

PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

Ella Baker Center for Human Rights

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The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights works to promote racial and economic justice for people of colour and low-income communities. Throughout our nearly twenty-year history, we have won victories in policy advocacy, civic engagement, the green jobs movement and violence prevention.

We are named for Ella Baker, an unsung hero of the civil rights movement who inspired and guided many emerging leaders. Ella Baker believed in the power of ordinary people to dream big and create change. We build on her legacy by giving people the opportunities and skills to work together and strengthen our communities so that all of us can thrive.

Some of our biggest achievements include building California's first-ever support and advocacy network for over 1,400 families of incarcerated youth, stopping the construction of a super jail for youth in Alameda County, closing five out of eight California youth prisons, and initiating a green collar jobs movement that helped ensure the passage of the federal 2007 *Green Jobs Act*. In addition, we have launched civic engagement campaigns like Soul of the City, which involved organizing participants who contributed 1,500 hours of community service and voter mobilization in Oakland and Heal the Streets, a fellowship program that trained local youth impacted by violence to become advocates for peace and social change.

Past successes have led us to our current mission: to end mass incarceration by moving resources away from prisons and punishment, and towards services like job training, education, healthcare, and housing that will build stronger and safer communities. Our focus on ending mass incarceration is based on evidence suggesting that the punishment economy in the United States, which functions through the application of punitive solutions to all social problems, has made entire communities less safe. The U.S. spends over \$60 billion annually to keep nearly 7 million adults under 'correctional' supervision. Recidivism rates remain around 67 percent. Black and Latino/a Americans are more likely to be incarcerated, to struggle with poverty, and to be victims of crime.

If not for forty years of mass incarceration, the poverty rate would be much lower today. Specifically, 5 million fewer people would live below the poverty line (Bobo and Thompson, 2010). Women of colour in particular

bear much of the direct and indirect impact of mass imprisonment. Yet these groups are absent from dialogue, and are not adequately considered during resource allocation decisions that drive public safety and economic policy.

We know that the way forward is a books not bars, jobs not jails, and healthcare not handcuffs agenda. To successfully tear down our punishment economy, we must build a national membership-based movement that develops the capacity of ordinary people who have been directly impacted by the prison system to take collective and courageous action.

For too long, the voices and perspectives of those who have been incarcerated, or those whose family members have been incarcerated, have been left out of the conversation about criminal justice reform and public safety policies. We aim to promote the growth of leadership in these families, so that all can benefit from community-driven solutions. As such, we are working at local, state, and national levels to advance policies that move funding away from prisons and towards services that will help people.

During a recent local initiative, we successfully campaigned for the adoption of a Jobs Not Jails budget in Alameda County. Throughout the last six months, we worked with faith leaders, community members, and grassroots leaders to demand that the Board of Supervisors allocate half of their public safety realignment funds towards community-based re-entry programs that provide job training, housing, healthcare, and education to people coming out of jail.

In the past, the supervisors allocated the majority of funds to the sheriff, but declining crime rates and empty jails indicate that that approach is unwarranted. Our collective organizing led to the recent adoption of a budget proposal which will award more funding to community programs that will help people coming out of jail rebuild their lives. We will continue to work with local officials to ensure that the budget is successfully implemented and that community organizations receive the funding.

Another local effort that demonstrates the positive effect of community-driven solutions is our partnership with Restaurant Opportunities Centers (ROC) United (see <http://rocunited.org>). Together, we hope to launch the Restore Oakland Center. Restore Oakland will serve as a multipurpose hub and will contain a restaurant, a cooperative food-enterprise incubator, and feature training programs focused on helping low-income and formerly incarcerated people advance to livable-wage jobs, as well as restorative justice programs. The project will serve as a space for empowering

community members and will provide an alternative to the cycle of criminalization and incarceration too many families in Oakland face today.

At the state level, we are advocating for legislation that will limit abusive practices in the prison system and for bills that promote reinvestment in re-entry services. We, for instance, are co-sponsoring a bill that would limit the solitary confinement of youth, as well as bills that would prohibit housing discrimination against people with criminal records and that would increase credits for state prisoners participating in rehabilitation programs, which can reduce their prison terms. We are also sponsoring legislation that helps people reduce their parole terms by complying with the terms of their supervision. Savings from the reduced parole supervision would support employment and housing for people coming out of prison.

The passage of Proposition 47, a measure in California requiring that certain low-level offenses like shoplifting or simple drug possession be charged as misdemeanours and which directs the millions in annual savings from reduced rates of incarceration towards mental health and drug treatment, school programs, and victim services, was a major victory for us and gave the state an opportunity to become a leader in smart on crime policies throughout the country. We are working with other local organizations to make sure that eligible persons take advantage of re-sentencing under the proposition.

Nationally, we are working with 20 organizations in 13 states on a community-driven research project that aims to document how mass incarceration impacts formerly incarcerated people and their families. This project will help address the lack of representation and the misrepresentation of low-income communities of colour in the design of smart solutions that can increase public safety, as well as economic and familial stability in communities with high incarceration rates.

Since April 2014, we have engaged over 1,000 formerly incarcerated people and their families in focus groups and one-on-one interviews in order to document their experiences. We are also interviewing over 200 employers to learn about their experiences with hiring formerly incarcerated people in order to discover the challenges that come with hiring them, and what incentives or support would make them more likely to hire formerly incarcerated people.

In October 2015, we released a national report documenting our findings and highlighting policy solutions that demonstratively enhance public

safety, public health, and economic security. In addition, we will introduce sentencing reform and community investment legislation (like California's Proposition 47) in other states, including Florida, Ohio, Louisiana, and California.

We hope that our efforts will contribute to the creation of a national membership-based movement that will end the systemic criminalization and incarceration of communities of colour. Ending mass incarceration is one of the most important fights since the civil rights movement and we will work with communities across the country to ensure that we seize the moment and win.

REFERENCES

Bobo, Lawrence and Victor Thompson. 2010. "Racialized Mass Incarceration: Poverty, Prejudice, and Punishment", in Hazel Rose Markus and Paula M. L. Moya (eds.), *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century*, New York: Norton, pp 322-355.

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