2020-2021
Publications and Zine Distributor
Catalog



True Leap Press
PO Box #408197
Chicago IL 60640

Qualities of a prisoner ally

There are many ways of "helping" prisoners. One is to impose what you think is "best" for them. This is the typical approach of well-meaning "experts" and "professionals" who are members of the criminal (in)justice bureaucracies.

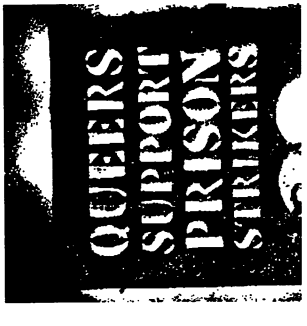
Another way of "helping" prisoners is thru charity. We use charity in prison to provide relief of suffering and to express compassion. But there are problems with charity: Charity creates dependency. It communicates pity rather than shared outrage and can romanticize the prisoner. Charity sometimes relieves the sufferings of prisoners, but it does not alter the basic conditions responsible for the sufferings.

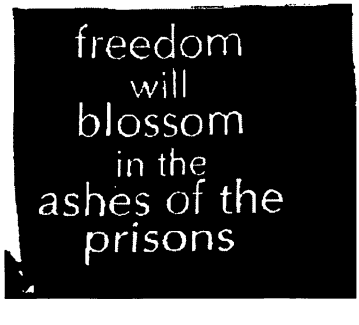
A third way of helping prisoners is to become their ally. These are some of the qualities of a prisoner ally as compared to those of the "charitable" person:

- The charitable person does not think of altering the prisoner's persistent need for help. The prisoner must always depend on the good will of the charitable.
- The prisoner ally helps the oppressed prisoner become empowered to change his/her situation.
- The charitable person often acts out of guilt and pities the prisoner who is seen as a "poor soul."
- The prisoner ally treats the prisoner as an ally in change, sharing anger about prison oppression.
- The charitable person might think the prisoner's situation comes from some fault within the prisoner.
- The prisoner ally identifies social and cultural forces that contribute to the cause of prisoners' oppression.
- The charitable person often has a plan for the prisoner, who is not regarded as a peer.
- The prisoner ally and the prisoner strategize together, mutually; no one must be "thanked."
- The charitable person expects the prisoner alone to change.
- The prisoner ally works with the prisoner and takes mutual risks, experiencing change also.
- The charitable person has his/her own view of what the prisoner must feel.
- The prisoner ally understands the prisoner's experiences thru the prisoner's own words.
- The charitable person has easy access to the criminal (in)justice bureaucracies.
- The prisoner ally often has a stormy relationship with the bureaucracies, because s/he is perceived as threatening to persons who hold power in the system.

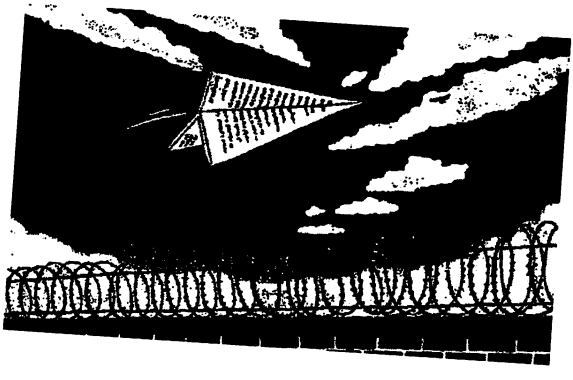
Note: Obviously, we are not proposing that the ally and charitable person are always so very opposite or that people ever actually fulfill either role in exactly the manner presented here. Rather, our purpose is simply to contrast the basic qualities of these two relationships. Learning how to become an ally is an abolitionist task.







