

Notes from the Unrepententiary

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The Jericho '98 rally in Washington, D.C. on March 27th was, I hope, a step in the direction of freeing all u.s.-held political prisoners and Prisoners of War. Vigorous action of all kinds - both domestic and international - will be needed to win the release of political prisoners. Radical politics of national liberation and to end white supremacy and colonialism produced the acts that ended in the imprisonment of over 100 political women and men. Our actions challenged the u.s. government - so it is not surprising that we find it nearly impossible to win release through the normal channels (few as they are) open to most prisoners. For example, the Federal and State Parole Boards most often politicize the process of release on parole, so that a political prisoner applying for parole is required to renounce her beliefs or apologize for his actions even to be considered for release.

Pursuing Jericho '98 as a long-term campaign is, therefore, necessary to political prisoners and POW's in the u.s. I think it will also be helpful to all prisoners in u.s. custody. Some people have said that supporting political prisoners is elitist, tending to ignore the plight of other prisoners. But I think the two causes are fundamentally linked, and can each best be served by embracing the other.

Many of the people who are now political prisoners and POWs did work in support of prisoners for years before our arrests. We did that work because it was a clear, basic part of fighting injustice in this classist and racist society. Some of us first met one another in groups agitating for better prison conditions, or to raise bail for women in jail, or to support the Attica Brothers and other prisoners who rebelled against inhuman situations in the prisons of the 60's, 70's and 80's. Whether the goal was to abolish prisons or to reform them, activists from the various movements for justice included the u.s. prison system in the list of oppressive institutions that demanded change.

The goals shared by today's u.s.-held political prisoners still include fundamental change in the prison system, and activities demanding the release of political prisoners also bring attention to the prisons as a whole, along with other examples of u.s. racism, colonialism, and class exploitation. Prisons in the u.s. are good business - something Angela Davis and other activists point out when they talk about the "prison/ industrial complex".

Prisons are also implements of genocide and counter-insurgency- as Dr. Mutulu Shakur and other New Afrikan POWs have analyzed in articles and interviews.

This aspect of the prison system is most clearly exposed by looking at how prisons suppress and more than decimate the Black, Puerto Rican, Mexicano, and Native American Nations in the u.s. empire, together with how they repress the radical political movements and leadership in those nations and in the white left. On the one hand, the u.s. imprisons vast numbers of young Third World people, so that their lives are destroyed and the lives of their communities disrupted. On the other hand, the government metes out harsh punishment to those political activists and revolutionaries who dare to build militant resistance to injustice. Together, these strategies produce an effective program of genocide: destroying the life of oppressed nations and their ability to fight for liberation. The massive incarceration of Black, Latino, and Native American women and men is meant to unravel the fabric of those communities, while the disproportionate sentences and conditions of confinement of political prisoners and POWs is intended not only to destroy the political organizations that exist, but also to frighten others from attempting resistance.

I said at the beginning of this column that I think international activity is needed for the release of political prisoners in this country. That's because we have to embarrass the u.s., to force them to admit that they hold political prisoners - something they deny. Without international pressure, they'll never admit that this supposed democracy, busy lecturing the world on human rights, imprisons people for political acts as well as on frame-ups and railroads. Already there have been some moments when international attention has been turned on u.s.-held political prisoners- the clearest example was the world-wide support for our brother Mumia Abu-Jamal. I think we need to direct international attention to the conditions all u.s.-held prisoners face, as well as to the obscene rate at which people are being incarcerated. If Jericho '98 and other campaigns on behalf of political prisoners do our work well, we can help to focus international attention on the u.s. prison system as a whole.

In the 70's, I worked in a group fighting the FBI's COINTELPRO and supporting New Afrikan POWs. I remembered talking to people about Geronimo ji jaga, Sundiata Acoli, Assata Shakur (who was then still in prison). Explaining who these comrades were, why they were in prison and why they received such harsh treatment helped show people that the u.s. democracy was phony, that fighting for human rights was answered by government repression, and that u.s. "justice" was anything but just. Learning about political prisoners often served as a first step for people to open their eyes to the broader inequalities in this country - including questioning the nature of the prison system, who goes to prison, and how the prison system affects and exposes the very nature of u.s. society.

Prison work of all kinds is plagued by a lack of resources. Joining hands whenever we can will help us all. If political prisoner support work is done in an elitist fashion, that should be changed. Mostly it feels to us inside that there's room for a lot more activity on all fronts. **Jericho '98** is a start towards filling the gap. The "**Critical Resistance**" conference on prisons, coming up in September and organized by activists in California, is another. **Free All Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War - AND Tear Down the Walls!**

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