

Lifers With Optimistic Progress

Truth as told by those in power has been formatted to fit into the scheme of their agenda, which makes it a product propaganda. Truth as told by the powerless is a truth unscathed by such distortion, which makes it a reality. As such, the truth as told by the powerless becomes a scepter and reference point in all matters of controversy between these two groups....

Written by Ivan Kilgore
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Recently, the Lifers With Optimistic Progress (L.W.O.P., hereafter) *Writers' Room Workshop* here at Solano State Prison (Vacaville, California) convened to discuss Felix Rosado and Layne Mullet's article, "Organizing Across Prison Walls..." (**Note to the editor: please insert CR website link to this article**) There were several points about the article that immediately caught our attention and inspired a class discussion. Some 13 points to be exact. The first being, the point where the authors write about how those of us who are currently serving indeterminate life sentences (e.g., 25-to-life) or life without the possibility of parole (LWOP, hereafter), have "hustled and bustled" in a hardscrabble effort to get our convictions overturned with little success. By a show of hands, all but two of our class participants are serving life or LWOP sentences—all of which, including myself, have exhausted our appeals and face the gloom prospect of dying in prison if things do not change.

Needless to say, this article definitely served to place some things into perspective. Namely, how we all have placed our faith and hopes for freedom in the hands of the very system that has taken it. As the authors note, we do this by investing our hopes and energy into a bogus appellate court system, the legislators, and the parole and commutation processes set forth by the governor's office and the California Department of Corrections & [r]ehabilitation (CDC[r], hereafter). Whereas, it's estimated that lifers have about a 15% chance of being granted parole and LWOPs, somewhere around 1% will obtain a determinate life sentence.

That said, hope is a muthafucka! Without question, our captors know it is a powerful tool to which they can manipulate for control purposes. This is especially so when we read, for example, how California's former governor, Jerry Brown, commuted 283 sentences. Some 200 in his last days of office.¹

Here, our class discussion turned to the fact that we must be careful to not allow our hopes to blind or mislead us when it comes to what it actually means when we hear about another lifer being granted parole or a LWOP sentence being commuted. For most, we reckoned with the fact that it can easily, without question, fuel our hopes for freedom and prompt many to "program"—that is, conform to the image of what it means to be a model prisoner. Whereupon, we can make the mistake of discounting CDC[r]'s history—that is, Governor Brown's history²—and the demographic and statistical makeup of the 283: (1) how many were excessive nonviolent sentences; (2) life sentences; (3) LWOPs; and (4) black/brown, etc.? (Note:

Approximately 5500 men and women are currently serving LWOP in California. Of which, Governor Brown has been said to have commuted somewhere between 43 to 74, which equates to a 0.78% to 1.36% chance of being granted an indeterminate life sentence).

Seemingly, such a dismal forecast would force those of us serving life or LWOP sentences (n.b., some 34,000 lifers in addition to the abovementioned 5500 LWOP) to reckon with the fact that we have neglected our greatest asset in this struggle: PUBLIC PERCEPTION! In a nut shell, it is the People's perception—that is, what they've been manipulated to believe in terms of crime and punishment—that keeps these cages filled and our chances for parole low, if nonexistent. And who controls their perception? It goes without saying, the media, politicians, prison bureaucrats, and other interested parties with a vested interest in the prison industrial complex (P.I.C., hereafter)—and not public safety as they often mislead the People to believe.

On this point our class discussion turned to strategy: (1) Free Alabama Movement (FAM, hereafter) tactics; and (2) implementing the radical concept of what today is commonly referred to as “Restorative Justice.” Here, I explained to the class how, in May 2014, we took the proceeds generated from my latest book, *Domestic Genocide: The Institutionalization of Society*, and, with the assistance of friends and family, set up the United Black Family Scholarship Foundation (UBF, hereafter)—a nonprofit organization dedicated to “Rebuilding Communities from Within the Community.” Thereafter, we partnered with FAM and, together, FAM co-founders Melvin Ray and Robert Earl (who were incarcerated in Alabama), and I took contraband cell phones and began hosting a national blogtalk radio program from our prison cells (I was in supermax, New Folsom in Folsom, California at the time). Whereas, we were able to get a number of prisoners, advocates, and entertainers from around the nation to discuss issues of mass incarceration, police brutality, education reform, and the REAL about what's happening in American prisons.

Realizing the public would be distrustful of our allegations of rogue prison guards, etc., Melvin and Robert had previously filmed and recorded over 60 videos and interviews throughout the Alabama Department of Corrections, which captured everything from unconstitutional living conditions to the warden saying he didn't give a fuck about prisoners' rights. Needless to say, this set fire to a few seats in the Alabama State Senate and D.O.C. It got me thrown in the hole for a few months and shipped to another max-shithole.

