

## **1) How can we use an anti-capitalist critique to build a broad-based coalition to abolish police and prisons?**

Because capitalism is responsible for so much misery in our world and police and prisons are tools capitalism uses to maintain control and ensure profits, building a broad-based coalition against capitalism should be easy. But it's not. One of the reasons this task is hard is because our critique of capitalism, when it happens at all, fails to connect the dots for the masses. We fail to show, in plain language, how capitalism creates the desperation and precariousness most of us are living in.

In prison, we are programmed to believe that our greatest failures were failures to be good capitalists and good patriarchy. (This is in a men's prison). We are indoctrinated with the idea that not only is capitalism good, but also inevitable. Capitalism is necessary if you want to live a good life. Our task is to expose this lie. Our task is to connect the dots between the hardship and deprivations the people endure and capitalism. Our task is to connect the dots between policing and capitalism. Our task is to connect the dots between prisons/incarceration and capitalism. And we must do so in an accessible way. We need to use cultural productions if we want to reach the masses. We have to think beyond the textbook or academic journal.

I recently received a zine, a comic actually, on racial capitalism from a comrade in New Haven. This zine explains racial capitalism clearly and the format attracted prisoners. The very night I gave a copy to a young prisoner, he and his cellmate read it. They came to me the next day and wanted to discuss it. The zine demystified capitalism for them. If we are going to build a broad-based coalition, if we are going to win, we need many more moments like this.

And this is where outside comrades are needed. We need accessible materials. We need collaborations between people on both sides of the walls that produce materials that demonstrate not only the problems of capitalism but also offer other ways of being, of relating and of living in this world.

I want to return to an earlier point. I mentioned "if it occurs," referring to anticapitalist critique. There was a time when prisoners engaged in vigorous critiques of capitalism and imperialism. Today, we see more railing against these isms. Railing isn't critique. It is just saying something is wrong. But it doesn't show how. It doesn't connect the dots. It doesn't demystify the relationship between capitalism and our pain. Mentioning capitalism in an article or essay doesn't qualify as critique. Especially the kind we need inside the prisons. We actually have people who are promoting "Black Capitalism" behind these walls. Honestly, most prisoners have no problem with capitalism. They haven't been given clear reasons to have a problem with it. We can do better. We have to do better if we want to build a mass movement.

**2. In 2016 and 2018, prison strikes against prison slavery garnered increasing media attention. This phrase meant to analogize prison labor with chattel slavery, and hones in on the 13th Amendment's exception clause in particular. What do these comparisons miss? What are some of the obstacles in organizing prisoners around labor strikes?**

There are a number of ways this analogy is off. First, let's be clear: we are talking about an afterlife of slavery. But my ancestors were brought here to work and die. They were captured and labor was forcibly extracted from them. Why are we being captured today? Is it to work? Not at all. A major misconception promoted by this analogy is that many prisoners are working behind the walls and we are being forced to. The fact is that most prisoners don't work. And those who do are engaged in the reproductive labor of the prison: they are kitchen, maintenance, custodial and block/tier workers. And they sign up or volunteer for these jobs. For a number of different reasons.

Regarding the exception clause, I don't believe changing what the law says about itself is going to get us free. We have been down that road before. Moreover, in 2018, Colorado changed its state constitution which mirrored the US Constitution, specifically its exception clause. And not one prisoner was freed because of it. And prisoners registered their concern that doing so would mean they could not work behind the walls anymore. The point is that nothing changed. Prisoners in Colorado haven't been freed and the material condition of the imprisoned hasn't gotten better.

This is why it is so hard to organize prisoners around labor. Prisoners don't see themselves as part of the labor movement. We haven't connected the abolition movement to the labor movement in a way that resonates with the imprisoned. Most prisoners see their situation as temporary: most of us have release dates. They see working as a plus. And for many it is.

Many jurisdictions pay prisoner who work in time credit. Prisoners who work in these prisons earn time, which is what is being extracted from us, towards their sentence. In Kentucky, prisoners can earn 20 days credit per month. So working gets one home faster. How am I going to convince this person not to strike?

I think we sometimes fail to understand that the PIC is not a monolith. There are regional and jurisdictional differences. There are different systems we are held under. Here, in PA, labor isn't an issue. Challenging and changing the sentencing schemes and the parole system is. We have to keep in mind the different sets of concerns and priorities each prison or region has. We cannot map concerns and priorities onto prisoners and expect them to fall in line. Moreover, strikes have prerequisites: community-building and mutual aid networks. This work hasn't been done. I have actually read some comments from those who call for the strikes that clearly show a contemptuous attitude toward those who work. How does one expect to organize with people one looks down upon? We need to talk to the imprisoned. Not just a few of them. Not just those with a platform either. Talk to prisoners, especially marginalized people. Find out what is important to them. Find out what they are doing now to remedy the situation or to fight it. And then, see where you can support those efforts. Those people might know something about how to solve the problems where they are caged. Give them a chance.

### **3) What are some of your takeaways from the national survey of prison labor you initiated? What suspicions were confirmed and what surprised you?**

The survey was initiated because we were hearing things about working behind the walls that didn't correspond to our reality. So we decided to ask prisoners across the country about

work/labor where they are caged. The survey is titled: Work and Us. As suspected, most prisoners don't see themselves as part of the labor movement. Most prisoners don't work. We received reports of between 30%-35% of prisoners working.

And for many different reasons. The work regimen is different around the country. Some jurisdictions pay. Others don't. Some award good time/earned time. Others don't. And everywhere, marginalized prisoners have a hard time being or staying employed, meaning they are precluded from earning funds or time back. What surprised me most were the different regimens employed and the many ways prisoners are induced to work.

**4) Talk a little bit about your own labor in prison. What should organizers outside understand about prison labor in Pennsylvania?**

I don't work. They have never offered me a job. They want me to remain idle. Here in PA, prisoners are paid, but get no earned time credits. There are the basic jobs mentioned earlier. These pay .19 an hour. Then, there are correctional industries jobs. This is how the PA DOC keeps itself running. Prisoners make our clothes, hygiene products and pack and distribute commissary. They do laundry for the entire system, make license plates for PA and build furniture for other PA governmental departments. These jobs can pay \$200 a month. That's a lot of money in here. There is an application and interview process. There is always a long waiting list. Another reason it's hard to organize here: the reserve labor pool is huge. Every PA prisoner is part of the general labor pool (GLP) and eligible to be assigned a job at any time. Every prisoner receives at least \$17 a month, idle pay, without working.

People work, not for funds as much as for other perks. Time out of the cell. Access to materials that can be used for other hustles. Looks good for parole. Access to phones. It is the perks that motivate lots of people.

**5) What is one thing that makes you optimistic about where the abolitionist movement is today? What is one thing that troubles you?**

The youth. The energy I see from the young people gives me much hope. They also refuse to be bullshitted and demobilized. I love it. What troubles me is our lack of cultural productions that resonate with the masses, especially the youth. Even in here, few activists engage the youth. When they do, it isn't to listen and learn. It is to dictate and direct. We have to do better if we are going to win.