

Editorial Note

Howard Davidson

I have just returned from Bloomington, Indiana and ICOPA V, the fifth International Conference on Prison Abolition. Every second year since 1983 social activists involved with prison struggles meet to further the development of a prison abolition movement by discussing abolitionist theory, considering alternative forms of dispute settlement, and sharing experiences about particular political activities. Since the conference is truly international (e.g people were there from Costa Rica, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, and the U.S.S.R.), it is an ideal opportunity to exchange views and build networks.

Like most undertakings, ICOPA has had to struggle with many issues. A central one has been an on-going effort to keep it from becoming another academic conference. In fact, the *Journal* actually began as an effort to offset the dominance of scholarly presentations and the notable absence of former prisoners' participation at ICOPA II (Amsterdam 1985). Shortly after that conference, I compiled papers by prisoners on prison abolition for presentation at ICOPA III. These papers were subsequently published in the first issue of the *Journal*. Fortunately, ICOPA is moving in the direction of a good balance between activists and academics, and judging by the attendance at this year's conference, the absence of former prisoners seems to be a thing of the past.

Because our history is intimately connected to ICOPA and so many participants are also subscribers, I like to promote the *Journal* at the conference and discuss it in the sessions. It is an opportunity to hear what academics and activists promoting a prison abolition movement think about the *Journal* and its relationship to their work. One session was planned where this discussion could and did take

place. As it turned out, a related session was planned on prisoner writing as resistance where Robert Gaucher was scheduled to present his paper on the history of Prison Justice Day (August 10th), a paper which appears in this issue. Gaucher was unable to attend and I was asked to present on his behalf.

The workshop where I planned to discuss the *Journal* was called 'Inside Prisons: Empowerment As Abolition.'¹ Much of the session focused on the possibility of prison education programs and publications like the *Journal* taking an active role in prisoners' efforts to organise. The previous day, Achebe Lateef of the African National Prison Organization discussed the importance of developing 'conscious unity' in the struggle for prison abolition. By conscious unity I took Lateef to mean people outside and inside united in political action with a common understanding of what must be done to abolish the penal system as we know it. I think Lateef would agree that for this to happen organised prisoners and outside activists need to engage in continuous dialogue. In my presentation I considered how the *Journal* could contribute to the development of this dialogue by encouraging prisoners and former prisoners to document and analyse the experience and politics of crime and punishment and to publish this work where it could be read by people sympathetic to the concept of a conscious unity.

During the discussion which followed my presentation, the question was asked: "How would I describe the contribution of the *Journal* to the prison abolition movement?" I replied that even in an issue which intentionally focused on prison abolition,² the development of abolitionist theory and practice was a low priority. In my opinion, much research published in the *Journal* analyses specific practices used by prison authorities to keep prisoners divided, demoralized, and denied basic human rights (See Abu-Jamal, 1990; Bourque, 1988; Lauzon, 1988/89; Morris, 1991; Mayhew, 1988; Stringfellow, 1991).³ Many articles contain explicit recommendations for prisoners to have the right to design and implement programs which meet needs *they* (not the prison authorities or well-meaning reformers) have identified as important (See Infinity Lifers Group, 1988/89; Homer, 1990;

Lugosi, 1991; Lynes, 1988/89; Reed; 1990). If people at ICOPA shared this opinion after reading the *Journal* and articles published in the penal press, they could further the development of conscious unity by putting at the forefront of the abolitionist movement support for campaigns against particularly oppressive penal practices (e.g. solitary confinement) and support for prisoners' rights to produce programs which they (i.e. prisoners) recognize as valid.

Concrete evidence for this position emerged at the session on 'Prison Resistance Writing' where I presented Gaucher's "Organising Inside: Prison Justice Day (August 10th) A Non-Violent Response to Penal Repression." Prison Justice Day is a day when people on both sides of the walls remember prisoners who died in prison and express their protest to the operation and function of prisons by peaceful demonstrations, strikes and fasts. Robert Bryden's article, "Remembering Prison Justice Day" describes this day in detail. Gaucher's history of August 10th shows that it was first organised by the Odyssey Group at Millhaven Penitentiary. From there it spread to other prisons and groups outside. The penal press played a key role in that process. Gaucher's account illustrates the value of having publications which insure a forum for the kind of dialogue which will build events like August 10th and with them conscious unity.

I came away from ICOPA refreshed and with new ideas. One of these is to do more to encourage dialogue in the *Journal* by asking readers to send us letters which comment on the articles we publish. We will be pleased to print a selection of these letters and pass all of them on to the authors for their consideration.

I want to close with a special note of appreciation to Laurence French and Nancy Picthall-French for their work in preparing Robert Sullivan's letters from death row for publication in this issue.

ENDNOTES

1. Other presenters at this workshop were Elizabeth Barker, the coordinator of the Boston University prison education program, and Ed Sbarbaro who teaches in Colorado prisons for Regis College.
2. The first issue of the *Journal* focused on prison abolition because it published papers collected from prisoners on this theme and solicited for presentation at the third International Conference on Prison Abolition (Montréal). An account of why these papers were collected on this theme is found in the "Editor's Note" to that issue (Davidson, 1988).
3. A particularly graphic example is the recent decision by the Correctional Services Canada to cancel the Lifers' Conference which was organised by the Joyceville Lifer's Group.

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