

Critical Conversation #3 – Red

November 9th, 2021

Garrett Felber: Hi. Welcome, everyone to our third Study and Struggle conversation, Abolition Must Be Red. Huge thanks to Haymarket Books for this event and their work to make this event possible. We're also extremely appreciative to our captioner and our ASL interpretation team this evening. So thank you all.

My name is Garrett Felber. I'm one of the organizers with Study and Struggle. If you don't know much about us, we organize against criminalization and incarceration in Mississippi through political education, mutual aid and community organizing.

Each fall, we put together a bilingual Spanish and English curriculum with discussion questions and reading materials and we also provide financial support to over 100 participants in radical study groups inside and outside prisons in Mississippi.

We also make this curriculum fully available online for other study groups across the country and across the world to use as they see fit. Finally, we come together for online conversations like this one tonight hosted by Haymarket Books.

For our Fall curriculum in 2021, we have borrowed and augmented Ruth Wilson's argument abolition is about presence, not absence. It has to be green and in order to be green, it has to be red. And in order to be red, it has to be international. For today, we're going to be tackling what it means for abolition to be red. And we're especially grateful to have Ruthie herself joining us tonight along with Stevie Wilson in a few moments.

Just so you all know what to expect from our format this evening, Stevie will be calling in from Pennsylvania. He'll have 3, 15-minute chunks of time to call in. Please bear with us for the transitions and breaks. We have time, we hope, at the end for a question and answer period. Drop your questions in the chat as we go and we'll try to get to them especially as Stevie is forced to leave us this evening.

Lastly, I want everyone to know about our final critical conversation, Abolition Must be International, on December 1st at 7:00 p.m. with Jalil Muntaqim, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Harsha Walia, and we hope, a few comrades from inside joining us through pre-recorded message.

With that, I'm going to hand it over to Ruth Wilson Gilmore who I'm incredibly grateful to give us this wonderful framework for the curriculum and also making it out until nearly midnight her time to join us this evening.

Thank you, Ruthie.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: Thank you, Garrett Felber and thank you, everybody, from Haymarket,

all of the interpreters, the captioners, John behind the scenes and the entire team that makes this possible. I thought maybe as we waited for Stevie to call us, I'd talk a little bit about this framework. It was something that came to my mind with a fair amount of clarity after I had been trying to pursue it for many years through all different kinds of organizing strategies through writing, through thinking.

A number of us, in trying to fight a prison in California stumbled onto something we did not invite, but really learned from using, that is the environmental justice and antiprison work go hand in hand. Similarly, in trying to fight against prisons and incarceration, we did not invent but we stumbled on to the fact that working with workers, whether they were organized or disorganized, employed, unemployed, or workless was something that went hand-in-hand with fighting against prisons.

And certainly, as we were organizing in California, we learned because California is such a crossroads of the planet that what we were doing was always in a fundamental way already international and that the work that trying to accomplish by making common cause solidarity projects, study and struggle with comrades around the planet could, both express lessons we had learned in California could bring the lessons of the world California, because as we think about it, abolition as presence has got to be present for the entire planet. Whether we're going backyard by backyard or in some other way.

As a result of thinking with so many people and learning from so many people for a long time, I had the opportunity in, I think it was 2019, feels like 200 years ago before the pandemic, to talk with a very lively group of people in Los Angeles who were celebrating a huge victory against new jails that had been planned for that county. And that we had over a 15-year campaign managed to defeat.

At the same time, there were people in the audience who had been organizing for years to drop life without parole. At the same time, there were people in the audience who had been working for years to release aging people in prison. And finally, there were people who had been working for years, and this is multi-generational groups who have been working solidly with, for example, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, who is celebrating a very important anniversary this week, on Friday.

So with all of this liveliness in the room, it occurred to me to say those words. Abolition must be green; to be green it must be red; and to be red; it must be international. So tonight, Stevie and I will have a conversation I'm grateful to be part of to talk about this question of red. What does it mean to be red? What is the relationship between people who are locked up and people in the free world when it comes to questions like labor, organized labor, fights over wages, the use of the social wage? Which is to say, all of the money we pay as taxes and fees and fines that could go and should go to things like housing, food, art, health care, jobs, support services, education, climate, climate, climate control.

Those kinds of things. We'll talk about the sorts of organizing that has happened inside and

outside, and some of the struggles that have occurred when understanding among well-meaning people on the outside doesn't really connect with understanding among people who are organizing for their lives on the inside. I hope we'll talk about that. And finally, we'll talk a little bit about some of the very specific campaigns that have occurred in prisons around the United States in recent years, particularly, strikes, work strikes. But also, hunger strikes. So these will -- are also quite possibly topics we will discuss with if indeed, Stevie manages to get through on the phone.

