. Is real. No officer came to work, they completely bumped on the administration. No more will they be pawns in the game. In our time, it's going down. (2016)

The image of wardens and superintendents walking the halls and passing out trays best demonstrates the power of sustained, diverse and well-supported prisoner resistance to render prison facilities untenable. More support and participation in these organizing efforts can extend the length and depth of the prison's crises. FAM's explicit non-violent approach has been rejected by other Alabama prisoners, both in word and deed (Kimble, 2017), but unlike many "free-world" pacifists, FAM has never denounced or sided with the authorities against rebels who take violent action; indeed, they have consistently helped raise awareness of uprisings and occupations. This shows a more mature and sophisticated approach to organizing than many protest movements on the outside.

By asserting themselves as political actors, accessing media coverage, and creating crises within the prisons, rebels drag prison officials into a competition for credibility. Events in Michigan around September 9th demonstrate what strong and well-supported prisoner resistance can cost a prison system in terms of legitimacy. During the spring and summer of 2016, Michigan prisoners engaged in a series of meal boycotts to demonstrate unity against conditions in multiple facilities (SPR, 2016c; Egan, 2016a). Then, on September 9th, prisoners at Kinross CI in Kincheloc, MI refused to work and the next day, organized a nonviolent march around the yard. They refused to re-enter the buildings until the administration met demands regarding specific changes to conditions in the prison. At the same time, outside protests took an intersection in downtown Lansing in solidarity with the strike (Ross, 2016). Chris Gautz, a public information officer from the Michigan DOC is one of the few prison officials who talked to the media when the strikes were going on. He was on a panel for Al Jazeera English's "The Stream" program with Kinetik Justice and Phillip Ruiz of IWOC. Gautz claimed that Michigan doesn't have trouble with prisoner protests, and when asked what happens when prisoners refuse to work, he said "Michigan prisoners are not forced to work." Kinetik and Ruiz pushed back expressing doubt about Gautz's statements (Stream, 2016). Shortly thereafter, word of the protest in Kinross became public, and The Detroit Free Press shared prisoner's stories of the state's response to their work refusal. After being promised by the warden that their demands would be met, the prisoners returned to the cellblock, where they were attacked. An Emergency Response Team entered the block and fired tear gas guns at prisoners at point blank range, dragged prisoners back to the yard, hog tied them for hours in the rain, and transferred them to other facilities across the state (MAPS, 2017; Egan, 2016b).

Outside supporters with Michigan Abolition Prisoner Solidarity (MAPS) and IWOC coordinated interviews between family members and journalists, and continue to support prisoners with call-in campaigns and news releases

about hunger strikes and resistance from prisoners in segregation (It’s Going Down, 2017). The crisis created by prisoners and augmented by outside support efforts dragged officials into the public light where they tried and failed to legitimize the prison. The work of MAPS in this effort is at once essentially important, strategically effective, and easily generalizable. It does not require special talents or extraordinary risks, merely a willingness to engage authentically with the trauma of dire circumstances prisoners find themselves in, some straightforward writing, and attention to basic administrative, outreach and communication tasks, all skills which are relatively easy to learn by doing.

### ***Conclusion: Making Prisons Impossible***

To treat us this way is wrong, evil and unsustainable socially. Stand with us. Lend your voices, your labor, and your ideas to this historical work. We can win, but only with you all by our sides. In the final analysis, this is a struggle to determine the nature of humanity itself... Until we win or don’t lose.

—Dorrough, Denham, and Robinson, *SF Bay View*, 2012

The prison rebellions of the past decade, and especially the nationwide strike on September 9th, exploit this dependency to illuminate the lived crises of prisons. They throw into question the legitimacy of the state and call forth the contradictions of “democracy.” Positing a multidimensional framework of slavery to understand the politics of their confinement, prisoners awaken the public to the inherent problems with caging life and its deep roots in white supremacy. With the increasingly popular historicization of the prison as a site of deeply embedded racial terror, there are new revolutionary possibilities—if done in conjunction with prisoners held captive.

Supporting and generalizing prisoner resistance requires more resources than current solidarity organizations are capable of or have access to. Though we applaud the many abolitionist projects around the world and the constructive possibilities they hold in crafting a new social imaginary, we urge organizers and scholars to act with prisoners in actively abolishing the prison system. Eroding the logic, credibility, and power of prisons is a matter of defiant survival and asserting personhood on a daily and hourly basis for prisoners. We want readers to ask the question, how can our support efforts better match prisoners’ commitments to crumbling the prison system?

We assert that supporting large-scale actions described in this chapter is just the start. Prisoners called for another national action on August 19, 2017, with a greater focus on mass outside support (IamWe, 2016), but steady, reliable, and long-term support projects are also essential. Developing relationships with prisoners establishes an infrastructure and network of re-



sistance across prison fences. There are many programs already in place that could use human capital, as well as financial support. Such efforts include books or zines to prisoners, penpal programs, prisoner publications, classes inside prisons focusing on political education or radical trauma work, and workshops or discussion meetups in the community<sup>2</sup>. These support efforts help prisoners organize themselves, spread their knowledge of the horrors of the carceral regime, assert their political agency, bring attention to their particular cases, and importantly, connect with “free-world” abolitionist projects and scholarship. Actively organizing with our captive comrades to refuse the carceral regime is an essential part of crafting a society that rejects white supremacy and colonialism.

### Notes

1. Lack of transparency in most state prison systems makes accurate numbers very difficult to acquire. Organizers from *supportprisonerresistance.net* used the following method:

We have tracked 46 prisons and jails that experienced some kind of disruption between September 8th and 21st. This total includes both lockdowns reported by officials ... and reports of protests from prisoners and supporters (some of which did not lead to lockdowns or full strikes). Of these, 31 facilities experienced a lock-down, suspension or full strike for at least 24 hours. Those 31 facilities house approximately 57,000 people. (SPR, 2016c)

2. Some examples include: Books and zines to Prisoners (Chicago Books to Women in Prison, Prison Books in Chapel Hill NC, Books Through Bars in New York, Midwest Pages to Prisoners in Bloomington IN); Penpal programs (Anarchist Black Cross, Black and Pink); Prisoner publications (The *San Francisco Bayview*, *Fire Inside*, *Unstoppable!*, *The Incarcerated Worker*, *Black and Pink*, *The Abolitionist*, *Wildfire*); Classes inside prisons (WEBS of Support).

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