

US: ‘We didn’t stop’: the Los Angeles abolitionist coalition that’s racking up victories

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JusticeLA’s activists have devoted themselves to shutting down a jail construction plan - and they aren’t ‘playing to the middle’

There was a moment in late 2016 when Los Angeles county was set to invest \$2.2bn in rebuilding and revamping parts of its jail system, the largest in the world. The old Men’s Central jail downtown would be replaced with a new “mental health jail” run by the sheriff’s department, and the women’s jail in south-east LA would be relocated to a [former Immigration and Customs Enforcement \(Ice\) detention center](#) in the high desert, more than 80 miles outside the city.

Taxpayers would fund the project, which activist groups claimed would ultimately cost [at least \\$3.5bn](#). The contract had been [awarded](#) and money promised. Justice reform organizers’ years-long efforts to halt construction and reallocate funds toward housing, education, and [community-based services](#) had failed.

But the battle wasn’t over.

That year, grassroots activists regrouped and rebranded, forming a broad coalition based on six organizations they called JusticeLA. They devoted themselves to shutting down the jail construction plan. Then they held their first direct action, an art installation in front of an administrative building where the [Los Angeles](#) county board of supervisors had greenlit the jail project. Activists set up 100 homemade jail bed replicas, creating a simulated jail dormitory for the public. More than 200 supporters showed up wearing orange shirts that read “I am not the property of L.A. County jail.” The action diverted traffic for more than six hours.

“Even when we lost, we still won,” Ivette Alé said. “We didn’t stop organizing, didn’t stop putting pressure on the county.” Alé, 35, is JusticeLA’s coordinator, which continues to work for decarceration and to increase resources for communities most affected by incarceration.

At the coalition’s core is a group of young abolitionists who grew up in Los Angeles in the “tough-on-crime” 90s, all of whom are the children of incarcerated people or were themselves incarcerated.

For two years following the jail bed action, JusticeLA employed protest, public education and policy recommendations to stop construction, and finally prevailed.

First, the county [scrapped the new women’s jail](#) project. Then in [August 2019](#), they dropped the mental health jail plan, deciding instead to invest in community services. Former state senator Holly Mitchell (as of January, she is a member of the Los Angeles county board of supervisors), described JusticeLA’s success in shutting down the jail expansion plan as “miraculous”.

"I give them full credit with bringing pressure to bear on a board [the county board of supervisors] that I'm not sure would have done it on their own," she said. The fact that the county was convinced to back out of a multimillion-dollar contract astonished her, Mitchell said.

Since then, they have been racking up victories by ignoring the conventional political wisdom of making compromises and "playing to the middle". Instead, they pursue their abolitionist goals and so far every campaign they have waged has succeeded.

Ivette Alé has been one of JusticeLA's key engineers since its inception, and an organizer since they were a student at UC Berkeley. As a young child, they and their family moved to southern California from Mexico City. Several years later, a close family member was incarcerated after battling substance use.

"If my [loved one] had received substance abuse treatment and mental health treatment instead of incarceration, my family would have been better off," Alé said. "So often the rhetoric around justifying incarceration uses the stories of survivors and victims to justify punitive systems ... A lot of us [at JusticeLA] have been survivors of interpersonal violence and state violence and understand that the punitive responses didn't help us as survivors."

Alé and their colleagues are working to build alternatives to those responses, and have built their coalition on the foundation of a few central principles. The first, Alé said, is that when they advocate for a policy, they leave no one behind. Traditional justice reform efforts tend to advocate for one community – cis and trans women, for example – but will stipulate that their efforts don't apply to those who have committed violent crimes. JusticeLA does not make those distinctions.

"It's making sure we don't feed into a binary of who's deserving and who's undeserving," Alé said.

Second, Alé said, they try never to help build something they will have to dismantle in the future. Proposition 25, a measure on the state ballot in the November 2020 election, would have eliminated cash bail but replaced it with risk assessment software that [some activists and scholars](#) say perpetuates racism and the criminalization of poverty, and which would have expanded judicial power. JusticeLA supports ending cash bail, but didn't see the tradeoff as a real step toward reforming pretrial detention. (The state has since [moved](#) toward eliminating cash bail.)

