

## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

### **Prisoners of State Repression and Writing for Social Justice**

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At present, there are more than 10 million human beings serving time in prisons around the world (Walmsley, 2013), with hundreds of thousands more held captive in immigration and other (in)security detention facilities that dot the global carceral landscape (Sampson and Mitchell, 2013). This past June, over 300 people from across Canada and around the world gathered at the University of Ottawa – which is situated on unceded and unsurrendered Algonquin Territory – for the *Fifteenth International Conference on Penal Abolition* (ICOPA 15). Together, participants said a collective “no” and took an “abolitionist stance” (Mathiesen, 2008, p. 58) against state repression in its various forms.

Hosting an ICOPA conference on Algonquin Territory and in Canada at this moment in time was significant for a number of reasons. Chief among them is the fact that the ownership of the land upon which the proceedings took place was never transferred and no treaties were ever signed to provide for its use by settlers. Yet many Indigenous peoples in what is most often called Ottawa or the National Capital Region, as well as those living across Canada, have been dispossessed of much of their traditional cultures and resources through colonial “strategies of annihilation” such as the reserve system, residential schools, the 60’s scoop and the white-stream adoption of children thereafter (Martel *et al.*, 2011, p. 235). Today, imprisonment is among the most visible of these repressive tactics, with the incarceration rate for adult-aged Aboriginals approximately “10 times higher” than it is for non-Aboriginals in a country where 140 per 100,000 adults are imprisoned (OCI, 2013). Another important point to underscore is that under a Conservative federal government, Canada has become increasingly punitive. More and more laws are being passed with the stated purpose of sending more people to more austere prisons to serve longer sentences with fewer opportunities for release prior to their completion (Piché, forthcoming).

Those of us assembled at ICOPA 15 were well-aware of similar patterns elsewhere in the world and acknowledge the fact that state repression is most often directed to reproduce racial, gender, sexual, economic, and other forms of inequality (Davis, 2003). Carceral nation states know no bounds, as they

deploy exclusionary practices in a stated effort to keep ‘us’ safe from ‘them’ – the ‘criminals’, Indigenous people ‘in need of civilizing’ and ‘assimilation’, ‘problem’ drug users, ‘bogus’ refugee claimants, ‘threats’ to national security, political ‘dissidents’, and other dehumanized and demonized populations.

Working towards social justice in our world requires knowledge of how domination in all of its forms works and affects us. It necessitates the development of strategies to resist the onslaught of corporate and state harm. It also demands efforts to build capacity to relate to each other in ways that promote equality and peace on a larger scale than is currently possible. Since the first conference in 1983, these objectives have been at the heart of the deliberations and work of ICOPA. Initially focused on prison abolition and the search for alternatives to incarceration, ICOPA has since expanded its focus to consider the eradication of the retributive penal system in favour of developing alternative ways of thinking about and responding to what states criminalize and punish (Piché and Larsen, 2010). In light of the continued growth of the prison-industrial-complex, the normalization and proliferation of the deprivation of liberty as part of the authoritarian pursuit of ‘security’, and revelations of the degree to which mass surveillance has taken hold and is impacting all of our lives, ICOPA remains a vital space for thinking and acting in the face of this *universal carceral* (Larsen, 2008).

### **THIS ISSUE**

In building knowledge to resist state repression and chart alternative ways forward, it is crucial that those most affected be at the forefront of these discussions. Without the insights of prisoners, it is impossible to understand the shifts and continuities in state violence as it is practiced and experienced (i.e. what we are fighting against). Moreover, without prisoners’ involvement, it is impossible to fully appreciate how to enact meaningful resistance (i.e. how to fight) and work towards social justice (i.e. what we are fighting for).

It is with this in mind that the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) continued its longstanding practice of inviting prisoners to submit papers to be read at ICOPA (see Davidson, 1988; Gaucher, 1988). Our call for papers and the initiative of those behind bars led to 24 papers being submitted and read in five prisoner-centered JPP sessions at ICOPA 15. The contributions included in this special issue represent those papers submitted for peer-review, which were ready for publication at this time. Moving forward, we

will continue to work with other authors who remain committed to working towards the future publication of their papers.

This issue begins with dispatches from the Canadian carceral state with articles by Jose Vivar and Jarrod Shook that introduce readers to the realities of imprisonment in Canada's provincial prisons and federal penitentiaries. A piece by Chester Abbotsbury discusses the role incarceration plays in reinforcing the various behaviours its proponents claim to 'correct', while Neil Shah explores how restorative justice has provided him with an alternative way of thinking about and responding to the criminalized harms he engaged in as a means of moving forward in his life. Following these pieces is a section on experiences and critiques of mass incarceration from the United States. A central theme in articles by Jerry Lashuay, Kenneth E. Hartman, and Susan Nagelsen and Charles Huckelbury is the growing use and disastrous consequences of life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) sentences, both for youth and adults. Subsequent contributions by Forrest Lee Jones and Shawn Fisher focus on the issue of prison crowding, and propose ways to start chipping away at the massive prison-industrial-complex. The last article by Jon Marc Taylor focuses squarely on a roadmap for reducing prison populations, and makes its central recommendation to consolidate the efforts of like-minded individuals and groups to affect meaningful change together.

The back end of the issue features a *Response* by Chris Clarkson and Melissa Munn on the role of and need for prisoners within abolitionist work. The *Prisoners' Struggles* section features the work of the American Prison Writing Archive, the Winnipeg ABC, the North American Animal Liberation Press Office, and Deep Green Resistance, all of which are organization or initiatives committed to documenting and resisting state repression. The issue also features the full program from ICOPA 15, as well as the artwork of Tim Felfoldi.

The following is not meant to be a definitive statement on what prisoners around the world are experiencing at present, and what form of support they would like to see extended by their comrades on the outside going forward. Rather, future *JPP* and ICOPA efforts to involve the incarcerated must seek to incorporate strategies and vehicles to ensure that the range of prisoners affected by state repression are among the voices heard and leading the charge. For our part, we welcome suggestions on how this can be achieved as ICOPA moves to Quito, Ecuador in 2016, Dartmouth and New Bedford, United States in 2017, and Liverpool, United Kingdom in 2018.

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