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## NEWS FOR WORKING PEOPLE



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Prison will end someday...When there is enough bread for everybody, no one will steal any more. When women no longer sell themselves, when reason prevails, there will be fewer vices and fewer murders. Prison will be destroyed. People will come and stare at the stones that are left, and they won't be able to imagine what we are living through. They won't be able to conceive of our misery any more than we can conceive of their grandeur. Life will become large and free. -- from "Men in Prison" by Victor Serge (1890-1947), a Russian revolutionary and writer who participated in workers' struggles in countries from France to Mexico.

## A Nation of Mass Incarceration

The U.S. has the largest prison population in the world. While the U.S. has less than five percent of the world's population, it has about 25 percent of the world's prisoners – half a million more than China, which has five times as many people as the U.S. There are about 2.3 million prisoners in this country, and about seven million either locked up or on parole or probation. No other society in human history has imprisoned so many of its citizens.

### Domination and Exploitation

Under capitalism, prison has always been used as tool of the ruling class to both dominate and exploit the working class population. In early British capitalism, as the factory owners needed more laborers, they created what have become known as "the poor laws." These were laws that punished people for being poor, by sentencing them to work in factories in slave-like conditions, the earliest versions of modern-day prisons.

And in the U.S., immediately after the Civil War, former slaves and poor whites in the South organized a government that reflected their interests – this period was known as Reconstruction. They passed laws to improve their lives, ensured equal rights of whites and blacks, and set up some of the first systems of public education. But quickly the former slave owners needed to get people back on their farms to be agricultural workers. They were able to break down the Reconstruction government through violence and terror, and eventually pass laws all over the south known as "Jim Crow" laws. These laws imposed many restrictions on the black population. The purpose of these laws was to terrorize the ex-slaves, slowly deprive them of land and jobs. These laws forced ex-slaves and the black population in the south into two horrible paths – to go back to work on the farms of the former slave owners in order to survive, or resist and be thrown into prison and do forced labor.

### From Poverty to Prison

Today, the role of mass incarceration is a little different. The reason the U.S. has such a high prison population has nothing to do with crime. U.S. crime rates are about equal to most other European countries, which have much lower prison populations. For the U.S., prison is the dumping ground for the unemployed and the poor.

The massive increase in the prison population happened at the same time as record numbers of job losses and long-term poverty throughout the country. Since the 1970s, millions of workers either lost their jobs or were forced to get paid less as factories closed all across the country and many companies moved production to countries with cheaper labor. Since this time, workers have had to take on multiple jobs to get by. The wages were so low that most families needed both parents to be working. But also the only way working families could

survive was to take on huge debts.

But there remained millions of people in some of the worst conditions, unable to find work, living in extreme poverty. For this section of the working class, often the poorest and the least educated – there weren't many options. People could either join the military or try to make a living any way they could, turning to the streets, drugs, and crime.

At this point, the U.S. government had to come up with a system to control this growing section of society that there were no longer any jobs for. For the poorest sections of the working class – they were thrown into prison. First starting in the 1970s under President Nixon, and then continuing ever since, the government launched what it called, "The War On Drugs" – a tool to police and imprison the unemployed and poorest sections of society, overwhelmingly black and Latino.

Between 1972 to 2006, the prison population grew from 300,000 inmates to over 2.3 million – a 760 percent increase. Today, about 30 percent of federal prisoners were currently unemployed during the time of their arrest, and over 70 percent had an income of less than \$24,000 per year. About 70 percent of all prisoners have not completed high school. The vast majority of these new prisoners were convicted for non-violent or drug-related crimes. Overwhelmingly, the rise in the prison population has been nothing more than a dumping ground of the poor and the unemployed. As James Hyman, head of a private prison company, told his investors: "We do not believe we will see a decline in the need for detention beds in an economy with rising unemployment among American workers."

### A Residue of Racism

The growing mass incarceration is far worse for the black population. Black men are sentenced to prison seven times more than white men. More than half of all black men without a high school diploma go to prison at some point in their lives. One out of every three black men are expected to



go to prison at some point in their lifetime. There are now more black men in prison, on probation or on parole than were enslaved in 1850, before the Civil War began.