All of this work is, as Garrett said in his introductory remarks work that seeks to fight criminalization, which is a major but not the only path to abolition. The path to abolition goes to every aspect of life. There is nobody and no form of life that is outside the imperative for abolition today. And as we pursue our conversation, I hope you in the audience will reflect on the difficulties and ideas that Stevie and I have a chance to discuss and share your thoughts and confusion and clarifications with us.

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Stephen Wilson: OK. I'm here. Can everyone hear me?

Ruthie: Yes. Hi.

Stevie: Can you hear me?

Ruthie: Hi, Stevie.

Stevie: How are you?

Ruthie: I'm all right. How are you?

Stevie: I want to say thank you for letting me be a part of this event. I'm just happy to be a part of it to discuss with you. Particularly, around labor, I've been incubating a couple of questions I've been thinking about some things here inside.

People are trying to organize around this concept of prison slavery. And it's really not getting off the ground. Particularly, where I'm at in terms of wages. So I've been thinking about some of the ways this concept is missing the mark. And some reasons why it resonates inside. So that we can get, can have some type of issues, we need to have a couple of issues. I think they'll work around and bring people inside together, actually getting significant amount of people behind the walls involved in our movement. So there are some things that I've been thinking about.

Ruthie: Well, can I ask you a question, Stevie?

Stevie: Go ahead.

Ruthie: All right. You are one of the few people I know in the United States who is trying in a somewhat organized and systematic way to find out what people who are locked up do. What kinds of work people do and don't do. Who they're working for if they're working. What the attraction is for people who don't have their freedom now to be able to work or to be able not to work. So could you talk to us a little bit about what your survey and research has shown so far?

Stevie: OK. First, I want to say that the reason why this was (inaudible), I was hearing a lot of things from the other side of the wall. I was reading some things that just didn't vibe with our reality behind the walls. And I knew that was the case in Pennsylvania. I didn't know that was the case everywhere else, but I wanted to find out what was really happening behind the walls. I wanted people to understand the relationship that we have with labor behind the walls. And so, I was curious, I didn't want to, I didn't want to listen – [This is a call from Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution. This call is subject to recording and monitoring.] – I didn't want to assume anything. So we came up with 20-something-odd questions for the first round of the survey. And what I will tell you first and foremost, some of the things I felt will confirm with that behind the walls. Most of us don't work. Every place the survey from, between 30% to 35% of the population actually work. And most of that is productive labor of the prison. Block workers and maintenance workers and ground keeping, that kinds of things, kitchen workers. There were opportunities where people were in correctional industries or they were working for what we call a private company, that was kind of rare. They were better paying jobs but they were rare.

And so, that's to confirm we already -- and then the thing that surprised me the most was the different work regimens they have around the country. It's different in Pennsylvania than it is in Colorado than it is in California. And when we talk about behind the walls, wow, we're not going to talk about one thing. We're talking about a lot of different, you know, variations and so therefore, when I thought about campaigning around labor, I realized we had to have different campaigns. Because (inaudible). [This is a call from Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution. This call is subject to recording and monitoring.]

I found out different reasons people weren't working. In Kentucky, I found out that for every day you work, you were going to get a day off your sentence. So that's the incentive for people working, they don't get paid, you know. And they get paid with your time. You get your time back. You know. In Pennsylvania, we actually get paid funds, we don't get any good time earned time. But some of the people working and sometimes people are not working for the money, they're working for good time, earn time, or whether it gives them access to other materials they can really make money with or because they -- go around the prison and see other people and see other things. So I learned a lot about why people work also. And not just the work regimen but why they work. I want people to not think labor looks the same all over behind these walls. And you want to talk about labor and in a particular site or region, and you talk about what's happening. And not assume that they would look the same everywhere. That was the biggest takeaway for me.

Ruthie: I hope that a lot of people are listening to us today. This evening. And that, if this discussion is available online after our conversation, that people will consult it. Because this is an area of dispute that regularly comes up everywhere. I had a long debate with a young man this afternoon who just kept saying, what you say, Gilmore, is not true. What you say is not true.

And what I said are things I learned from you a couple of weeks ago, Stevie, plus my own research. Which seems to be true. And so, what that tells us is that there is some way that people are -- have convinced themselves that they have found in slavery and uncompensated labor the magical kernel of all of prison and if they can bust that open, the prison walls will come down. And I think what you have just helped us think is, that isn't the case.

Stevie: Yeah. I've got to tell you, going back to 2018, Colorado. You know, Colorado's constitution mirrored the 13th amendment in the United States constitution [that allows for prison slavery and involuntary servitude as punishment for a crime]. It mirrored it and they removed the clause [in 2018] from the state constitution and not a single person was working in prison. So I don't understand why we think if the law says something about itself that somehow the prison walls are going to fall down. That's not going to happen.

