

There are plenty of lessons we can learn from the Attica rebellion, the first being the role of the political consciousness of the prisoners. The rebellion occurred during a time of intense political struggle across the US (and world) against the Vietnam War and racism at home. Oppressed people in the US were inspired by worldwide anti-colonial revolutions happening at that time. From 1949-1976, the People's Republic of China, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, showed the world oppressed people could not only make revolution through seizing state power, but continue to revolutionize society through the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, re-energizing and inspiring people's ideas about liberation and socialism (to learn more about this period, read the book *Continuing the Revolution After the Revolution: Socialist China, 1949-1976*, and write to us if you want to get a copy). Oppressed people were identifying with the Vietnamese and other struggles around the globe against colonialism and imperialism, the most powerful military in the world (the US) could be defeated by a much smaller, less technologically advanced people fighting for liberation. **Prisoners leading the uprising at Attica were steeped in this political climate and were organized along these political lines, having drawn up demands and engaging in political protest inside the prison prior to the rebellion.** Additionally, the conditions of life in Attica were worsening. The prison, only built for 1,200 inmates, had reached a total of 2,243 by the time the rebellion had popped off, with inmates living on top of one another. In describing the conditions of life, historian Howard Zinn wrote, *"Prisoners spent 14 to 16 hours a day in their cells, their mail was read, their visits from families conducted through a mesh screen, their medical care disgraceful, their parole system inequitable, racism everywhere."* All of this and more led inmates to revolt. So on that September day, when some inmates had an argument with a guard and reinforcements later came to throw two of them into solitary, other inmates resisted and began the takeover.

We remember Attica today because of the courage of the prisoners standing up against oppression and for the people's liberation. The rebellion shined a spotlight on the growing mass incarceration machine, its role in society to contain oppressed people who threaten the system, and the brutal conditions prisoners in the US face. During the uprising, inmates spoke out on live TV about the torture at the hands of guards, inhumane living conditions, and brutal treatment of inmates by both the prison and legal system. **Attica sparked more rebellions elsewhere and a national movement of people on the outside to take up the cause of prisoners.** It put the prison struggle on the map for the whole world to see. Not only did it force the system to make substantial changes to the treatment of prisoners and general prison conditions, but also to make changes to

things like parole. And while the rebellion was violently put down, those inmates took a bold stand and made the ultimate sacrifice that inspired millions in the decades to come. Today, Attica holds a special place in the hearts of the oppressed across the globe.

THE SHU AND PELICAN BAY

The prison movement made both advances and retreats in the years following Attica. While the system was forced to make changes that respected the rights of inmates, it also took precautionary measures to try and prevent inmates from again becoming a force they had to reckon with. In the 1980s, California prison authorities began to massively expand their prison system. The so-called War on Drugs launched in the 70s-80s, creating an explosion in the prison population across the US, with Black and Latino men targeted in police arrests and hit with long sentences for non-violent drug offenses. In response to the growing prison movement and periodic uprisings, California's state government enacted and maintained policies of dividing and segregating inmates by race, leading to stoked racial tensions inside the prisons. But increasingly, authorities began to use solitary confinement as a means to keep inmates divided.

In 1989, California opened the Pelican Bay State Prison, a so-called state of the art prison with a new kind of indefinite solitary wing known as the Security Housing Unit, or SHU. The SHU was designed to hold prisoners who were determined by authorities to be members of "prison gangs" and who posed an "internal security threat" to the prison authorities. These prisoners would be removed from the general population and placed in solitary for the remainder of their sentences, many in solitary for decades. Black prisoners caught reading books like *Soledad Brother* or *Blood In My Eye*, or Latinos and Chicanos found with drawings or symbols of Aztec warriors, would be classified as internal threats, transferred to Pelican Bay, and placed in the SHU. Thousands of prisoners not only suffered from the decrepit conditions and abuse, but also the psychological torture of the SHU, having no human contact for years besides guards who would move, restrain, or beat them. Visitors couldn't even be in the same room. Usually having to drive hours to see their loved ones inside, families could only talk through glass to prisoners for their one-hour visit, once a month.