### Torture Chambers

Going to prison means being subjected to torturous conditions. Most prisons are way overcrowded, housing double or triple the capacity. Throughout the country an average of 80,000 prisoners are held in solitary confinement, many of them for multiple years, enduring conditions of torture. It is not surprising that for every year spent behind bars, a person's life expectancy decreases by two years.

### A Necessity of Capitalism

The mass media and politicians paint a picture that incarceration is the result of bad decisions made by individuals – this way they can ignore the conditions in our society that push people down paths that lead to their incarceration. When corporations employ as few people as possible, and keep our wages low – they create a permanent mass of people living in poverty and unemployed. And mass incarceration is nothing more than the place to dump these sections of society that have been denied employment and any legal means of survival.

In order to make profits, capitalism needs poverty and unemployment. And so it will always have crimes of need and survival – and prison will always be the dumping ground of the poor and unemployed.

## The Rich Get Richer – The Poor Get Prison

The worst criminals in our society are the super rich. Bankers and CEOs cause horrible pain and suffering to millions of people around the world, but they are rarely punished for their crimes against humanity. Poor and working people, however, are incarcerated at ever increasing numbers, even though the crimes they commit usually stem from real need instead of greed.

The super rich can ruin people's lives and are rewarded for it. It's not just that many CEOs and executives are given a pass for drug use and illegal prostitution. Big banks and corporations are responsible for laying off

thousands of workers, kicking people out of their homes, and destroying lives. Banks caused the 2008 financial collapse by committing fraud and manipulation. What did they get? Bailouts. Citigroup, Merrill Lynch, and seven other U.S. banks received \$175 billion and paid \$32.6 billion in bonuses to their executives in 2008, the same year the crisis began. In 2010, Goldman Sachs settled a lawsuit for \$550 million for cheating investors, the same year they made \$39 billion. Even though Goldman Sachs stole money from poor and working people through predatory lending, it was rewarded with \$12.9 billion in taxpayer's money. GE has been found guilty of environmental pollution, price-fixing, discrimination, stealing classified documents, felony fraud, and retaliation against whistleblowers. Regardless, in 2010 GE reported U.S. profits of \$5.1 billion, paid no taxes and claimed a credit of \$3.2 billion. For big companies, criminal behavior is just part of doing business.

Meanwhile, poor and working people are punished for crimes of desperation and need. Today the prison population is about 2.3 million people. The majority of federal and state prisoners are incarcerated for non-violent or drug-related crimes. About 30 percent of prisoners were unemployed when they were arrested and 70 percent of state prisoners had an income of less than \$2,000 a month or \$24,000 a year.

The judicial system is set up to target the poor, and rewards the super rich for destroying the lives of millions. Under capitalism – the rich get richer, and the poor get prison.



## Affluenza?! – WTF?

Last December, Ethan Couch, a white 16-year old killed four people while driving drunk. He was sentenced to rehab and ten years probation, but will serve no jail time. His defense argued that he suffered from "affluenza" – what a psychiatrist described as a real condition when the rich are so wealthy they have no sense of responsibility for their actions. Last year, the same judge oversaw a case in which a black fourteen year old was sentenced to ten years in prison for punching a man whose head struck the pavement and later died.

If the rich suffer from affluenza and are incapable of understanding the consequences of their actions, then why the hell are they the ones in charge of running society?



# The Origin of the Police

There weren't always police on every street corner with the power to stop, search, and harass people in the name of the law. For most of human history, daily issues of society were settled by people themselves, in their communities. Police forces were introduced by governments controlled by the wealthy, not to protect people but to protect the wealth and property of the rich from the threat of the masses of people.

Our modern police force is modeled on the police system developed in countries like Britain during the 19th century industrial revolution. Before the 19th century, a small police force called "constables" existed. They were few in number, elected by the residents in a given territory, and were unpaid. Some territories had no police at all. Most daily disputes were settled by people themselves, between neighbors, families, or in larger town meetings.