And I think it's very important for us to understand that I just think that some people benefit, maybe it's the art they've gotten that has gotten traction, maybe in the mainstream media and people don't want to let it go but it's a false argument. Most prisoners do not work. OK. They do not need themselves in front of a labor movement.

Most of us think it's a temporary thing, need to work itself as a hustle. A hustle. And so it's like, really, you know, it's not. It's not an issue that we can actually organize large prisons around. Also, I've spoken before about the fact that, you know, with 35, 30% of the people behind the wall, that means that's a large reserve pool behind the walls. And so the people that do work are not going to strike. They're not going to stop working because they fear that they could be replaced so easily. They can be.

And here, I was talking to someone earlier about the concept of surplus labor, talking about surplus beyond the wall. We have, we have, you know, 70% of the population's not working in the part of the general labor pool. And so therefore, these people are all working are afraid to quit are afraid to boycott, afraid to strike because they know they can be replaced so easily.

You know, and might be something they lose as far as getting home faster. That's the issue that's so complicated and hard to organize people around. Even though we keep saying, oh, these national (inaudible), certain spots, but secondly, they weren't successful. They weren't successful. OK.

People didn't stop working, the walls didn't go down, we didn't get any closer to freedom. And to think from me when I organize saying what can we do to move all of us closer to freedom? Focus on decarceration. This is taking the air out of the room. What are we getting from this? How are we changing the conditions of people behind the walls? How are we getting people

closer to freedom? And it's not happening. And I think Colorado is the perfect example the law was changed and people were not free from prison. Prison slavery is outlawed in Colorado but they still have a whole bunch of people locked up. I mean, so I don't understand how they get around this issue. You know.

This -- there were other things we could be doing, I think, with a lot more people behind the walls as far as fighting for (inaudible). Getting to the parole boards, preemptive parole. These are things getting closer to freedom, all of us, we can all get behind. So I just think this is an issue I've been saying it and I've been saying it over and over, again. It's not what it is. It's [prison slavery] not what it is. It's not. And I don't know why it seems to be, you know, this just major issue that people keep bringing up but I keep saying, you know, it's not what it is. It's not. Most of us don't -- I have been in prison for 8 years now up here upstate and I have not worked at all. Not a single day. And it isn't effective at all. They don't want me to work.

Ruthie: Well, you know, one of the things, one of the things you said, Stevie, you know, really caught my imagination because at the heart of the matter, what all of the people in prison and jail and even those who are under home arrest with ankle shackles and so forth are doing is they are by fact of being un-free, having the time, which is their lifetime extracted from them and then that time is turned into money by the people who work for the prison service, by the people who sell things to the prison and so on and so forth. That it's all about time.

Stevie: Working to get their time back, some of these people. That's what they've stolen from them.

Ruthie: Exactly.

Stevie: Everything I work, I get a day off my sentence. And my ancestors were brought here, right, as slaves to work and die. But we weren't put in prison to work and die. We're here. There's a reason why we're here, not to work. OK. And I think, what they're taking from us is time and that's why so many people do work because they get to earn it back. They get to earn it back if they work. You know, they get a day for a day. [Thank you for using Securus, good-bye.]

Ruthie: Thank you, interpreters for doing such a great, great job. And that was, actually, a good time for us to pause. I hope Stevie will be right back. But everybody, think about the fact that what we're talking about is time. Time extracted from people's lives, time that extracted from people's lives turned into money.

And also, this comes back to the red issue. What red signifies is not a better, fairer wage for work, but red signifies is our lifetimes should be full of plenty and joy and time that we can devote to being farmers or writers or artists or machinists or whatever we want to do that we combine our time to make the things that we need together, and we also have our own individual time to do the things we want to do. That's what red is. The fair wage is part of it but it's not it. I think this is where Stevie's research has so clearly taken us. Is he back yet? No.

Stevie gave us two examples that I think are very good for us to reflect on and try to think with. The example of people who are incarcerated in Kentucky, who are paid with time for their work. And as Stevie put it, they're earning their time back, they're getting their time or life back. And for us to think about what that means, as well as the events that unfolded in Colorado where in the wake of, I assume, uprisings of 2020, Colorado removed slavery from the constitution and lo and behold, no one got to leave prison and go home.

We see that the forces that are concentrating so many people in prison and jail are different forces from those that many people meaning well consistently and repeatedly put forward. That somehow, it has something to do with labor. Should we listen maybe to one of Stevie's remarks that he sent us?

Garrett: Would you like the questions that Stevie posed to you now? Or one of the clips you recorded?

Ruthie: Let's do one of the clips. Let's listen to Stevie. Let's do the first one. How can we use an anti-capitalist critique to build a broad-based coalition to abolish police and prisons? Let's listen to what Stevie has to say. I think it's amazing we can do this at all. We're spread all over the place. We have all different kinds of relationships to technology, to one another in the world. And it's great. That we can do this. Capitalism is responsible for so much misery in our world and, also, we are turning it on its head by coming together as we are in this time, in this way. So let's hope that our contradictory tendencies are going to be successful.

