

- to appear before the legislature to provide more complete information about prisons and the treatment of prisoners.
- C. Educate the public through the news media, union newsletters or publications, and public speaking engagements.
 - D. Retain attorneys to help gain our objectives through the courts.
 - E. Use peaceful, lawful, and legal methods to obtain fair treatment and due process of law for all prisoners of the state of North Carolina.
 - F. Collectively bargain with prison administrations and administrators.

Southern Coalition on Jails and Prisons, 1974–1990

Lydia Pelot-Hobbs

In 1974, as the United States embarked on the political project that would become known as mass incarceration, free-world activists organized the Southern Coalition on Jails and Prisons (SCJP) to resist the growing use of criminalization and imprisonment. The SCJP was formed as a regional organization, and at its height in the early 1980s it had chapters in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Between 1974 and its demise in 1990, the SCJP focused on four primary issues: reforming prison and jail conditions to ensure the rights of prisoners, halting new prison construction, abolishing capital punishment, and developing alternatives to incarceration.

To meet these goals, the coalition employed a range of tactics. For instance, as part of its activism to reform prison and jail conditions it filed civil action lawsuits along with supporting prisoner strikes and other forms of resistance, such as the North Carolina Prisoners' Union's struggle for official recognition as a union. SCJP understood its constituency to be both friends and family of incarcerated people as well as radicals and progressives without a direct relationship to the penal system but whose politics poised them to be sympathetic to SCJP's aims of countering state punishment with social justice. It established support groups of family and friends of incarcerated people, coordinated carpools for prison visits, and petitioned governors for prison reforms. Through newsletters and conferences, its members strove to inform and mobilize people around the everyday and extraordinary forms of carceral violence, from inadequate health care to solitary confinement to guard beatings. SCJP worked in alliance with legal organizations such as the ACLU and the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee as well as liberal religious groups on lawsuits addressing prison conditions and in advocating for ending the death penalty. The group understood itself to be a regional branch of a national movement against imprisonment and linked itself with organizations such as the National Prison Moratorium Project and Stop the Olympic Prison in Lake Placid, New York.

SCJP organized from the standpoint that the post–civil rights “New South” was not a transformed society—as many southern elites claimed—but was leading the nation in reinforcing racism and class oppression through the expansion of the penal system and the resurgence of the death penalty. In its analysis, the growth of incarceration served to warehouse poor and working-class southerners of color who society had otherwise abandoned. An SCJP flyer described capital punishment as “the ultimate means of disposing of people we no longer know how to deal with.”

While self-identified as a penal reform organization, the SCJP’s demands often mixed reformist and radical politics in its calls for pre-trial release, alternative diversionary programs, and a total cessation of new penal construction. Its campaigns faced the challenge of inadvertently encouraging punitive state building projects. For instance, in the early 1980s, the Louisiana chapter had filed a series of lawsuits against widespread inhumane conditions and premature death in the Louisiana jail system. Yet the state government in alignment with local sheriffs responded to the lawsuits by expanding the jail system rather than expanding release mechanisms. In response, the Louisiana chapter retreated from prison conditions litigation as a decarceration strategy.

As tough-on-crime politics solidified in the 1980s, SCJP campaigns focused less on decarceration and more on ending the death penalty, which was particularly widespread in the South. The coalition opposed the death penalty both at the policy level and by holding protests and vigils; they challenged the state’s killing of John Louis Evans of Alabama, executed in 1983, and protested the planned execution of Shabaka Sundiata Waglini of Florida, who was released from death row in 1987 and freed from prison in 1990. While its strategies shifted, the SCJP never abandoned its position that “if the choice were between prisons as they now are and no prisons at all, we would promptly choose the latter.”

2.B.4.

National Council on Crime and Delinquency/
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

From National Moratorium on Prison Construction flyer (1976)

Coalitions of faith-based and secular progressives challenged the federal government’s plan to construct additional prisons in the 1970s. The biggest such effort at the time was the National Moratorium on Prison Construction, a joint venture between the Unitarian Universalists and the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.