But during the 19th century things changed – industry was growing and many businessmen were becoming incredibly rich by exploiting workers. The 19th century workers in the cloth mills and factories of Britain worked more than 20 hours per day and often died of work-related illnesses before the age of 30. British cities like Manchester were described as a kind of hell on earth, where factories poured out smoke and workers were condemned to live lives of misery.

In conditions like these it is no surprise that people revolted and fought against their bosses. The first workers' strikes of the 19th century caught England's factory owners

by surprise. The few police that existed were in no way able to stop thousands of workers from undertaking strikes and protests. Without a sizable police force to rely on, factory owners, their families, and upper class students from colleges like Oxford fought workers in the streets in order to defeat strikes and stop the rising tide of workers' struggles.

Soon factory owners began to demand their governments control the working class by increasing the number of police. Starting in 1829, the British state introduced the Metropolitan Police force into cities like London. Unlike the constables of the past, these policemen were paid employees, hired by the central government. This system became the model for other cities around Europe and the U.S.

Police became an intense presence in the urban communities. The state brought in the police to control workers' strikes and organizing. But the government needed an excuse. They found it by accusing poor and working people of being criminals who need to be watched and controlled. The new police forces took over the work of solving daily disputes, controlling domestic violence, theft, and small crimes. By taking control of these basic functions of society, the new system guaranteed that police would be present when they are needed – when the private property of the wealthy is threatened, they are there in the thousands to protect it from the poor and working class.

The truth is people were able to live together for thousands

of years before the police were introduced – not to protect people, but to control them. If we take responsibility for the problems of our community and our society, there is no reason we should need or tolerate the presence of the police.



Early depiction of workers defeating police in Britain

## 1971: The Attica Prison Revolt

The Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960's and 70's generated a revolutionary spirit of revolt reaching all segments of society, including the prison population. In September, 1971, prisoners in Attica Correctional Facility in New York organized a revolt that lasted for five days.

Conditions in Attica were horrendous. The facility was built to contain 1,200 inmates but was crammed with 2,225. Prisoners were denied basic sanitation, had only one shower per week and one roll of toilet paper per month. About 54 percent of the inmates were black but all of the prison guards were white, fostering racist violence and tensions.

The uprising in Attica was sparked by the murder of George Jackson by prison guards. Jackson was an influential black revolutionary prisoner who had become politicized and joined the Black Panthers while serving a sentence of 23 years to life for a crime he committed at 18. His death sent shock waves throughout the country, setting off revolts in many prisons, but the most powerful was in Attica.

On September 9th, prisoners freed an inmate who was to be detained in his cell, then broke down the gates to take over the courtyard. More than 1,000 prisoners were able to take control of the yard and the prison, taking 40 guards hostage. They demanded access to literature, better food and conditions, and to be treated as human beings. As the prisoners put it in their statement to the outside world: "We are firm in our resolve and we demand, as human beings, the dignity and justice that is due to us by right of our birth."

Everyone had a role and something to contribute during the strike. The strikers organized themselves into committees such as security, food distribution, waste disposal and protection of the hostages. Despite all of the past racial tensions, there was an incredible sense of unity among the prisoners like never before. One black striker described, "I never thought whites could really get it on...I actually cried it was so close, everyone so together."

Negotiations were held in an open and democratic manner among the prisoners in which the representatives relayed information to the strikers in the yard. Despite widespread international attention and support, the prison officials were able to stall and refused to budge on the question of amnesty. After four days of negotiations between inmate representatives and prison officials, Nelson Rockefeller, then Governor of New York, made the call to retake the prison.

The police were mobilized with incredible brutality. With machine guns and tear gas, they took the prison, killing indiscriminately, resulting in the death of ten of the guards and prison employees as well as 33 prisoners. Prisoners were shot while surrendering, some of them lying on the ground. Survivors were beaten with nightsticks and forced to crawl naked through broken glass. The press was banned from the area and only learned of the brutality through leaked reports by police and survivors.

