

## A Call for the Abolition of Prisons

*Tiyo Attallah Salah-EI*

---

In the history of philosophy, there is perhaps no more powerful image than the cave described by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*. This deep, dark hole, we are told, is inhabited by prisoners bound in such a way that all they can see is the play of shadows on an interior wall, fleeting shapes that they mistake for reality. Far above these hapless souls, outside their underground dwelling, is the dazzling light of the sun, a sight reached only after an arduous journey upward.

For over a quarter of a century I have been making that arduous journey; striving to reach that dazzling light of freedom and justice, not just for myself but also for the two million women and men presently housed in that cave in the United States. During that journey I gained new insight regarding the pain of prisons, and the devastation and brutalization of people by capitalism and imperialism. From that painful experience, I became a prison abolitionist.

I may never be able to fully describe the complex dynamic process of how to organize and bring about the abolition of prisons. However, it is my hope that the views and information presented here will help others to develop further their own reasons for why they would be willing to undertake this struggle. The strength of my vision has depended in great measure on what I have learned about prison during my twenty-five years of incarceration and how much I am willing to continue learning. This type of learning requires a lifelong commitment to continual inquiry and knowledge in order to arrive at new levels of understanding and insight.

I have learned that there are many different ways of looking at any thing, event, or process. It all depends on how you look. I continue to look and learn as I live within the rotten, corrupt core of the criminal justice system. The prison has been a teacher for me. It reflects my own mind. The prison has not changed. It is my mind that has changed.

When your mind changes, new possibilities begin to arise. In fact, everything changes when you can see things on different levels simultaneously, when you can see fullness and connectedness as well as individuality and separateness. Your thinking expands in scope. This can be a profoundly liberating experience. It has taken me beyond a limited preoccupation with myself. It put things in a larger perspective. It has certainly changed the way I relate to prisons and the criminal justice system. If we hope to see things clearly, as they actually are,

and thereby perceive their intrinsic meaning, we have to be mindful of the ruts our thinking gets us into; we have to learn to see and approach things differently.

Facing our problems is usually the only way to get past them. There is an art to facing difficulties in ways that lead to effective solutions. We can, by exercising imagination, intuition, and creativity use the pressure of the problem itself to propel us through it. It is incumbent upon us to find new ways to break through the cycle of violence that so often characterizes the present corrections and criminal justice system.

The least controversial observation that one can make about the criminal justice system today is that it is remarkably ineffective, absurdly expensive, grossly inhumane, and riddled with ruthlessness and racism. In my view, and the views of a growing number of people, the hypothesis that prisons are institutions for controlling people of color is far more viable than the notion that prisons are an effort to prevent crime. All serious analyses of the history of incarceration reveal the same historical thrust: prisons and other systems of punishment are for social control, not crime control.

The criminal justice system is a multibillion dollar industry and very subversive of democratic principles. This establishment has doubled over the last decade. Its power has mostly been concentrated on the black community. The system is accountable to no effective form of civilian oversight. No system is less accountable than the correctional system. The corporate media, government, and private think tanks usually frame the debate over the criminal justice system. Researchers and policy makers, answerable to no elected official, formulate policies and concoct plans that wreak havoc on the poor and minorities, especially on black women and men.

Social factors and issues that create crime are no longer examined. Most people do not want to talk about things like adequate income, employment, and anti-poverty programs. All of this is now passé. People are left with the idea that criminals must somehow be simply wicked people, quite unlike themselves. If criminals can be defined as genetically different, the distinction between them and us is made even easier. It is a simple way out. Then no one has to feel any guilt for what goes on in society. The general public wants its pound of flesh. It does not care what happens. Racists want to prove a point with blacks, and politicians are going to help them to do it with the criminal justice system.

Race is the big, ugly secret that lies at the heart of most crime policy, certainly in North America. The criminal justice system is a system run on

soundbytes and throwaway lines. The system is not interested in anything that would lower crime, much less in anything decent or humane that is going to advance society. It is just a terribly corrupt system. And, of course, when you are talking about crime and criminals, it is very easy to fall into demonizing and stereotyping. Not only will people accept it, you can build a political career around it.

There is a need to find alternate options to incarceration, a lot of options, especially for the lesser offenders who have drug problems but who are now being sent to prison. We must go further than merely condemning prisons and the building of more prisons. We have to point the direction in which the solutions lie. We must focus upon what can replace prisons, and whether what we demand or propose will really eliminate the evils being objected to. We have to create and offer a well-thought-out program for accomplishing change and propose specific alternatives to replace the present system. We are going to have to face and deal with questions that demand workable and acceptable solutions. How would society function if we abolished prisons? What will be done with the dangerous few? Who decides? Who pays? Who benefits? Who will be in charge? Where will this lead us?

This is why we must be clear as to tactics, and above all, be armed with a workable program that will enable us to reach our goal. We cannot ignore the lessons that history has already taught us. We must create and project a powerful program for reaching our revolutionary goal of abolishing prisons. I strongly suggest we begin a new way of thinking about abolition.

Justice suggests that we may need to take a broader view of certain problems if we hope to solve them. This approach involves asking ourselves what the extent of the problem actually is, and discerning the relationship between the various isolated parts of the problem and the problem as a whole. If we do not identify the system correctly in its entirety, we will never come to a satisfactory solution because a key domain will always be missing, the domain of the whole.

We have to expand beyond our habitual ways of seeing, thinking, and acting. If we do not, our attempts to identify and solve our problems will usually be thwarted by our own prejudices and preconceptions. Our lack of awareness of the system as a whole will often prevent us from seeing new options. We will have a tendency to get stuck in crises and to make faulty decisions and choices. Rather than penetrating through problems to the point where solutions

are reached, there is a tendency to make more problems and to make them worse, then to give up trying to solve them.

