

Transformation

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Women's Project Attends Critical Resistance South

By Angeline Echeverría

On April 4th-6th, the Women's Project attended *Critical Resistance South: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex*, a conference held in New Orleans, LA. In addition to staff people, four formerly incarcerated WP members attended the conference. Critical Resistance is a national grassroots group that fights to end the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). The PIC is a complicated system that uses prisons as a solution to social, political, and economic problems. The PIC depends upon oppressive systems that the Women's Project works against, like racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. It includes human rights violations, the death penalty, industry and labor issues, policing, courts, media, community powerlessness, the imprisonment of political prisoners, and the elimination of dissent.

At the conference, we learned what other groups throughout the South are doing to resist prison industries and to empower currently and formerly incarcerated individuals and their communities. As a follow-up to the conference, we

showed a film on May 18th, entitled "Voices from the Inside," that focused on the experiences of women in a California federal prison.

Since 1989, the Women's Project has been working with women and men inside of Arkansas prisons and jails. WP Staff Member Felicia Davidson-Richardson currently facilitates groups in Pulaski County Jail (Little Rock), Department of Community Correction (Pine Bluff), McPherson and Grimes Unit (Newport), Tucker Unit (England) and Wrightsville Unit (Wrightsville). She deals with issues of domestic violence, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS prevention, healthy relationship-building, and other topics relevant to prisoners' experiences.

Arkansas is participating in a national trend of increasing incarceration. There are more than 2 million people locked up in US prisons and jails, more than at any other time in history. Between 1980 and 2001, the Arkansas prison population increased by 249%. The majority of these prisoners are nonviolent

offenders and 80% of the women incarcerated in Arkansas are in for substance abuse-related convictions. Eventually, 95% of all prisoners nationwide will be released back into our communities.

Arkansas is the #1 state in the nation for methamphetamine production, and the majority of drug abusers in prison will receive little or no substance abuse treatment for their addictions before they are released.

Not only do prisoners lack access to substance abuse treatment, but they also lack access to education and counseling that will help them to deal with the issues that led to their incarceration. 80% of women incarcerated in Arkansas have experienced domestic violence, sexual assault, and/or physical abuse. Arkansas is the #3 state for domestic violence homicides and #1 for domestic violence homicides of African-American women.

When women are released from Arkansas prisons, they face all the challenges they had before their incarceration and then some. There are the challenges of substance

abuse, lack of education (the average female prisoner has an 11th grade education), violence against women, and poverty (women are released



WP Board Member, Brenda Olive, and Director Judy Matsuoka listen to speakers at the Critical Resistance South opening session.

from Arkansas prisons with \$25; the average female prisoner earned less than \$10,000 the year before her incarceration). 80% of women in Arkansas prisons are mothers and the average mother in prison in Arkansas has 3 minor children. In addition to the challenges they had before their incarceration, if a woman has a drug-related felony, she will be unable to access many of the services available to help people facing such challenges, such as subsidized housing, TEA (welfare) and food stamps.

The Women's Project is working to address some of the needs of currently and for-

merly incarcerated women in Arkansas, but we know we need to do more. Through our MIWATCH program, we transport children to visit their mothers in prison and we collect toiletry items for incarcerated women.

Through Felicia's groups, we're able to educate male and female prisoners to better deal with the challenges they face in a system that's stacked against them. We are currently forming a group of formerly incarcerated women to work together to develop solutions to the problems that they and other mem-

bers of their communities face.

As a community, we need to stand up against the idea that more prisons makes us safer. Few people believe anymore that prisons in any way rehabilitate people who commit crimes. We need more alternatives to incarceration and more opportunities for people who suffer from the obstacles of poverty, lack of education, racism, substance abuse, and violence. Please call our office to get involved in our efforts to challenge the Prison Industrial Complex in Arkansas! ■

What is Abolition?

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WHAT IS ABOLITION?

* Abolition is a political vision that seeks to eliminate the need for prisons, policing, and surveillance by creating sustainable alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.

* Abolition means acknowledging the devastating effects prison, policing, and surveillance have on poor communities, communities of color and other targeted communities, and saying, "No, we won't live like this. We deserve more."