JusticeLA's large base of individuals and organizations is due in part to an expansive approach. In early 2017, when it looked as though the jail construction plan was unstoppable, Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors and then leader of Californians United for a Responsible Budget Diana Zuñiga realized they needed a broader coalition than those who were explicitly abolitionist. Together they recruited some of their activist colleagues and created JusticeLA.

"We've got to ... expand so that even organizations who don't articulate themselves as abolitionist are down and feel compelled to fight for an abolitionist demand," said Mark-Anthony Clayton-Johnson, a founding executive team member of JusticeLA, recalling the groups' decision to rework their approach.

Clayton-Johnson, Alé and their colleagues convinced reformist – though not explicitly abolitionist – groups like the Service Employees International Union and ACLU of Southern California to join the coalition in the common pursuit of justice reform.

Decision-making power within the coalition, however, remains with the core group, which consists of members of established grassroots groups such as Dignity and Power Now and the Youth Justice Coalition, and rests only with formerly incarcerated and Black people and people of color.

“They’ve done a remarkable job of balancing the different elements of what social movement work requires to be successful,” said Toussaint Losier, professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. “And they’ve done it in a way that has distinguished them from what we find in other parts of the country, where you have organizations or even local coalitions that are good at doing one aspect of this ... to the exclusion of others.”

Indeed, JusticeLA has focused on a broad range of criminal justice policy issues. They fought successfully to get [Measure J](#), which would allocate between \$360m-\$900m of county money to social services, on the ballot in the November 2020 election. Then they fought successfully to get the measure passed. They scored the surprise victory in November with the campaign to replace cash bail, which required voters to consider nuanced arguments against racist algorithms.

That was a case where JusticeLA wasn’t aligned with some of their usual political supporters, including then state senator Holly Mitchell, who co-authored the original bill eliminating cash bail that Prop 25 would have upheld.

“In the process of policymaking, there is sometimes impatience with the notion of incrementalism,” Mitchell said. “I think there’s sometimes fear that if you start down a particular road around a policy shift, and if it is not ideal, then it’s better to have not gone down that road at all.”

It was a point of contention that didn’t get resolved. “But we were able to have a conversation. I heard their perspective. They heard mine,” Mitchell said.

Still, JusticeLA is facing steep obstacles. The Gallup Center on Black Voices, created in response to last summer’s uprisings, found that although the overwhelming majority of Black Americans and Hispanic Americans say law enforcement needs “major changes”, only 22% of Black Americans and 20% of Hispanic Americans are [in favor of abolition](#). In fact, a majority of Black and Hispanic Americans want to [maintain current levels](#) of law enforcement presence in their neighborhoods.

Burnout is also a constant peril in other organizing spaces he’s worked in, said Clayton-Johnson. To prevent that, JusticeLA’s leaders try to devote resources to mental health and creativity. Clayton-Johnson is an acupuncturist, Cullors is a multimedia artist, and Alé is a former fashion designer who moonlights as DJ IZLA.

Alé pointed out that engaging creatively with colleagues and allies relieves tension and strengthens relationships. It requires having your finger on the pulse of the community. “That’s what being an artist is,” they said. “Being able to reflect back your personal experiences and that of your community in ways that folks can identify with.”

Their artistic events tend to be the most intimate type of activism. In June 2020, JusticeLA held an [event](#) inspired by Tupac Shakur’s book of poetry *The Rose That Grew from Concrete*.

The group laid thousands of roses in front of the Hall of Justice as a tribute to those who have been killed at the hands of law enforcement in Los Angeles county. One of JusticeLA’s founding groups, Dignity and Power Now, holds card-making events in front of county jails on Mothers’ and Fathers’ Day so that visiting family members can present artworks to those they’re visiting.

“There’s a long tradition of joy as a radical force in our work, particularly in the Black organizing tradition,” Clayton-Johnson said. “Even in moments of conflict, or really tense political struggle, we still have a right to that.”

“I mean, that’s the world we’re trying to build, right?”

Lauren Lee White

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