Despite their solitary confinement, prisoners in the SHU devised ways to communicate with one another, through coded messages and passing small handwritten notes between cells. After some years of planning, prisoners in the SHU managed to organize a hunger strike in 2011, demanding an end to their indefinite solitary confinement, and another strike in 2013. Inspired by the 1981 Irish Republican Army (IRA) hunger strikers who fought inside British prisons against conditions and violations of their rights, SHU inmates saw the

tactic of a hunger strike as a way to not only bring prison authorities to meet demands, but also to get more public attention on the struggle of prisoners. News of the strike spread, and inmates in other prisons began to join in, adding demands like clean facilities, better food, and better access to books. **At its peak, some 30,000 prisoners across the state of California joined the 2013 hunger strike**, which lasted about two months with different levels of engagement. The strike gained national attention and put a spotlight on California's use of solitary confinement and its poor prison conditions. The California strike inspired others to take up the struggle even after it had ended. In 2014, over 1,000 immigrants, detained by US Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) at the notorious Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington, went on a hunger strike for 56 days to protest their confinement and the horrific conditions in the facility, exposing people to the struggle of migrants captured by ICE who were forced into the same conditions as inmates in the jails and prisons. **In 2015, due to the struggle of prisoners, California was forced to terminate indefinite solitary confinement and greatly reduced the number of individuals in solitary as a whole.**

While horrific conditions inside California jails and prisons persist, the hunger strike dealt a blow to the system and forced it to concede to inmates' demands. Even under the harrowing and nearly impossible conditions of solitary, inmates were still able to organize themselves to fight back. Prisoners in Pelican Bay, who would normally be considered enemies, got together to draft an "Agreement to End Hostilities" document stating inmates would not fight each other. An outside support network helped spread the word to other prisons and raise the demand of prisoners in the streets. **This kind of coordinated inside-outside strategy built a broad movement among different sections of society, a movement much needed and severely lacking today.**

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

There are plenty of other great examples of developments and tactics in the prison movement in recent history, and in the last decade, we can look to and learn from, much of which we've had to condense. In 2016, the Free Alabama Movement (FAM), an organization of prisoners and supporters organizing in the Alabama Department of Corrections, organized a coordinated prison work strike that involved an estimated 24,000 prisoners in 24 states, the largest prison strike in U.S. history. The strike dealt an impressive blow to the state of Alabama, heavily reliant on the slave labor of prisoners, as well as exposed the inhumane conditions and mistreatment inside the prison system to a national audience. In 2020 and 2021, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, inmates inside the St. Louis City Justice Center (CJC) staged multiple protests against conditions inside the jail. When their demands weren't met and their peaceful protest was physically put down

by guards, their tactics escalated, again pushing to the national stage the medical neglect and deteriorating conditions prisoners face, especially during the pandemic. As one rebel inmate wrote during the time:

"In the early hours of the 6th, inmates broke several windows on an upper floor. They chanted and held signs. Several things were also set on fire and thrown out of the windows. Chairs and other items littered the street below the windows, and at least one car had a shattered windshield. Sometime in the early morning the inmates at the St. Louis Justice Center staged an act of civil disobedience because of the inhumane treatment by CJC Management concerning Covid-19 along with other issues. Expo-Stl was made aware that more than 50 inmates participated in a peaceful protest that took place on December 29th. Nothing was done to address those issues and this mornings uprising was the natural evolution of the actions of living and feeling human beings. Here now is a communications from inside the Justice Center itself."

In the Winter of 2025, prisoners inside New York state prisons stood up and rebelled against conditions across the state, requiring the National Guard to be called in to stop the unrest. These rebellions were mostly spontaneous reactions to the conditions inside and didn't raise a coherent list of demands or have much outside support. What is required is the kind of organization that can lead both prisoners and people outside to challenge the conditions and mistreatment prisoners face.

In a more recent act of resistance, in May 2026, the whole world heard the cries of the Delaney Hall hunger strikers, demonstrating how immigrants are not passive victims, but a leading force in changing the situation right before us. As of this writing at the end of June, immigrants detained in at least four detention centers are on active hunger strike (Delaney Hall, NJ; Torrance County, NM; Praeland, TX; Adelanto, CA). A month prior, immigrants kidnapped and held at Moshanna Valley Processing Center, PA and North Lake Processing Center, MI also went on hunger strike, with protests following. And these are only the ones that started in the past two months. Resistance has spread, led by immigrants subjected to the death camps around the country where detainees continue to die under mysterious circumstances at a growing rate, who are demanding the full closure of all ICE detention centers. This is the direction the fight against both ICE and the prisons and jails needs to go, and their ongoing resistance can fuel ours if we seize the time, stand with the strikers, and join them in struggle.

All of the above examples are continuations of the prison movement in the US. Organizations come and go, capitulate, and can be sabotaged by the enemy. Prisoners who stand up and speak out can be retaliated against. Some step forward, brave the storm, and win the battle in the ongoing war. These are the

realities of the struggle to change the world and fight oppression. But one thing remains certain: no one besides the masses of people will make the kind of change we need. Prisoners in the aforementioned examples were never begging for changes to be made. They organized to fight against the prison authorities and the conditions they imposed.