Stevie [pre-recorded]: Capitalism and the conditions that prisons are living under -- inside here, inside of prison most people don't care about capitalism. They can't see the connection between what's going on and capitalism. So I've been struggling for the last year, year and a half to try to get prisoners to see that capitalism is a problem. And one of the problems that we have in Pennsylvania is that the Department of Corrections has this line, where they're kind of impressing upon us impress upon us, to brainwash us, where they say that the only reason we are in prison is because we weren't good patriarchs, good capitalists. So if we become better capitalists and patriarchs -- this is in a men's prison obviously, we will be successful out in the world. So guys are actually in here saying things like they're for Black capitalism, and that blows my mind because capitalism is anti-Black, so I'm like, what do you mean Black capitalism? And this is what they think. And so I've been struggling the last year and a half, trying to figure out how we can connect capitalism to the suffering that people are undergoing in this country, in this world. And because in here, many who see capitalism as natural and inevitable, there is no other way. And so, I think we have to do lot more work to show that capitalism is a problem. And has been a problem.

One of the things that happened recently, a friend of mine sent a zine in about racial capitalism, really good zine, it was a comic, and as soon as I got it on the block, some young guys saw it, cause they like comics, and they read it. And not only did he read it, but he gave it to his cell mate and he read it. And I've copied it quite a few times and passed it out in the

compound. The young man But came back and said we need more of this. This is going to capture people's attention because of the format. It was a comic. I just did the same thing with maroon comics and gave that out to people, people are really attracted to these things.

So if we want to connect with the masses, and connect with people inside and really talk about capitalism and the reason why we are in the situation we're in, we need to have material that is accessible to them, and especially for young people. And we have to do a better job, much better job of relating to the people why think the way they are and how capitalism has played a role in this.

I think that right now, it's hard to organize around the anti-capitalism inside the prison. Because people will look at you like what do you mean? It's only capitalism. [If you critique capitalism] people will think you're crazy. Because they think it's inevitable. Like I said, it's natural. But we can do a better job. We can do a much better job if we get the materials in and we get them in the format because I guess, this zine on racial capitalism was amazing, and people are passing it on to people and people are really taking to it and we're having discussions around it. And so I knew that the excitement is there and the desire to learn is there, but we just have to the material to make the connections for them. It's a question that I'm asking, how can we do this? How can we connect the movement and make a broad based movement anti-capitalist, we can't talk about anti-capitalism inside the prison. It's crazy. And I'll tell you something else, too.

I realize that unlike the 60s and the 70s, all right, with with someone like George Jackson is writing about capitalism. And he's breaking it down. Like he's really breaking it down. You know have someone like Yaki, Yaki was really was breaking it down, And they weren't just railing against capitalism, they were giving analysis and piecing it together, connecting the dots for people. Well, we don't have that type of analysis coming from behind the walls anymore. We have people actually railing against capitalism -- yeah, capitalism, imperialism, all these isms -- but they're not telling the people how that is affecting their lives, how that is responsible for the suffering that's going on.

And so, it's one thing to complain about something, but it's another thing to explain to people and give them analysis they can use. And to say this is why things are so fucked up in my neighborhood. This is why things are so fucked up in my school. This is what we have to do -- you know, we have to make this connection for people. And we have to not just reel against capitalism and imperialism but break it down for people and connect the dots. OK?

Ruthie: OK. I completely follow you in everything you said, Stevie. And one of the things that comes to mind is to ask ourselves how it was that 50 years ago, people who were locked up were engaged in these analyses were, as you put it, breaking it down. We know about George Jackson, but the fact is, there were study groups, Study and Struggle groups in prisons all over the United States.

Of course, this was at a time where there were maybe 20,000 people in prison in the United States, in California and the number of people in prison throughout the United States was quite

small compared to now.

So if we think, then, about what has transpired over the intervening 50 or 60 years, we start to maybe get a glimmer of why it is that people are, if aware of capitalism as something not natural or inevitable, are more likely to rail against it than to analyze it and as you say, connect the dots.

Maybe what we need is not only more like the zine you talked about coming from my hometown New Haven, but program, also in study groups inside, people developing zines. Taking ideas that seem to at first that seem too abstract or dense and then and then, ask some questions, how does this relate to my school? My home, my life, my experience? My being here inside talking to the rest of you? But it might be that some kind of production if that could happen inside, which I'm not all together sure it could happen would also help to put the weight back into the analysis that people like you clearly have, and many other people have and have had through the long period of the growth of prisons in the United States. But we can do so in such a way that people who at the moment are impatient of certain kinds of difficulty in analysis will see themselves in the analysis and be more likely to carry it forward into their own everyday thinking and work. I forgot that we don't actually have Stevie on the other end to talk with us.

