

# Building an international movement to abolish the prison industrial complex

Rachel Herzing and Isaac Ontiveros describe the aims prompting an abolitionist framework.

*Critical Resistance (CR) is a US-based grassroots group engaged in community organising focused on the goal of abolishing the prison industrial complex (PIC). CR uses the phrase 'prison industrial complex' to refer to the intersecting interests of government and industry that employ surveillance, policing, the judiciary, and imprisonment as solutions to what the state identifies as social problems (i.e. poverty, homelessness, 'social deviance', political dissent). Rather than understanding the PIC as a broken system, we believe it operates precisely as it has been designed: to contain, control, and kill exactly the people it targets, including poor people, people of colour, queer and gender queer people, youth, immigrants, and political dissidents. As such, we do not advocate for reforms dedicated to improving this well-oiled machine, but advocate for a complete elimination of the prison industrial complex.*

In 2008, Critical Resistance celebrated the tenth anniversary of the conference from which our organisation was born. We framed our anniversary celebrations around three themes: dismantle, change, and build. These themes also frame how and why we do our work the way we do. Our aim is to **dismantle** the prison industrial complex – to erode it, shrink it, and starve it of the resources it uses to survive until it no longer exists. We have done this by making it as difficult as possible for any new prisons or jails to be constructed through campaigns with local communities where prisons are proposed, by working with architects and planners to boycott prison building projects, through educating governmental bodies who decide how money for prisons gets spent, by supporting prisoners' communication and helping advocate for resources that make them able to resist even from within prison walls, and in following a decarceration strategy through which we advocate for the release of as many prisoners as possible while supporting post-release efforts that make it possible for people to escape the clutches of the system by not returning to prison.

Our **change** work focuses on challenging the basic assumptions that prop up and sustain the prison industrial complex, including the idea that we cannot live without it. We do this by questioning the basic language the system uses (offender, inmate, peace officer, crime, criminal justice system, etc.); by engaging in campaigns that prevent people with conviction histories from being

required to disclose that status on housing and employment applications; by forging Coalitions with environmental justice activists, organised labour, health care providers and educators to highlight how our interests are connected; and in loudly and persistently rejecting the logic that imprisonment, policing, and surveillance make us safe. We apply new organising strategies to addressing harm, repression, and violence that do not cede all our power to the very systems designed to contain and control us.

While we strenuously argue and struggle against what we oppose, our work is equally about **building** what we do want without imagining the system will provide that for us. Our goal is to build our capacity to respond to harm that is not purely reactive or rooted in crisis. We do this by planting community gardens to provide green



Photo courtesy of Critical Resistance, Oakland

space and food for our members and neighbours; by creating visual art and liberatory images of resistance to help us create new visual languages; by proposing ways that governmental funding could be used to support community centres, health, education, and housing rather than imprisonment and policing; by structuring ourselves in non-hierarchical formations; and by employing collective practices that reject punishment and retribution in our organising work.

We know from our organising experience that the PIC is innovative. CR has struggled to match that level of innovation. Even as the PIC shifts to meet changing social, cultural, and economic terrains, some elements remain constant, however. The people targeted by the PIC remain fairly consistent, for example, as does the drive for system expansion. Similarly, while the durability of the PIC persists, so does resistance to it. The communities in which we work have taken a wide range of approaches from civil disobedience, to tribunals, to physical struggle. Always at stake is our ability to exercise self-determination and dream our own futures.

Building and using an abolitionist framework allows us to understand the various and connected oppressions imposed on our communities while at the same time visualising, understanding, and practicing new ways of living in which our relationships to ourselves, others, and our environments are free and empowered. If true, community-based self-determination is our goal, then our imperative is to begin living now the world we want to see in the future. This approach both equips us with the