Today, we are sorely lacking the kind of national organization required to deal a real blow to the mass incarceration machine, but in many jails and prisons across the country, there lies seeds of resistance that can begin to grow and flourish. If prisoners and their families are ready to put an end to the misery, an organized prison movement on revolutionary lines is what it will take. The Spark has ideas about what this could look like and wants to correspond with prisoners about their thoughts, ideas, and strategies on this matter to make this a reality.

FROM THE CRIMINAL TO THE REVOLUTIONARY MENTALITY

One of the biggest obstacles in the way of building the kind of prison movement in the US able to bring the system to its knees is the pervasive criminal mentality fostered by the capitalist society and the mass incarceration machine itself. Prisoners must transform themselves and commit to the struggle, study revolutionary history and theory, and make sacrifices big and small. Whatever prisoners did or didn't do on the outside, everyone inside is encouraged to act and think like a criminal. Desperate conditions force prisoners to turn on each other, rob, steal, and extort one another. For oppressed people, the entire system encourages and fosters a criminal mentality, a "get mine," "me first," dog-eat-dog world (read more in "Crashing Out: Where Does Crime Come From?" from Going Against The Tide; write to us to get a copy). This mentality has first got to change and be combatted within ourselves and each other if prisoners are serious about the cause, and it can only start to change through an intense personal struggle with oneself.

Before Malcolm became Malcolm X, he was a petty criminal who stole, robbed, pimped, and sold drugs, going by the name of Detroit Red. It was during a stint in prison where Malcolm was recruited into the NOI and began the process of deep, personal, and political change, transforming himself from Detroit Red to Malcolm X, who left the prison and would become a revolutionary leader that shook the system to its core. In 1968, a young Puerto Rican gang leader named Jose "Cha Cha" Jimenez entered Cook County Jail for a 60-day stay for possession of heroin. During this time, Cha Cha began to read revolutionary literature and decided he would dedicate himself to fighting oppression. While inside, Cha Cha stood up for other inmates, helped translate for Spanish-speaking inmates inside, and educated inmates on their rights. Cha Cha left CCJ and would go on to turn his street gang into a revolutionary organization called the Young Lords Organization. He continued to fight against oppression until his passing at the beginning of this year.

In 1980, the Peruvian Communist Party (PCP) (aka Sendero Luminoso, or the Shining Path) initiated a revolutionary people's war to overthrow their oppressive, fascistic, US-backed government. During this struggle, many revolutionaries were captured and thrown into Peru's prisons and jails. But instead of viewing capture as simple defeat, the PCP viewed imprisonment as a new opportunity to wage struggle, referring to the prisons and jails as "shining trenches of combat." Within five years, the PCP had extensive control of the country's prisons and jails. Peruvian society was turned upside down by the people's war, and revolutionaries who organized prisoners were recruiting more into the party, **replacing the government authority in the prisons with the revolutionary order of the prisoners**, and leading coordinated resistance behind the walls. While the US prison movement today is in a much different position than the militants in Peru during the revolution, the Peruvian experience is worth further study and

recognition of what's possible when prisoners have organization, guided by revolutionary politics.

Historically, organizers in the prison movement in the US have referred to jails and prisons as "**universities**," not in the narrow sense that many people can get a degree or learn a trade while doing time, but that incarceration clears the ground for changing someone's entire worldview. This kind of transformation is not just personal, it's political, and one where people are not only transforming themselves, but the people around them. **Beginning to fight not just for their own dignity and self-worth, but for the dignity of all people oppressed by this system.**

While some transform doing time, many become hardened by the realities of prison life. And not all transformation is positive, either. For example, many people become "born again" while inside, and advocate for only self-improvement and prayer in the face of systemic injustice that requires collective struggle (like the examples above). This is not a knock on religion, but instead a recognition that not all change of consciousness can lead to changing society. Only learning, studying, and applying revolutionary ideas can push the movement forward and carry it through to its necessary conclusion: power in the hands of the oppressed masses of people.



PRISONERS HAVE DIFFERENCES AND PROBLEMS WITH ONE ANOTHER, BOTH REAL AND PETTY. BUT THERE'S A COMMON STRUGGLE TO BE HAD AGAINST THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE CAPTURED YOU, THE PEOPLE WHO SERVE YOU SHIT FOOD, THE PEOPLE WHO HUMILIATE YOU, THE PEOPLE WHO NEGLECT YOU, BEAT YOU, AND SET YOU UP. WE REMEMBER ATTICA. ATTICA MEANS FIGHT BACK.