What -- something that he and I did discuss for a while when we talked a few weeks ago was how there are some aspects of the analysis of capitalism that are very straightforward for in Stevie's experience for him and his comrades inside to get a handle on and talk about and understand.

So, for example, for people who are locked up to think about themselves as part of masses of people who are surplus to the requirements of the political economy on the outside makes sense. Or for people to think about how the land where the prisons are obviously could've been used for something else for food, for housing, for you name it, for schools that was used to build prisons so it's easy to understand, huh, surplus land, turn to incarceration. Stevie tells me, for example, in my book, I start to talk about money capital being surplus, people say what does that even got to do with me?

So the question I put back is how might we figure out a way to ground an abstract analysis in the experience of people who are trying to figure things out so that their analysis gets bigger and better and stronger as Stevie and his comrades have managed to do and as all of the comrades in Mississippi have managed to do as part of Study and Struggle. So where are we now?

No luck with the phone? OK. I'm glad we have the time we have. I think, John, could we play another clip?

[John: Going to suggest the questions, is that cool?]

Ruthie: You mean the questions Stevie has for me? You want me to talk about? All right. Sure. Go ahead.

Stevie [pre-recorded]: Yeah, I wanted to record these questions because our phone system has

been in and out all day. And I didn't want to miss the opportunity to ask Ruthie a couple of questions. And the first one is that I wanted Ruthie to talk about the role of the scholar in our movement. What does she feel about role of the scholar in our movement? I also want to talk about the role of the imprisoned in our movement. I wanted to hear her comments about that. I wanted to ask Ruthie how she defined solidarity.

Ruthie: OK. Three questions. That's OK. We might get to the fourth one. Let me –

Stevie [pre-recorded]: What could we here in the United States learn about abolition from the European abolitionist movement? So much of our movement is US-centric. What I tend to be exposed to outside of the US is regarding South America, but I don't believe I hear too much about what's happening as far as the abolition is concerned in Europe. But I have been reading some French writers, French abolitionists and stuff and I'm interested in what's going on and what Ruthie feels we could learn from their movement and their strategy, their tactics over there.

And I think, that might be it. I'm looking at my list here. [Laughter] Yeah. That's it. Those are the questions I have. Oh, I'm letting Ruthie know that just in case you don't get to speak live, she still owes me a the Chester story.

Ruthie: OK. 5 questions. OK. All right. Here we go. First question, what is the role of the scholar? The role of any scholar, whether they're working at an academic institution, locked up inside in an institution of total control like a prison or studying and learning things on their own while having a day job like working for the post office is to learn how things work and share that learning in the best way they can. And when I say the best way they can, I don't mean that every scholar is required to say imitate a writing style that would be the same as what they used in let's say the New York Daily News or a tabloid newspaper.

Scholars figure things out and they say things the best way they can. And they put the material out, what they've learned out for other people to use and build from or tear down because it's wrong and do something else with.

So the role of the scholar is to figure things out and to share what they figured out. It isn't above or below the role of anybody else involved in a social movement. Now, one of the things that I like to do, and I am a card-carrying scholar is to figure things out and then find as many different ways as I can to say the same thing.

So at the beginning of our conversation today, I talked about the framing that this year's Study and Struggle curriculum is following. The notion, the imperative, actually, for me that abolition must be green to be green, it must be red. To be red, it must be international.

Now, those words which were fairly compact are words that I researched and learned about either to put together a political campaign or to put together a scholarly piece of work and the difference between those two things for me is really minimal.

And how I described and analyzed and made sense of things like environmental justice, the fight for safe working conditions and safe workless conditions. Fight for education, fight against capitalism, I've said in many, many different ways.

And it's been very exciting for me. And I think is exciting for scholars like you, Stevie and scholars like Garrett and others to find our work taken up in places and by people we might never have met or known.

That's the role of the scholar. Make the work, throw it out there, see what people can do with it.

The role of the scholar is also, I think importantly, is to insist when people are pursuing paths that will not lead to freedom, to say have you considered this? Have you considered this? Have you considered this? I know for a fact, I'm 71, pushing 72 that nobody becomes suddenly better at analysis and organizing by having someone get in their face and say, you are wrong. Nobody does, although, I was raised by a man who I worshipped to this day who used to tell me how frequently I was wrong.

That's the exception that proves the rule. Holding up, however, examples of where misguided pursuits of freedom might tragically lead or might frustratingly not lead is something a scholar can do. Again, it's not only a scholar that can do it, but that is part of the scholar's task.