In effect, the State of Alabama lost its most effective means to control the People's perception: ITS CREDIBILITY! In addition, we undermined its ability to control the narrative as to who the real “criminals” are. That said, we as a prisoner class have to take control of our image and how it's shaped in the public spectrum. Here's where both inside/outside activism begins and will find its most effective means of challenging public perception as to who we are as people and our redeemable qualities.

To be clear, what we are saying here is, instead of simply being a group of prisoners who limit ourselves to starting or partaking in programs offered within prison walls, our objective as L.W.O.P. is to start programs in the communities from which we stem. It is for this reason, in part, that the UBF was created so that such prisoner initiated groups and programs could be

extended beyond prison walls and have an outside coalition composed of a number of organizations working on behalf of *all* community members inside/out.

This, in effect, will: (1) address the point Clinton “Nkechi” Walker alluded to in the article where writing about his absence in the “Village.” Whereas, the UBF strategy will rebuild the bridge reconnecting us to our communities and, thus, amend the broken social, economic, and political structures fueling the P.I.C.; and (2) in doing so, the prisoner class not only will gain control of its image, but its members will also develop a sense of investment in the communities to which we return.

On that, we then turned to Kempis “Ghani” Songster’s point on respecting the leadership of those on the inside with our “Chestnuts in the fire!” Real Talk! When we read this, we couldn’t help but reflect on the fact that we’re up in here on the frontline, holding spears, and taking major hits while many, if not the majority, of our outside “supporters”, for lack of better expression, are holding picket signs and practicing how to become better armchair revolutionaries.

Case in point, several years ago there was a protest march on Broadway Blvd. in downtown Oakland. I vaguely recall a brief story on the Bay Area news mentioning something about 800 people showing up to protest prison slavery. Prior to this, I had received a few pamphlets on the upcoming *National Prison Strike* and had been corresponding with a volunteer for several months at the Oakland branch of the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (Oakland-IWOC, hereafter). During the course of our correspondence, nothing was said about strategy, organizing, etc. This was largely due to the fact I was not at liberty to write about such matters openly and the volunteer refused to come visit me. Thereafter, I’m speaking with another IWOC volunteer about this matter and employed him to think in terms of whether or not this demonstration could be categorized as direct action: that is, did it (1) Disrupt, in any way, the operations of the P.I.C.?; (2) Did it stop any of the 18-wheelers that supply CDC[r]’s Prison Industry Authority (P.I.A., hereafter)?; (3) Did any of these protesters or organizations know what prisons have P.I.A.?; (4) Do they know what State or private entities contract with P.I.A.?; (5) Did they change the perspective of any correctional staff?; (6) Moreover, was it coordinated as an inside/outside effort?; (7) Who canvassed the protesters for volunteers to write or visit prisoners?; and (8) What structure did they have set in place to train volunteers and assure their work is fulfilling? NOTHING!

That said, there’s a major disconnect between the leadership of inside/outside activism. The objectives, direction, strategy, commitment, and action is not coordinated or inclusive. Needless to say, this defeats our efforts and any real possibility to achieve our objective. How so? Here, I barrow from fellow comrade Rafiki X where he states:

...[W]e must bear in mind that these outside groups, activists, and organizational heads are not our inside leaders, but are only representatives of our collective plight, struggle, and body, and can only be as effective as is the body of which it represents. Therefore, if we are excluded and/or inactive in our inside/outside

demonstrations and struggles for justice and liberation, then they in turn will be ineffective representatives of our plight and struggle....³

Thusly, there must be a balance of mutual respect and dedication between both inside/outside leadership. Because if the outside cadre lacks the insight and commitment of the inside cadre, you get 800 people standing around holding picket signs, disrupting nothing. And if the inside cadre lacks the insight and respect of the outside cadre, we'll be in prison fighting for the dumbest shit (e.g., sweat suits, cable TV, canteen, etc.).

Turing to the subject of "political education," it's deeper than what Terri Harper alluded to in the article. Right now as I write this CDC[r], legislators, and many "unconscious" well-meaning organizations are advancing a "reformist" agenda disguised in the rhetoric of prison and criminal justice reform. It's a reactionary tactic (damage control); a nursery rhyme rocking the People (and inmates) to sleep in hopes of disarming the groundswell caused by widespread public condemnation of the *New Jim Crow*.

In other words, the State and its cohorts in the nonprofit industrial complex are attempting to pacify the People's demand for "change" and maintain prisoner control (n.b., deterring, slave revolts) by playing on our hopes and changing a few laws to let a little pressure off the value. These are age-old reformist tactics that grease the wheels of a machine that has been responsible for incarcerating, killing, and hiding the world's largest surplus population.

Furthermore, when it comes to political education and what Kerry "Shakaboona" Marshall, David "Dawud" Lee, and Robert "Saleem" Holbrook point to in essentially describing the characteristics of a "conscious and politicized prisoner[]," both inside/outside cadres must understand the nature of the work that has to be accomplished in order to get incarcerated people to stop thinking and acting in terms of "inmates" and to think of themselves as "political prisoners."