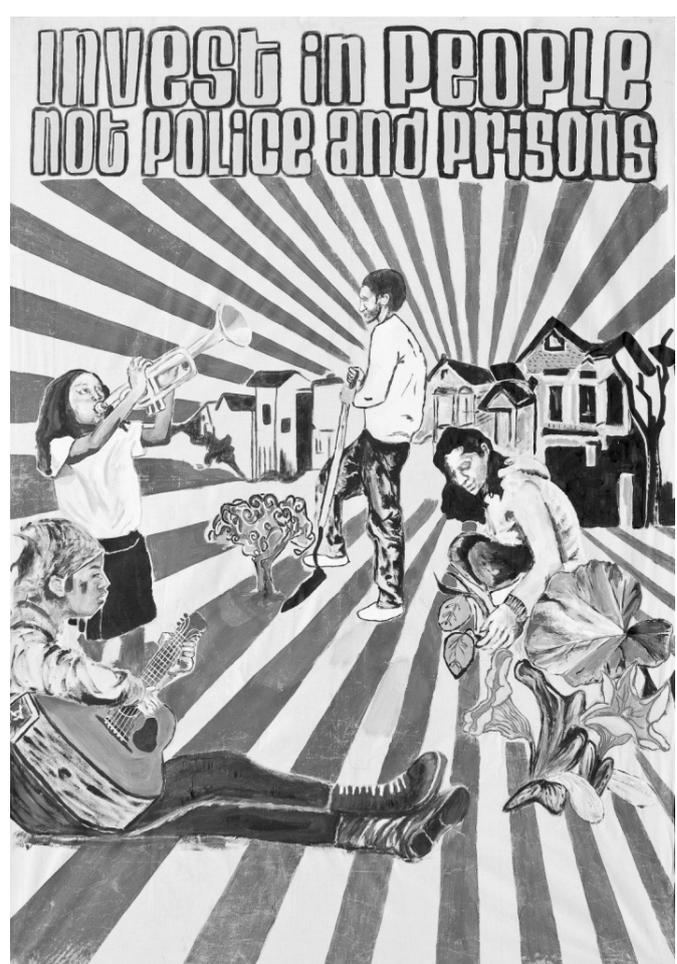


Photo courtesy of Critical Resistance, Oakland



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ability to keep our eyes on our long-term goal, and provides a framework in which to move politically in the here-and-now, keeping our strategy and tactics as sharp as our vision is expansive. Taking to heart and action Audre Lorde's teaching that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,' an abolitionist framework creates space to stop trying to tinker with the system and play reform games that are largely disastrous. It instead opens up possibilities for what our world could look like without the PIC – now and into the future.

While much is still unknown, CR's work is not necessarily about reinventing the wheel. As PIC abolitionists, we draw on the histories of resistance that surround us. We are inspired by movements that have sought to dismantle systems of oppression, to change social, economic, and environmental relationships, and to build a new, better, more liberatory world. Our ability to understand where we come from and where we are headed, and to develop new goals, strategies, and tactics, is strengthened by engaging critically with related struggles – slave insurrection and slavery abolition movements, indigenous resistance to colonisation, anti-colonial and Third World Liberation struggles – both inside and outside the United States, the Civil Rights movements, labour movements, arts-and-culture organising, to name just a few. Our strong affinities with these movements are also rooted in the fact that many people involved in our movement come directly from the ranks of the above-mentioned struggles, making these historical connections more than just educational or

metaphorical. Policing, imprisonment, white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism, have developed and grown directly in response to peoples' resistance to them. As such, we gain lessons from historical examples imparted to us by movements that have come before us, and are empowered by seeing ourselves situated in an unending legacy of resistance and liberatory vision and practice. Situating ourselves historically augments CR's ability to develop our political ideology, strategies, and tactics toward increased impact in pushing abolition on local, national, and international levels.

As stated above, CR is dedicated to prison industrial complex abolition. We believe that the interlocking nature of the institutions and forces that comprise the PIC requires a holistic approach to its demise. Because our political genealogy is intimately related to liberation struggles that understood the interlocking nature of the systems against which they fought, our organising approach integrates that logic as well. We employ a diversity of methods and means to fight the many fronts of the PIC. We do not allow ourselves to focus singularly on imprisonment, because we understand the roles that surveillance and policing, for instance, play in determining who will wind up in cages and for how long. Similarly, our work is rooted in honing our political ideology, engaging in study, building new leadership, and developing new language as much as it is about holding demonstrations, applying pressure to politicians, or base building.

On the ground, we work in Coalition with other organisations to resist and roll back prison expansion in and jail construction and demand decarceration. We oppose the repression of policing and immigration raids. We fight racially and economically motivated 'anti-gang' legislation and their attendant policing tactics. We generate and use propaganda and political education materials to help make PIC abolition common sense. We develop alternative practices through which community members confront and transform harm and conflict

without using police and other state agencies, with the goal of making policing obsolete in our communities.

But, just as we reject reforms that reorient and prolong the life of the PIC, we are challenged to push our work beyond constricting the PIC's expansion and building up alternatives to addressing harm. We do not want to live more humanely alongside the PIC. We want to abolish it for good. That is, we want to win. Our vision helps us illustrate the horizon, but if we want to get there, we need to build ships and set them to sail.

So, how do we win? Making claims to the correct way forward has often led social movements to abandon creativity and imagination for stagnation and dogmatism. The answer may very well lie in how we help to build an arena where the question is asked and engaged in a vibrant way. For CR, we hope to contribute through concrete work that chokes the expansion of the constitutive elements of the PIC, while at the same time building up new language and social relationships, resulting in the PIC being superfluous, and ultimately, obsolete. This work requires organisation and strategic thinking and planning that moves beyond local spontaneity. And, as the development and dispersal of the ideology, strategies, techniques, technicians, and hardware of the PIC are truly international phenomena, our work must be, in turn, an international and well organised movement of invested organisations, communities, and individuals. ■

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For more information about CR's work, please visit: [www.criticalresistance.org](http://www.criticalresistance.org).

### References

Lorde, A. (1984), 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Kore Press, pp. 110-114.

### Corrigendum

The article 'Understanding the demonised generation' by Brian McIntosh and Annabelle Phillips, first published in *Criminal Justice Matters* 83, March 2011 (DOI: 10.1080/09627251.2011.550157), contained a number of errors which the authors should like to take the opportunity to correct:

- The opening line of the article on p. 28 should read: 'This article sets out to challenge...'
- The second line of the first column on p. 30 should read: '...over six in ten young people stated that they had committed an offence in the previous year (64%).'
- The third line of the second column on p. 30 should read: 'Furthermore, while four in ten young people were in favour of a compulsory citizenship programme...'
- The 12<sup>th</sup> line of the second column on p. 30 should read: 'Volunteering was seen to appeal for a mix of practical and altruistic reasons, with just under six in ten stating that they find the work experience and training element of volunteering appealing...'

Brian McIntosh and Annabelle Phillips  
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