The role of the imprisoned, second question. Many roles. To be. To show and to insist on the various ways that those who are locked up experience the extraction of time, however it is people who are locked up want to talk about it. And figure out how solidarity can work inside as well as through the walls just as people who organize on the outside, scholars and not scholars, should figure out what solidarity is and how it can work through the walls.

One of the things that Stevie and I talked about for a while that I've learned from many, many, many, many years of talking with people who have been locked up of reading things written by people who were locked up, locked up in prisons, locked up in concentration camps, locked up in military occupations, locked up in all kinds of ways. People who have been locked up in the occupation of the West Bank in Palestine now for more than 70 years.

What I've learned from people who have been locked up resonates with what I know about being alive in general. And that is experience is not the same as consciousness. Experience tells us many, many things that are true enough. But it's in testing the relationship of one's experience with another and another in the process of building solidarity that produces the consciousness we need to free ourselves collectively as against to make prison or whatever aspect of life we're trying to change just a little bit better and less deadly.

Consciousness, in fact, is what I think Study and Struggle is all about. It's the kind of consciousness that people like Cabral and the party for the -- the African Party for the Independence put into it motion in the pursuit of their long 13-years long revolution against colonial domination by Portugal in order to create the conditions for consciousness to flourish

and develop the created schools that were built and staffed and put into motion as soon as a zone in that country was liberated.

So during the war. Every year, a school somewhere was established. And staffed by people who were both soldiers and teachers or otherwise had dual or triple roles in that revolution.

The work of becoming free, in other words, is the work of solidarity, and my definition of solidarity, which is the third question you asked me.

Solidarity is mutual dependence. If solidarity means we become dependent on one another, indeed, it's the opposite of that rugged individualist independence that people who have come of age in the United States and in the US cultural system, the political economy of capitalist culture has a form that insists we are all lone individuals on the planet. This makes no sense to me. There's 7 1/2 billion people on the planet. We ought to be dependent on each other rather than trying to figure out how to be independent of each other. . But, when I say solidarity is dependence, it means that there has to be some kind of mutually agreed on, which is to say constantly renewed sense of dependence so that the dependence doesn't become domination or being dominated.

It means that we hang from each other rather than some hang from others. It's easy in a way to think about solidarity independence through thinking about power and difference, not in a fatal way. But rather in the way I like to describe best. My best friend has power over me. He makes me happy in a way I cannot make myself happy. I am dependent on him. We are dependent on each other that the power is not a dominating power, it is not a cruel power, it is not a dismissive or controlling power. It's the kind of power that makes the social possible.

So that is how I define solidarity. I think the next question, should I continue? OK. The next question has to do with learning from the abolitionist movement in Europe. I don't actually know which French abolitionists Stevie was referring to. I've talked with a number of people in France and around Europe over the years. And in fact, there's been a lot of effort in recent years for people who are involved in mostly anti-racist, anti-police brutality, pro migrant work. That is the focus much more than prisons. Police, migration, brutality. And then, related things, housing, safety, community. Such people have been trying to link their struggles across the various countries that add up to Europe.

So for example, Vanessa Eileen Thompson has been organizing with many people in Germany and Switzerland as have others in Germany been organizing with people there and in Belgium and Netherlands. There are people around France who have been organizing throughout France but there's a whole lot of organizing happening both in the big cities and then, along the southern coast because so many long distance migrants are trying to cross the Mediterranean to get to a place where there is more, the opportunity for a secure wage, even if in a very marginalized way.

Here in Portugal, there is a lot of struggle going on around housing, education, police brutality. We just recently have started a campaign because a young man died in custody recently, he was

only 23 years old. Would be equally tragic were he 73 years old. And he was locked here in the prison here in Lisbon. There was a major demonstration about that.

But here, as is true in many other parts of Europe, a lot of the abolition work is like the abolition work, for example, in the United States in the 18th and 19th Century was focused on not so much directly on the thing to be fought as on the conditions of everyday life that would make fighting that thing certain the thing to be fought more certain to go away. All right. So if people have a place to live or not worried about money, not worried about deportation, are not worried about all the things that make life full of anxiety and full of vulnerabilities, then, the need for police starts to melt away.

If people are able to live in communities not harassed by police that have decent schooling, decent health care and so forth, again, the organized violence of police or border patrol becomes less apparent as a need for the social order.

So the abolitionists are working in all of those areas in the effort to push back what seems to be so normal in terms of massive police forces, massive border forces and so forth.

I think I just got a note about something. OK. I am pausing. I have been asked to pause. I will pause and I will go to the next question.

Are you ready? OK. And thank you, again, I want to thank everybody who is doing the interpretation. It is so beautiful. I love to be able to watch it and I should learn to read. It. So the last question was about Chester. So we're going to wrap up. This is the last thing I'm going to talk about.