TRUE LEAP PRESS is a radical anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-patriarchy publishing collective based in Chicago, with active members in New York City and Los Angeles. The current open projects of the group are divided between our publication of Black Studies and revolutionary abolitionist analysis and commentary, *Propter Nos*, edited by three members of the group, and a growing zines-to-prisoner distro ran by one member, under the mentorship of imprisoned abolitionist activists, organizers, writers, and artists around the country. We have been operative as a collective since the release of our journal in 2016.



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Updates

Propter Nos, fourth issue in progress

We're happy to say things are moving steady for our collective, bringing two new members onboard and editing pieces for the fourth volume of *Propter Nos* (*PN*), our periodical publication that brings together Black and revolutionary abolitionist theorists, creative writers, poets, artists, scholar activists, and grassroots community organizers. You can order your copy today, at no charge for imprisoned people. It was a push to steal time for this project between 2018 and 2019; however, the third issue of *PN* did make the rounds at several bookstores in Chicago. The publication was distributed at zine fests and non-academic conferences during the summer and has been circulating in prisons and a few jails around the country. *PN* is also included in the catalog of a few anarchist distros, with orders even made by groups in Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, South Africa, and England.

Confusion with the Process

While we receive feedback and follow-up requested from so many readers, we are also *not* hearing back from a number of folks after their first or second letters. We are certain our materials aren't uninteresting, and revolutionary literature is always needed and on demand in these gulags. This leaves us to presume that people locked up across the country are expecting a consistent stream of reading materials from us—a result of misunderstanding the process. Three issues in particular have been consistently brought to our attention, so please read carefully, and read everything if you plan to collaborate in this process. First, a lot of people

assume we have a mailing list. While initially we planned on developing some kind of internal database, too many peoples' addresses are in flux to manage. We therefore now only send our readership literature by request. Second, it is up to you to choose the selections from the catalog, and we will fill each request order-by-order. Once you finish the books or zines you've requested, please follow up again with another request. This year we are sending in three zines max per order, so when asking for materials please share three titles you are interested in and an additional three as back-ups. Another issue we are having is that word has gotten back to us that some mailrooms are not even informing our imprisoned readers that the literature is arriving. This tactic is called "non-distribution" and is a much more difficult tactic of censorship to maneuver. The third point to consider is that—in the best of chances—we hope people aren't corresponding or requesting materials anymore because they have been released from imprisonment.

Political prisoner Stephen Wilson, *interviewed*

Stephen (Stevie) Wilson, a member of our collective whose writing on study groups in prison appears in the last issue of *PN*, was recently interviewed by our friends ***Rustbelt Abolition Radio***, who a member of ours had the pleasure of meeting at the Bend the Bars prison activist conference in Lansing last summer. We've included a copy of the interview in the closing pages of this catalog (page 20). Several friends, including Stevie, members of No New Jails NYC, and one of our editors are working on a new print publication, tentatively titled ***In the Belly***, which will primarily feature imprisoned abolitionist artists, writers, theorists, and organizers, as well as news media on the prisoner movement from inside for people with loved ones locked up. The audience for the newsletter will be first and foremost the families, friends, and loved ones of prisoners. We imagine this project will be a tool for bringing more people directly

impacted by the prison industrial complex into movement work. Related to this project, there is an archival anthology called ***Queer in Here: the Writing and Art of Queer and Trans Prisoners*** in the making as well, which will be compiled under Stevie's guidance.

Sharky's Testimony, Reflections on the 2018 Aug. 21st to Sep. 9th National Prison Strike