To be brief on this subject is unkind. Yet the reality behind these walls is, the majority of people think of themselves as inmates and willingly accept the notion that they are criminals; that they are relegated to crime to survive; that they are deserving of punishment; and that they are in need of the State's *rehabilitation*. This is largely due to the fact that they have little, if any, understanding as to how America's social, economic, and political systems function to create criminogenic conditions that shape the values they subscribe to.⁴

Thusly, we have our work cut out for us. This is especially so given the fact that when it comes to radical education or anything that will actually empower us, most "inmates" will turn a deaf ear and blind eye to it for fear of persecution by prison officials. That said, as prisoners, we are no more free to read and study than our enslaved ancestors. And like our ancestors, being illiterate of the vast discourses of radical thought has placed us at a major disadvantage in terms of organizing.

Lastly, when it comes to organizing our inside/outside cadre, we mustn't forget Huey's "survival programs," which "recognized that in order to bring the people to the level of consciousness where they would seize the time, it would be necessary to serve their interests in survival by developing programs which would help them to meet their daily needs...."⁵ (See

e.g., the UBF “Program’s Tab” at below website) To this end, we discussed why the UBF and L.W.O.P. organizations have partnered to implement the Writers’ Room Workshop. Our objective is to improve (political) literacy and, unlike most creative writing classes throughout CDC[r], we aim to teach incarcerated men, women, and children the power of words through publication/production of their work.

Thusly, and in conclusion, our final question is how will our outside cadre assist us with this work? We see and understand the struggle. We are patient. And we are growing more conscious and disciplined by the day. Yet we recognized our shortcomings as well as those who claim they are with us. That said, if it’s nothing more that comes of this article, we hope that all the organizations (e.g., Critical Resistance, F.U.E.L., L.W.O.P., Initiate Justice, CCWP, etc.) fighting on behalf of LWOPs and other prisoners would consider uniting in a collective effort to bring about change.

For more about the author, his writings, radio interviews, and the *United Black Family Scholarship Foundation*, see:

<https://www.willisraised.wordpress.com>.

For more about the *Free Alabama Movement*, see:

Google: Ivan Kilgore-Free Alabama Movement;

<https://www.freealabamamovement.wordpress.com>.

For more about the *Lifers With Optimistic Progress*, see:

<https://www.liferswithoptimisticprogress.wordpress.com>.

¹ Note: It was recently reported that the incumbent Governor Gavin Newsome has rescinded some 225 parole and commutation grants.

² During his first term in office (1978-82), Governor Brown, faced with the prospect of having to either renovate or replace existing prisons so as to meet capacity demands, merely pondered the notion of using his “powers as the State’s chief executive to relieve overcrowding by ordering parole for indeterminate-sentence prisoners who had served time equal to the new sentencing requirements [set forth by the 1977 Uniform Determinate Sentencing Act] and by commuting sentences for others who had been in the system a long time. Instead, he began to investigate the best way to... modestly expand capacity...” (See Gilmore, R. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, And Opposition In Globalizing California*. University of California Press, 2007, pp. 91-92.) Fast-forward to Governor Brown’s reelection in 2011, California’s prison population had expanded by some 20 prisons and some 175,000 inmates as a result of his bonding initiatives for prison construction. By then, the federal courts had stepped in with a series of rulings and court orders, which deemed the overcrowded prison system unconstitutional. Thereafter, the state was ordered to reduce its prison population significantly. Consequently, Governor Brown, the CDC[r] Board of Parole, and the state courts were then forced to release lifers and commute LWOPs.

³ Conversation with the author February 2019.

⁴ See attached essay, “The Glaring Contradictions In the Rhetoric of Prison Rehabilitation.” If we can accept the fact that crime prone environments are purposefully created by the State, then how is it the State is to “rehabilitate” us? Here, I employ the reader to view America’s social, economic, and political systems in conjunction with one another and to not isolate them by simply focusing on, for example, the effect of the penal institution. For everything, the courts, police, schools, legislators, etc., works in tandem, hand in glove, to create crime for purposes of making it functional for capital exploitation and control purposes. On another note, I must digress to point out a glaring contradiction in the rhetoric of prison rehabilitation: “...an unrecognized contradiction in the design of the rehabilitative prison ... insist[s] that prisoner reform and long-term prisoner custody [e.g., life terms, LWOP, death

penalty] [are] compatible. They [are] not. The notions of prisoner rehabilitation and continued custody [are] ineluctably at odds—a prisoner’s reform by definition requires[s] his release....” (Source: Cummins, E. *The Rise & Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement*.)

⁵ Newton, H.P. “Black Capitalism Re-Analyzed,” p. C (supplement from) *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*, Saturday, June 5, 1971.