

MAY 2013 ACTIONICOPA.ORG UPDATE

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RESISTING CARCERAL NATION STATES: THE FIFTEENTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PENAL ABOLITION (ICOPA 15)

JUNE 13 - 15, 2014

**UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA
ALGONQUIN TERRITORY / OTTAWA, ONTARIO, CANADA**

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BUILDING AWARENESS, DEVELOPING STRATEGY, TAKING ACTION

THOUGHTS ON ICOPA 15 AND ICOPA'S RENEWAL: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM PRISONERS

The response to ICOPA's outreach initiative for prisoner participation for ICOPA 15 has been substantial and encouraging. Prisoners from Canada, the United States, and as far away as Australia have contributed suggestions for both agenda items and strategies for expanding the abolitionist cause. Although universal agreement on tactics remains elusive, the fundamental goal of eliminating the current prison industrial complex (PIC) continues to guide the discussion.

Peter Collins is a Canadian prisoner currently concerned with the incarceration of women and Aboriginals, and the institutional silencing of dissenting voices of marginalized peoples. He perceptively describes the lack of solidarity of prisoners, most of whom are victims of self-interest that masks larger issues. His suggestion is to increase public education efforts to inform them about the intrinsic structure and abuses of the system.

Writing in California, Dortell Williams also cites the need for more education and advocates more exposure for abolitionists in the mainstream media, specifically to reach voters and taxpayers about prison policies and practices. Without the support of those demographics, prisons could not function. Dortell, among others, also articulates the need for outside support for those on the inside, including Internet access and feedback on the written work of prisoners.

Another American prisoner, Chas Ransome, also sees the battle in terms of bridging the communication gap with the public to educate a public that has been victimized by media accounts and corporate interests. He describes the prison's incestuous relationships with special interests who have substantial investments in the construction and maintenance of prisons. Chas also points to the need to move away from policies that target the poor and powerless, offering New York City's recent closing of inner city schools as an example that effectively puts children on a path to prison.

Richard Hall also brings a sociological perspective to the table, pointing to the correlation of poverty with high incarceration rates. Prison continues as a tool for social control, which requires abolitionists to adopt the

tactics of investigative reporters to reveal shortcomings. Echoing Peter above, Richard points to prisoners' lack of concern with abolition, either seeing it as an unrealizable goal or focused exclusively on personal issues that leave no room for a broader picture. He describes a grassroots effort that would organize and educate, which means more communication with outside world by creating a mass media voice.

As an example of what can be done from the inside, Kerry Shakaboona Marshall founded the Human Rights Coalition that frames the abolitionist argument in terms of human rights. He also suggests networking with related organizations with similar goals, such as the NAACP and the ACLU.

Writing pseudonymously from a Canadian prison, "Joe Convict" also discusses the advantages from partnering with like-minded organizations, including NGOs. He also suggests developing a training manual for prisoners who remain trapped in systems that breed ignorance and fear, and, therefore, compromises their ability to resist. The carceral state's responses to such exposure will reveal its weaknesses and contradictions.

Cathy Marston, a prisoner from Texas, brings another feminist critique to the fight, adopting as a slogan "The personal is political". Given the patriarchal nature of prisons and employees, she advocates a policy of inclusion of women and other oppressed voices inside and outside the prison and the dissemination of literature to facilitate informed choices. Solidarity in the abolitionist movement, of course, requires communication. Since most prisons forbid unrestricted contact, outside groups must help. Cathy also reiterates one of the most frustrating obstacles to unity: the lack of communication once correspondence or submissions leave the prison. In conclusion, she confirms the need for outside support when prisoners are released in order to facilitate success and deconstruct stereotypes.

Writing from Australia, Craig Minogue also suggests that the ICOPA agenda is best advanced by people on the outside who make an effort to work with prisoners. Craig and Cathy make the same argument regarding the lack of information available to prisoners, which includes little communication regarding letters or submissions. Craig states that he has often received no acknowledgment of a submission and no copy of the journal in which his papers have appeared. To remedy this oversight, he posits establishing an "affiliation" with a university or NGO with prisoners in charge of an abolitionist curriculum. If this should prove not to be possible, Craig also suggests creating a website to enable connections with other abolitionist groups. He does not, however, see a community effort as productive, insisting that individuals be encouraged to make their own connections with outside groups.

In counterpoint, Tiyo Attallah Salah-El contributes a Marxist critique of capitalism and rise of the PIC. He cites the disconnect between the public's perception of prison and the actual operation that exploits and degrades human beings. The solution must be, *pace* Craig, to organize collectively for greater influence. A corollary to this position is the requirement for abolitionists to be flexible and have the ability to adapt to change. Tiyo also offers a broader critique of faith-based prisons as tools of control and a recognition that any social movement must include eliminating "systems of violence" that permeate American society. His is a wider approach that affirms the connection between poverty and criminalized behaviour, an issue that should be paramount in any discussion of prison abolition.

Jon Marc Taylor also points to the lack of contact with individuals and organizations on the outside. Prisoners do not feel they are a part of the abolitionist movement and often fail to recognize the existence of any movement conceived and operated to improve their lives.

We want to thank all prisoners who responded to our requests and agreed to be a part of this discussion. We invite them and others to continue to share their ideas that will inform the development of the conference agenda for ICOPA 15 and the future direction of ICOPA.

* Note: The full texts of the contributions compiled and summarized above will be available for download in mid-June on the CONFERENCE webpage at <http://actionicopa.org>.