* Abolitionists recognize that the kinds of wrongdoing we call "crime" do not exist in the same way everywhere and are not "human nature", but rather determined by the societies we live in. Similarly, abolitionists do not assume that people will never hurt each other or that people won't cross the boundaries set up by their communities. We do imagine, however, that boundary crossings will happen much less often if we live in a society that combines flexibility with care to provide for, and acknowledge, people's needs. To do that, we must create alternatives for dealing with the injuries people inflict upon each other in ways that sustain communities and families. Keeping a community whole is impossible by rou-

tinely removing people from it.

* An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead the average person to believe that things really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives.

IF NOT PRISONS AND POLICE, THEN WHAT?

If our vision is to eliminate the need for prisons, policing, and surveillance, we must have a clear idea of what we need to make our communities safe and secure. We must make those alternatives realistic and we must be able to begin building them today. We need community alternatives that keep people out of the hands of police and out of prisons and jails, while addressing the fears that people live with on a daily basis. We can do that by building our communities and ending a reliance on, and belief in, law enforcement as the only solution. Here are just a few examples of what those alternatives might include:

* Community-based economic resources: Current cooperative economic models

provide us with one set of strategies to build our communities. We can create a means for providing meaningful work—and training for that work—to all. This work and training can provide for our housing, food, and clothing, and should contribute to the well being of the community.

* Community-based education models: We have examples of small, charter and alternative schools that have been successful in showing us alternative means of educating our community. Community-based schools can offer education to anyone who wants it (youth and adults). Education can be free, participatory, and aimed toward sustaining the kinds of social environments we want to create. They can also model the community forms we want in their teaching practices. Our schools can tailor the learning process to the needs of the students and can involve the adult community in learning and teaching so schools are not isolated from the rest of the community.

* Community forums: Some current restorative justice models from around the world provide us with examples of how community mediation and problem solving is used to resolve conflicts and keep our communities

safe. We must create a means of dealing with people who hurt each other (physically, mentally, emotionally, materially). We can establish community forums to address grievances people have regarding each other and as a means of resolving those conflicts. Such formations could include community councils that mediate between individuals/groups, community elders to whom community members could go to for advice and counsel, age-, issue-, and interest-specific groups for building community ties (youth groups, artists' circles, support groups, study groups, etc.), to community-based strategies for keeping individuals community members from harming themselves or others and to provide disincentives for repeating such actions. Above all, these groups can grow from the community and their direction and scope should come from the people involved in them and whom they affect.

* **Community Services:** Current community-based organizations provide us with good examples of how services may be provided. We must provide services to those who have difficulty providing for themselves. Such strategies can emphasize not only taking care of those who need the most help, but finding ways to help people get through these systems and come out with both what they need and their humanity and dig-

nity intact. These models can also include working with people who currently provide such services to design workshops, trainings, and ongoing support and resources that go beyond providing individual advocacy and services, and emphasize gaining independence from those systems.

* **Medical care:** Current neighborhood clinics and free clinics provide us with good examples of strategies for making free health care available to all. Such services can include basic health (preventative, check ups, acupuncture, etc.), health crises (major medical emergencies, terminal illness), dental and visual health, and mental health (both routine counseling and therapy as well as crisis care and care for the mentally disabled, etc.).

Many of the strategies discussed above are already in place. They are not fantasies, but real life examples of community building and growth.

WHAT DOES ABOLITIONISM MEAN FOR ME AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Taking an abolitionist approach means radically shifting the way we think about providing for ourselves and living with each other. It means imagining social environments that provide all of us with basic necessities: a safe place to live, enough food, access to

medical care for minds and bodies, access to information and the tools with which to understand and use that information, the resources to participate in whatever kind of economy we have, a means of expressing opinions/interests/concerns, and living free of bodily, psychological and emotional harm (both from individuals and from the state).

Can you say that you have access to all these things? Does every one in your community have that same access?