Such experiences can lead to feelings of frustration, inadequacy, and insecurity. Our doubts about our own abilities become self-fulfilling prophecies that can come to dominate our lives. In this way, we effectively set our own limits by our thought processes. Then, too often, we forget that we have created these boundaries for ourselves. Consequently, we get stuck and feel we cannot get beyond limits of our own creation. Therefore, when someone comes forth with the idea of abolishing prisons, most people react and respond with all sorts of self-imposed boundaries. Some will even turn a deaf ear to the words calling for prison abolition.

I took on the challenge and the risks of facing the full attack from the criminal justice system. I surprised myself and others with my newfound courage and clarity. In the process, I discovered my limits, and I found myself capable of doing things that I never thought I could do. The point is, we do not always know what our true limits are.

Prison abolition, like the abolition of slavery, is a long-range goal. Abolition is not simply a moment in time but a protracted process. Prison abolitionism should not be considered a pipe dream but rather a strong strategy that can, in time, bring about a halt to the building of more prisons. This is why an abolitionist approach demands a solid critical analysis of crime, that is juxtaposed with appropriate social structures plus anti-crime strategies that focus on the provision of social resources. We must educate the public that prisons need to be abolished as the sole way of attempting to resolve social problems that are better solved by other more humane ways and means.

Abolition and revolution are not new. History is replete with stories of the struggles of people on the bottom of the social ladder banding together and organizing to bring radical change for the betterment of their lives and the lives of future generations. Some struggles succeeded, some failed, and others are ongoing. The questions we face regarding the struggle to abolish prisons are too many to count. I do not know how long it will take to abolish prisons. That is akin to asking someone how much air is in the universe. Therein is the real challenge—our search for answers must be incessant.

Should we not ask ourselves how we could build new powers from below? How can we create a new common language to define injustice and to imagine a society without prisons? What are we doing in practice to create the new from within the old? Does such a movement have a chance of surviving and

creating change? Survival and victory depend on coordinated action. We must learn how to cooperate quickly and effectively so as to intensify, broaden, and deepen our struggles. We need stronger networks for communication and support. We must develop a process of dialogue and organization unprecedented in our history.

We can develop a process of dialogue and organization unparalleled in the history of abolition. Let us strive to give hope that a new kind of thinking about the abolition of prisons is in the making, one capable of inspiring people to come together and speak to each other about abolition and revolution. *We must strengthen the hope and dreams of Freedom, Abolition, and Revolution.*

Here we are, the dead of all time, dying once again, only now with the object of living. You have to get out of your self to save yourselves. What we seek, what we need and want is that all those people without a party and organization make agreements about what they want and do not want and become organized in order to achieve it (preferably through civil and peaceful means), not to take power, but to exercise it! (EZLN/Subcommandante Marcos)

#### SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR MOVING AHEAD

First, accept the fact that no one person or organization can keep up even in a cursory manner with all aspects of the struggle. Sharing that work through political organizations is necessary, as is developing supportive and cooperative relations among many organizations. Therefore, we should consider supporting, listening, learning, and exchanging knowledge (not just “information”) with anti-death penalty organizations in their efforts to first bring about a moratorium of the death penalty and the eventual abolition of the death penalty. When such a goal is achieved, we can build upon that success by inviting them to take the next revolutionary step and buttress our struggle to work toward abolishing prisons. We would then have a much broader base of well-seasoned activists, supporters, networks, knowledge, communications, information, and funding.

Secondly, we do not need to set out with the idea of tearing down prisons, but to promote and transform the present prisons into healing and caring centers. The infrastructure is already in place for all the basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, medications, transportation, and recreation. Prison staff should

be retrained to become in-house teachers, paid at the same pay scale as they are presently being paid. Such a strategy will help placate the various guard unions and other misguided prison advocates. Present-day prisons could eventually become healing and caring centers for the homeless; shelters for abused and battered women and children; meaningful and productive drug and alcohol treatment centers; places offering meaningful education and vocation programs for families living in abject poverty. Bring new leadership roles into prisons to work along with most treatment personnel.

Thirdly, to the best of my knowledge, there has been little if any mention, much less serious discussion, among abolitionists about what to do with the dangerous few. I think we can all agree that for the overall well-being and safety of society at large, detention is, and may always be, required for the small group of people who cause harm to others. This question must first be acknowledged, studied, discussed, and resolved, not only by abolitionists, but also among broadly-based groups of doctors, judges, community organizations, corrections personnel, psychologists, legislators, and others at all levels of government. The general public must be invited to take part in these open discussions. This issue will test the mettle not just of abolitionists but also of all involved parties. Now is the time to begin planning tactics and strategies regarding this important and sensitive issue.

#### NEW POSSIBILITIES

Creating new ways of “thinking about prisons” requires the best efforts, ideas, and experiences, along with honest, careful, sharp, and critical reflection from all those who are willing to take on this daring and daunting task. We construct the groundwork for future generations to build a world that is safe and just. Let us begin working at the edges of what is possible. Let us strive toward a new possibility. Let us fight with the weapon of intelligence. I invite you to join us.

To learn more about the Coalition for the Abolition of Prisons (CAP) please log on to our website at [www.noprison.org](http://www.noprison.org) or e-mail us at [CAP@noprison.org](mailto:CAP@noprison.org). I am deeply indebted to Monty Neill and the Midnight Collective for sending me the great book *Auroras of the Zapatistas*. Contact *Midnight Notes* at P.O. Box 204 Jamaica Plain, MA 02130.