

America's Left Forum - Reform or Revolution: Imagining a World with Transformative Justice - Against the "prison-industrial-complex"

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The United States has 2.3 million people in prison, a larger proportion of its population (743 per 100,000) than any other nation in the world. While the U.S. has 5% of the world's population, it has 25% of the world's prisoners. U.S. federal and state governments spend an enormous \$60.3 billion on prisons. But there is in the United States a movement against what has come to be called the "prison-industrial-complex." And this year the movement against incarceration as the country's primary response to crime was the theme of the annual Left Forum, the largest and broadest gathering of socialist intellectuals and activists in the United States.

America's radical gathering on the left began in 1981 as the Socialist Scholars Conference, changing its name in 2004 to the Left Forum. It brings together every year more than 3,000 people from around the country—and some from around the world—to participate in several plenary sessions and hundreds of workshops on every subject of interest to the left, from discussions of the environment to LGBT rights, from labor union strategies to the way forward for the women's movement, from debates about the future direction for the Palestine solidarity movement to discussions of the economic crisis in Europe. Featured this year in the plenaries and among the panels was the national shame of mass incarceration. In addition to a plenary dealing with the theme, there was a criminal justice track at the conference with 12 workshops.

Left Forum's featured speakers this year were Marxist economist David Harvey, singer and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte, and former Black Panther and Communist Party presidential candidate (1980 and 1984), professor Angela Davis. Davis has for many years campaigned against America's horrendous prison system and this year took that campaign this year to the Left Forum which was held at the John Jay School of Criminal Justice in New York City. Davis and others called for a radical rethinking of our society's criminal justice system, for ceasing mass incarceration, and for an end to the death penalty.

The movements against mass incarceration and against the death penalty have been growing and have an impact. In part this has been driven by the blatant racism of the system. Of the 2.3 million in prison, 1 million are black. One of every six black men in the United States has been incarcerated. While African Americans make up just 13% of the U.S. population, they comprise 40% of the prison population; similarly 16% of the U.S. population is Latino, but they make up 21% of the prison population. At the same time, in 2009, African Americans made up about 41% of those on death row, Hispanics 11 percent, others 2 percent; that is 54% of those awaiting the death penalty were people of color. Some 32 of country's 50 states have the death penalty, and there are at any one time about 3,000 prisoners on death row, and as many as 30 prisoners are executed each year.

Professor Michele Alexander, an African American scholar, took up these issues in her highly acclaimed and influential book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*

published in 2010. In it she argued that the war on drugs and current law enforcement policies had had an impact similar to the racist Jim Crow system of the 19th century. That same year, Piper Kerman, a white woman who served 13 months in prison for her role in a drug deal, wrote *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*, which subsequently became a hit Netflix show. She has been a prominent speaker against incarceration, pointing out that women have been the fastest growing segment of the prison population, leaving behind devastated families.

Another source of opposition to the “injustice system,” as many call it, has been The Innocence Project, founded by Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld in New York. It works to committed to exonerate wrongly convicted people through the use of DNA testing and succeeded in winning freedom for 316 wrongly convicted people, including 18 who had been on death row. The Innocence Project’s work suggests that eye-witness evidence is often wrong, that police and prosecuting attorneys often treat the accused unfairly, and that plea bargaining leads the innocent to accept some prison time, fearing they will do worse if they plead innocent.

All of this has been accompanied by active movements in many states against both mass incarceration and against the death penalty. This work frequently brings together religious activists, Roman Catholics in particular, with secular humanitarians, and leftists. The National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty is the largest coalition against capital punishment, anchored by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Groups such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO) have for years also worked in coalitions against the death penalty. U.S. support for the death penalty—60 percent still support capital punishment for murder—is at its lowest level in more than 40 years.

Habitual offender laws, such as California’s “3 strikes” law (after the baseball phrase “three strikes and you’re out”) first passed in 1993, have been adopted by 23 states. These laws require judges and juries to send convicted individuals to prison for long terms, sometimes for minor offenses. Many and perhaps most of those convicted had been involved selling or buying drugs. Given the obviously failure of the American criminal justice system to actually reduce crime as well as pressures from the reform movements, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder has in the last year called for a reduction in these sorts of harsh sentences that raised the American prison population from 500,000 in 1980 to 2.3 million today.

For many years discussions of criminal justice in the United States revolved around punishing the individual who committed a crime and only secondarily around attempts at rehabilitation. Progressives have raised the alternative of “restorative justice,” that is, the notion that justice should come about through the action of all of those involved in a crime—perpetrator, victim, and society—in attempt not to punish but to heal. Those on the left, such as the scholars and activists at Left Forum, call for a society that ends racism, sexism, and homophobia, provides all citizens with not only their basic social needs—employment at a living wage, health care, education, housing, and transportation—but also opportunities for self-fulfillment.

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