We need to start building the kinds of social environments that will provide these resources for all before we can abolish anything. We need strategies that will keep our communities whole and keep us safe, not ones that rely on punishment, caging, and bodily harm. The environments most of us live in offer us "public safety" that does not serve the entire community, but protects the interests of the state and the rich and powerful. We cannot abolish prisons if we don't have sustainable communities for people to come home to.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Abolition means that every time we oppose or try to tear something down, we need to build something sustainable in its place. We can do this by being strategic, by researching not only

what the problems are, but also what resources are available. We must look not only at what the state is doing wrong, but what is already available in our communities that could provide economic and social sustainability for all, or what needs to be created and how we will create it. Each step in our organizing must be able to do this.

Being an abolitionist means taking action and putting energy into building our families, neighborhoods—all of our communities. It means creating a firm community foundation for people to come to when we finally tear down all the walls. Together we can do this, but we must believe that it is possible. ■



WP Board Member Brenda Olive discusses prison issues with activist and prison abolitionist Angela Davis and other conference participants.

Report from CR South

By Sabrina Hood, WP Member and CR South Participant

Critical Resistance is a very important part of our life and our culture. It teaches you about how to work with the system. It teaches you what you can accomplish if you put your mind to it, and that one person can make a difference.

Why CR is important to me: because I'm a Black woman who has been through the prison system and was judged unjustly. I was strung out on cocaine and guilty of being an addict, locked up for many years. Now I've learned about the Critical Resistance movement, and it is very important that I do not drop the torch. It was a great pleasure and adventure to be taken to a conference of that magnitude. I learned that nothing's impossible if I put my mind to it. I learned that there's nothing I cannot accomplish. I am very proud to have been a part of the Critical Resistance movement, and it will forever be a part of my life. I do not plan on setting the torch down ever again.

I hope that through the Women's Project we become a strong force to help anyone who's been sentenced unjustly. I pray that we, as women, become a stronger force to help other women to be released from prison and to give them a chance to enter life again and be stronger. I do not want to see any more women sent back to prison or kept in prison because they don't have a place to go. I truly pray that we are allowed to help them transition out. This is my dream: to be of service to someone else before myself.

Facts about Arkansas Prisons

- In 2001, the estimated prison population in Arkansas was 16,400. The total population was 2.7 million.
- Between 1980 and 2001, the Arkansas prison population increased by 249%.
- 80% of women incarcerated in Arkansas are in for substance abuse-related felony convictions.
- Arkansas is the #1 state for methamphetamine production.
- 80% of women incarcerated in Arkansas have experienced domestic violence, sexual assault, and/or physical abuse.
- Arkansas is the #3 state for domestic violence homicides and #1 for domestic violence homicides of African-American women.
- 80% of women incarcerated in Arkansas are mothers; the average mother in Arkansas prison has 3 minor children.
- The average female prisoner has an 11th grade education.
- The cost to educate someone for 2 semesters (15 hours/semester) at the University of Arkansas: \$3,556. The cost to incarcerate one prisoner for a year: \$13,747.25.
- The average female prisoner earned less than \$10,000 the year before incarceration.
- In one year, approximately 2100 women are incarcerated at Newport.
- In 2001, 1,163 youth aged 10-12 were arrested in Arkansas.
- In 2001, 17,255 youth under 18 were arrested in Arkansas.

Correctional Facilities in Arkansas (not including county jails and transitional housing)

Benton Unit, Boot Camp Program, Central Office, Cummins Unit, Delta Regional Unit, Diagnostic Unit, Jefferson County Jail & Correctional Facility, Maximum Security Unit, Mississippi County Work Release Center, North Central Unit, Northwest Arkansas Work Release Center, Pine Bluff Unit, Texarkana Regional Corrections Center, Tucker Unit, Varner Unit, Wrightsville Unit, Grimes Unit, McPherson Unit.

Prisoners Speak Out

The following testimonials were written by participants in Felicia's Domestic Violence classes.

On or about Feb. 4, 2003 I walked into Domestic Violence Class, not knowing some of the things I know now. With the help of Mrs. Felicia I learned a lot about domestic violence.

I learned a lot about the concept to building and making a strong and healthy relationship. I also learned what leads to a negative and unhealthy relationship, domestic violence.

There are all types of domestic violence. In the most harmful case it would be physical abuse, which involves hitting, kicking, slapping, etc. There are all types of abuse: physical, emotional, sexual, economic, and also verbal. I learned that abuse is abuse no matter how you see it. It only brings your mate down. It causes low self-esteem for both parties involved.