So Stevie is from a place in Pennsylvania called Chester. It's a town that has experienced decades and decades and decades and decades of the effects of de-industrialization from the mid-1960s forward. It's a place that had a little knot of radical Black internationalists who were friendly to if not, within the Black Panther Party for self-defense and other people who organized themselves there, as well. And those people, you know, like my own father had very ordinary working class jobs. That's what they did in the daytime. They went and they did their working class jobs. And the rest of their time they organized, they promoted ideas. They figured out how to achieve political achieve things in political struggle. Here my story about me in Chester. I went to college in Pennsylvania for one year. One very long, sad year at Swarthmore College in a very leafy, posh suburb of Philadelphia. All trees and pretty buildings.

And I was unhappy and cried the entire year. This was 1968, 69, there were 40 Black students at this school that had maybe 1,200 students. So we students started to organize ourselves. We the Black students started to organize ourselves to demand this was 1968, that Swarthmore College find and admit and enroll more Black students.

Very straightforward, right? 1968. The world was on fire. And we were enraged. The Dean of Admissions decided to write up the academic profiles of the 40 students, 40 of us and hand out the our academic profiles, our SAT scores, our high school GPA, what we studied and so forth,

gave it to everybody at the entire college.

People got up one morning and found the profiles of the 40 Black students in their mailboxes, all the students. And the dean's argument was, these are the very best Black people on the planet and they are not that good. So clearly, we can't go any deeper and admit one more Black student much less what these students are demanding. So we decided to organize and fight. We planned and we talked and we talked and we planned and we argued. We studied and struggled. We spent a lot of time trying to find what to do. And looking at what was happening and campus upheavals and streets around the country.

And remember, this was 1968. Martin Luther King was assassinated in April and Bobby Kennedy in June and there were many assassinations happening all the time.

And, we decided we had to do something dramatic. We couldn't have a press conference to try to resolve our problem. We decided to take over the admissions office and we did. We went in all prepared. Detailed planning. Swearing people to secrecy, telling people who didn't want to be part of it that was fine, but they couldn't tell on us. We had solidarity. And a small group of us took over the admissions office. This Dean of Admissions very self-sacrificingly came up to us and said, you can keep me here but let everybody else go.

And we said we don't want any of you, all of you get out of here. We threw everybody out of the office and chained ourselves in and laid siege to the entire school. Since the school is a Quaker school, they stopped everything they would ordinarily be doing in order to meet in the Quaker meeting way that Quakers do to discuss and discuss and discuss and reflect and discuss and figure out what they wanted to do from what then until now is called the crisis.

During the crisis, during our occupation of the admissions office, I'll tell you this, because I told you about my father. My parents drove from New Haven, Connecticut, down to Pennsylvania to do political education with us. So they arrived at Swarthmore and had to help them climb in the window of the building where we were. And my dad ran some political education workshops my mother who was also very shy, she hung back and did other things with the group.

And at one point, the group decided to delegate, to delegate to my father the authority to speak on our behalf. And we went to find the President of the college, he was just preoccupied or rude, depends on your point of view.

My parents left, we stayed in the office. Lots of uproar. And then, a tragedy struck. The president of the college died. He died suddenly, he had a heart attack, he was a young man, he was in his 40s. And he died.

So a rumor spread around the campus that we had been taunting and harassing him and watched him die. Nobody was with him, he was by himself. A terrible way to die.

And there we were locked in the admissions office at the leafy, Posh suburb afraid because that's

where we were. We were standing in the window of the admissions office looking out and there's a circular driveway mind the main hall there called Parrish Hall and it was evening, January, it was evening. And suddenly, a bunch of cars came slowly up the drive.

And there was 3 cars, maybe 4. And the car doors opened and there were some brothers in Dashikis standing in the car doors just looking at us. And we knew, we knew. So we packed up, we cleaned up the office, we rushed out, we got in the cars, they drove us to Chester, Pennsylvania, they put us up in a house, this house that accommodated us all of us. We're still not sure how it happened. There was no furniture, but there was a piano. So we sang a lot. And we spent some days there trying to figure out what our next thing would be.

And the guys would come around once a day bringing us some food, make sure we were OK. Otherwise, pretty much left us alone. And then, another tragedy struck. Somebody had gone and gotten the newspaper, the New York Times. We were a bunch of nerds. So, we read the New York Times. And sitting reading the paper on, I guess, it was January 20th, 1969, and I turned the page and I learned reading the newspaper that my cousin who was like as close to me – if I said he was my brother, you would understand better. Had been killed in Los Angeles, he was a member of the Black Panther party and the LAPD had started a war between the Panthers and the United States and my cousin had been killed. So I read about that in the newspaper.

So the people in Chester looked after me and took care of me and eventually got me to a place where I could take a train and go home and be with my family so we can mourn. And that is my story about Chester. Chester saved me twice.