For the U.S. ruling class, Attica had to be crushed because it represented the revolt of prisoners against a fundamentally

unjust system. The prisoners' capacity for organizing collectively across racial lines provided an example which could link with the broader social movements sweeping the rest of society. For this reason Governor Rockefeller was willing to use incredible brutality to crush the strike.

Despite the massive violent repression, the Attica prison uprising shows us the potential of the most marginalized people to come together and fight for justice and basic human dignity, even in the worst conditions. For this reason Attica became a symbol of prisoners' resistance whose name is remembered to this day.



## Prisoners' Hunger Strike – Solidarity Against All Odds

In 2013, for two months, over 30,000 prisoners throughout 67 percent of the California state prison system went on a hunger strike to protest their treatment. This was the third hunger strike by prisoners since 2011, and it was by far the biggest fight in the history of the prison system in this country. Against all odds, amidst segregation, gang conflicts, and horrific conditions, these prisoners were able to organize and use their refusal to eat to pressure prison authorities and politicians to address their demands.



The hunger strike began on July 5th, 2013 with 30,000 prisoners in 22 California prisons refusing to eat. Finally after two months of the strike, prison officials agreed to hold public hearings on the conditions in the prisons and the isolation units, and to meet with the leaders of the strike in order to discuss their demands. On September 5th, prisoners and prisoner rights activists announced the end of the strike.

The strike was organized by the major prison gangs, usually organized around different ethnic groups – white, black, Latino. These organizations, typically tools to divide and conquer, were transformed by the prisoners into a means to work together. Behind locked doors and under the most intense surveillance, these prisoners were able to organize, plan a strategy, and make their demands with the help of prisoner rights activists and organizations on the outside.

The prisoners' demands included better, more nutritional food, access to medical care, and an end to ongoing violence and abuse by the guards. But above all, the prisoners demanded an end to the tortuous system of isolation in solitary confinement units known as the Secure Housing Units – the "SHU." It was from these inmates in the SHU that the organization of the hunger strike began.

In the SHU, prisoners are confined for years in windowless

cells. Without any sunlight or fresh air, these prisoners spend 22 hours per day alone and confined, under constant surveillance by guards, who regularly beat them, search their cells, and subject them to humiliation. There are 80,000 people in solitary confinement in U.S. prisons, and California prisons are among the most brutal. There are 750 prisoners in solitary confinement who have been there for over ten years. There are dozens among them who have been in solitary confinement for more than 20 years.

The fact that these prisoners have not only survived such horrific conditions but were able to organize a mass movement of this scale is an impressive example of the resilience of people to fight despite their difficult situations. For the most part, the conditions of the prisoners have not improved from this strike. But the scale of the prisoners' hunger strike proved to the inmates that despite the overwhelming obstacles stacked against them, they were able to develop networks, organize, and unite to fight for their interests. At the end of the strike, an organizer of the strike made this point: "From our perspective, we've gained a lot of positive ground towards achieving our goals. However, there's still much to be done. Our resistance will continue to build and grow until we have won our human rights."

### Where We Stand

The world we live in today is increasingly ruled by prejudice and fear, under a system of widespread violence and war, where exploitation and oppression are the rule, with the many dominated by the few. The name of this system is capitalism.

### The Force For Change Exists Today

Everywhere, working people's labor makes society run. Working people have the power to bring this system to a halt and bring about the changes needed. Like slavery, feudalism and other systems that enriched the minority at the expense of the majority, capitalism's removal is long over due. The time for socialism has come.

### We Stand For Socialism

- A world based on peaceful collaboration and international cooperation of working class people -- not the exploiters who rule today.
- The common ownership and sharing of the world's resources and productive capacity.
- An egalitarian and democratic government, organized and controlled from the bottom up.
- Protection of the world's ecological systems, putting science to work to sustain life, not destroy it.
- A society where human relations are based on respect, equality and dignity of all peoples, not racism, sexism or homophobia.

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