Low self-esteem causes a person to be bitter and angry inside and out. It then leads to build-up, which causes domestic violence.

In order to avoid domestic violence in a relationship, you must learn to trust your mate. You must learn to communicate. I learned that communication is the key to solving problems.

Learning About Violence

Step One

I had a fight with one of my classmates.
Mad nervous. Fear. No.

Step Two

Fear mad no

Step Three

I was in control
Yes. I got upset
Blame

Step Four

I need to learn control
Talk without anger
Why we violent

Violent Incident

She was talking about the baby that I feel isn't mine
Had a male friend over all night
I got mad, punch her on side of face
I became upset.
I wanted her to stop saying that was my baby

Short & Long-term Impact

Made my wife really start cheating
Put me back in jail and the thought of it being over.



Testimonials continue on next page...

This class has helped me mainly in preparing myself for a healthy relationship, but it goes deeper and beyond that; it also has helped me identify some coping skills with my temper. The class has certainly given me a better look at me, for better, and for worse. But I am not discouraged, because, as I found out in this class, there is effective treatment for this behavior flaw, if one is willing to be honest and open, to accept new suggestions and ideas from Felicia and the program that she so willingly gives her precious time to teach.



Ms. Felicia has earned the title "Ms." which is the form of respect all women deserve and which she has respectfully earned. I pray that her thoughts and teachings will be forever engraved in the contents of my heart, and that I can take the skills she has given me, and pass them to someone who perhaps it can help free from the slavery of abuse.

Abuse is a terrible thing and it is not an individual problem, it's a community problem, and education is the first indication of fighting back. Again I say thank you and I pray with all my heart and soul that this program will forever be blessed. ■

Movement Building

From "Critical Resistance South Conference Report" by Melissa Burch, CR South

To those of us who worked so hard to organize CR South and from reports from those who attended, the conference was a tremendous success. An incredibly diverse group of people came from all over the region, many from communities directly impacted by the PIC. Over the course of the weekend, 1200 people registered for the conference, while hundreds more participated in some part of the conference.

People were inspired and motivated to work more closely together and left feeling they were part of a larger movement that they could continue to access and collaborate with. We succeeded in creating a space where information and resources were shared effectively, and most importantly, relationships built that have the potential to form the fabric for a renewed movement against the PIC in the South.

A Radicalized Movement

Finally, we have the sense that the movement was radicalized by the conference and its focus on PIC abolition. From the introduction to abolition on Friday night, to the well-attended workshops on abolitionist organizing strategies, and other workshops that approached the ideas less directly, finding ways to create community safety without relying on prisons, policing and surveillance was central to the agenda throughout most of the weekend.

Several conference goers who work in traditional reform organizations have spoken up since the conference about how they now better understand what CR means by PIC abolition and agree with the need to pursue abolitionist strategies and reforms that do not undermine the ultimate goal of abolition. In the space we all shared and created over the course

of the conference, it really felt like a world without walls was possible. ■



The New Slavery

By Henri Smothers, WP Member and CR South Participant

I'm convinced that a person's life experiences determine how they feel about what happens around them. Just the other day I was told of an event that recently happened that reminded me so much of what the Negro slave must have felt like in the 1600's. I was told of 9 or so dark skinned Black men chained together in prison clothes being led into a courtroom. Those who were in charge were the White people. Those who were accused of having violated the law were all dark skinned Black men. That description reminded me of the many pictures I have seen in so many books that I have read. That description reminded me of the New Slavery. The court system as it is now is the new Middle Passage to the prison system. Someone has to run this big business we call the Criminal Justice System. Why not use the New Slaves as free labor just as was done years ago?

Back in the old slavery days,

no one really knew what happened to their loved ones as they were carted away from their relatives. Many of the slaves didn't even have relatives that were close by their sides. Even if the relatives were there, when their loved ones were sold there was nothing they could do about it. Today in the Criminal Injustice System, much is done the same way. Black men, women and children are being carted away by the thousands every year while many of us stand idly by and do nothing or we do very little.