Garrett: Thank you so much for that, Ruthie. So I think what we're going to do is just play Stevie's last clip in response to the question, what makes him feel optimistic about the movement for abolition today. And then, maybe we'll throw that to you for a final closeout. And thank you, you're doing the lord's work.

Garrett: What is one thing that makes you optimistic about where the abolitionist movement is today? What is one thing that troubles you?

Stevie: [pre-recorded]: The youth. The energy, the level of understanding that they have. The fact that it's -- the movement today sees young people, you see they're not stuck on this cis-het patriarchy thing either, like you see queer trans folks, you see diversity as far as – you really see diversity in the movement among young people. And I feel like their energy, they're not going to be bullshitted, not going to be de-mobilized, they have no problem standing up to power, which is amazing to me, you know, it's amazing to me. And always to say to young folks; you're always waiting for old folks, but I say listen, Fred Hampton was 21 years old when they murdered him. And when they started the Black panthers. I talk about how old was Malcolm and how old was Martin at the Montgomery Bus Boycott? 26? I talk about you know, how Malcolm was young, don't wait for the old folks, we sitting around. Ya'll got to do this.

And pointing the other thing, on the flip side of that, even in here, I find it troubling because, we

don't engage the youth here like we need to.

There's this idea, especially young Black and Brown males, that they're dangerous, they're out of control and we're socialized to fear them. So even in prison, you have people saying, oh, those young guys are crazy, we're not going to talk to them, and not realizing these younger guys, actually, are the key. They are the key. And so, we have to be able to talk to them and engage them and spend time with them, you know. And build with them. The flip side is for me is that inside the prison, I don't see a lot of people engaging the youth and listening to them.

They will talk *to* the youth, but not with the youth. You know what I mean. They want to direct them and guide them and this, but they aren't listening to what the youth have to say. And they have things to say. And they teach me everyday; I learn something from a young person I'm like "Are you serious? I didn't know that, I didn't know that." Their perspective is different, you know, I'm older, and I'm learning things from them, I learn why certain things happen. I'm not out on the streets, I'm not hanging out on the corners, not in the neighborhoods they're in. And so, I'm learning what happened there and why from their perspective. And it's very different from what, you know, the PIC's gonna tell you, or what the media's gonna tell you, or what the DA's gonna tell you, so it's important to listen to the young people.

We keep saying that closer to problem, closer to the solution, well, they are living in the problem. They are living in it. And they can tell us some things and it's about listening to the youth, also. And that's, I guess, one thing I'm excited about the youth but at the same time, I'm kind of concerned about how we we're not engaging the youth in the way we really we need to.

Garrett: So Ruthie, we'll close with the same question to you. What's something that makes you optimistic? And what's something that troubles you?

Ruthie: Something that makes me optimistic is the incredible connectivity that I see between and among people all around the world now that, perhaps, became more apparent with COVID but I also think that COVID produced this solidarity. So, for example, I've been working with nurses.

The National Nurses United. And their resolutions from their annual conference in September were amazing. And -- or October -- were amazing. The resolutions covered everything. Including prison in prisons. Everything. They did not say, I'm a health care worker and can only speak to issues that are bread and butter health care worker issues. Similarly, I've been talking with people in India who have figured out a variety of ways to make it possible for people to have lives that are not ruined by the economic and political upheavals of rising fascism on the one hand, and the terror of COVID on the other, and the ongoing wars that are constantly produced by those that have the equipment to wage them.

I am, finally, encouraged that as I was saying is the case here in Europe and, certainly, the case with my comrades throughout the continent of Africa and beyond, people are building, building, building connections, trying to figure out how to develop and enhance the kind of solidarity we need to make the world we want into the world we need into the world, excuse me, the world we

want into the world we need. All of these things. So all this internationalism has gotten my heart big and my mind on fire.

One of the things that concerns me is the -- the best way I can put it is this way. People get really excited for good reason when they, when we, I'll make -- I'll use we statements. When we come upon something that seems to explain a problem. I get very excited. Now, I've got it. I got it. I see the problem.

But then, as was the case with slavery that we discussed about an hour ago in prison, people have a hard time stepping away from that explanation when different kinds of evidence and understanding become available to use. And that really worries me. It worries me because I know it takes a while to change how we think about things. Certainly, I could tell many stories about my own constantly developing consciousness. But it's also true that I think many people of all ages have a habit of reciting what we think is right as though the words are themselves magical enough to do the work that actually organizing and rehearsing the revolution requires.

So, excited, concerned, but I'm always full of hope.

Garrett: Thank you so much. I think we'll close with that. And I just want, on behalf of all of the Study and Struggle organizers and earn tonight and I know Stevie when I share this with him will be tremendously sad he couldn't participate more but very grateful for your time and thoughts. So thank you, everyone.

>> RUTHIE: Thank you, Garrett, thank you, everybody. Have a lovely evening.
Good night.