There are many reasons given as to why many of us do nothing or very little. One of those reasons is, it doesn't concern me. Well, it does concern me. My life's experience has taught me that every man, woman, boy and girl that is being sold into the New Slavery is someone's child. There is a very good chance that for every woman that is locked up she has at least one child that is being left behind as a result of her

being sold into slavery. Not every man that is being sold has children neither does he necessarily have a significant other that he is leaving behind. Yet there is a very good chance that his being sold into the New Slavery is costing some loved one somewhere some pain and some money. Those persons caught up in the Criminal Justice system usually bring the whole family with them.

When a young black person is locked up, chances are he or she will never be known by any name but Ex-Con, if and when he/she is released. Therefore, that person moves further down the road into deeper slavery. Once that person has donated their time to the Criminal Justice System, the System doesn't do any favors for the Ex-Con. Take for instance, the many low to no paying jobs that the prisoner does while in prison for some of America's companies and corporation. Those same companies would not consider hiring an Ex-Con upon their release from prison. Yet that company has reaped the benefits of cheap labor while that person was in prison. What is 12 cents an hour to a prisoner who is working in the prison system? That is his hourly wage for each 8 hours of work. That's about \$20.00 a month per working prisoner. If shopping in the Prison store is the equivalent of \$100.00 per month, something is wrong with this picture. The prisoner works all month and doesn't make enough money to afford to shop for some of the luxuries at the prison



store, such as shampoo, deodorant, feminine products. Isn't this similar to what the indentured slave went through before slavery was declared unconstitutional by the 13th Amendment in 1865?

The New Slavery is a way of controlling massive numbers of people who have no say in what happens to them, a way of controlling many, many lives by getting them to work for free and paying them little to nothing for their labor. What a concept. It is a fact that much of America has been built on the backs of the African American, and it will continue to be until enough folks' life experiences get them to think. It's time for something to be done about this Middle Passage. Where is the new Harriet Tubman now? We are the Harriet Tubmans of the 21st century. If we are to survive as a people, it's time we get this train rolling. ■

Cooking Up Justice

The Women's Project is publishing its first ever cookbook, *Cooking up Justice*. The book contains over 100 recipes from Women's Project members, friends, family, and supporters. Call us to order your copy today!!!

The Empowerment of CR 2003

By Shirley Burgess, WP Member and CR South Participant

I sit at the Women's Project in Little Rock, Arkansas in a house on the corner of 23rd and Main Streets that is filled with love, care and concern for women of all nationalities. I'm beginning to focus on the empowerment of the conference. I am able to find so much peace within, because of the compassion, information, and inward drive that I received.

As I think on the many times that I have been locked and behind cold, cold bars, not knowing when nor how I was going to be able to get out, I focus on the conference to end the prison industrial complex. I truly agree with the mission. I know from experience when we get out of jail/prison, we know not what the future has in store for us. At times we feel as if society has forgotten that we are humans locked in a cage. After the struggles of being behind bars time and time again, the Women's Project has allowed me the opportunity to attend a conference I shall never forget.

During this conference I found the drive to do all that I can to make it better for the next woman, man, or child who comes along and has been in the same situation. I gain hope, enthusiasm and a drive from within

to continue my vision and to help other women.

I know that when I was locked up I lost my self-

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esteem, my pride, and the reason to even live. The conference gave me so much. I was unable to store it all, but I know that I want to be the person who is part of rebuilding and reconstructing individual lives so

We all must remember that no matter what others say, there is still hope as long as we have the air that we breathe. We must all know that love and peace come from within. I always looked outside of my self for



Shirley Burgess poses with Angela Davis at Critical Resistance South. Ms. Davis was a featured speaker at the conference.

that they too may find a new freedom. I feel the conference will empower and sustain solutions to social, political, and economical problems. It will continue to build the people of faith, activists, former and current prisoners, as well as families. Critical Resistance focuses on fighting to rebuild the lives and to redirect our people. So let us all join in and keep our desires strong and never let the freedom light go out.

that peace. Today we must guide our people to find that love within, and this world will be a better world. See you next year if GOD be willing. ■



Transformation...

is published four times every year. In each issue, members receive analysis of contemporary issues, information about Women's Project upcoming events and activities, book reviews, and more. If you are not a Women's Project member and would like to continue receiving the journal, please fill out the membership form below.



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