Apparently four prisoners at New Folsom (California State Prison – Sacramento) ended up participating at some point during the span of the 2018 national prison strike. We spoke with the comrade Heriberto Sharky Garcia who went viral on Twitter for the duration of the strike, until large corporate media outlets began emailing us for more information forcing us to remove the video to minimize attention on our work—at the time. We spoke with Sharky about the strike's aftermath and administrative backlash. He was reprimanded continuously from the strike to the very moments conducting this interview. We are currently trying to find Sharky some outside supporters that can offer solidarity on a campaign around visitation rights for family traveling long distances in California. He is incarcerated in Northern California while his family is separated from him, residents of Compton/Long Beach area. Crystal, the love of his life, and their three kids would love to see him. Sharky has been incarcerated since 13. Sharky is part of our (not-always-the-most-stable but still-nonetheless-operative) mutual aid network. Sharky didn't explain what forms of struggle the others engaged in, but did say one of them (who typically would be someone that works even during a "lockdown") made the choice of refusing to work. Incredible feat. It takes a lot of courage to stand up in the jaws of *unmediated state power.* As is to my knowledge a recurring phenomenon in California prisons, another prisoner (the "next in line") gladly took his job for the duration of the lockdown. Sharky noticed this is a recurring contradiction in the history of the work strike tactic. People are gladly willing to be scabs. During the strike, the guards fucked with everyone during the lockdowns. Especially with Sharky because he kept refusing trays. He said the harassment was strong and they stripped him and caged him multiple times. He lasted 15 days strong, but passed out on the 16th. He woke up in the Medical Center hooked up to a bunch of tubes and machines.

A prison strike has begun to take hold in custodial institutions across North America, with reports of sporadic protest action from California and Washington state to the eastern seaboard as far south as Florida and up to Nova Scotia in Canada.

Details remain sketchy as information dribbles out through the porous walls of the country's penitentiaries. Prison reform advocacy groups liaising with strike organisers said Wednesday that protests had been confirmed in three states, with further unconfirmed reports emerging from Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina.

The confirmed cases related to a hunger strike in Folsom state prison in California. A 26-year-old inmate called Heriberto Garcia managed to dispatch to the outside world a smartphone recording of himself refusing food. The video was then posted on Twitter.

When he was told the contents of the meal, Garcia could be heard replying: "Burritos or not, not eating today. Protest. I'm hunger striking right now."

The second confirmed action was in the Northwest detention center in Tacoma, Washington, where as many as 200 detained immigrants joined the nationwide protest. The Canadian unrest occurred in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where prisoners at Burnside jail put out a statement in solidarity with their striking US equivalents complaining that they were being "warehoused as inmates, not treated as human beings".

—excerpt from *The Guardian* (England)

Sharky was later that day caught off guard by the administration; officials said he was to meet with the public information's officer (PIO) only, but it turned out to be a set up: "disciplinary hearing." The Lieutenant was there, the Capitan, the PIO, and the assistant warden also in the room. He said the admin's biggest fear was that the whole yard would turn up and begin participating in the strike. They laid out a spread of documents, mostly news clippings (the articles about his action in the *Guardian* newspaper's website [https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/23/prison-strike-us-canada-forced-labor-protest-activism]) and other info circulating Twitter about Sharky's action. They had a whole file built in a matter of days, or something like that. The PIO interrogated him about how all these media outlets knew about his action, and how word spread so quick. He refused to say anything. Sharky did however tell them that he was on protest/strike in solidarity with the nationwide and then started asking the admin question regarding what *they* knew about all of it, if they knew, and what they thought of it. They proceeded to read off the ten demands, then he replied after: *"yeah… mhmm. I agree with all of those. AND I want to add a few specific to this prison: a) the unhealthy food has to be addressed, b) the medical neglect that goes on has to be addressed, c) the new folsom prisoners often aren't allowed access to the law library to study cases, research etc. thus denied legal help."* He also brought up how there has been a lot of d) issues with visitation

rights being respected. Sharky also demanded a change to the J-Pay scam, where they take 55% or something like that. Didn't fully catch what he was referring to. Went over my head. Finally, the IGI / ISU gang investigation unit came into his cell and took pictures of everything, from his tattoos, to his books, to his artwork. They said they are investigating him for "gang validation." But Sharky knows this is all just because he's an active organizer inside. The guards also tried to get the "big homies" to shut him up, but they didn't. They tried to frame him to other prisoners saying he was making a scene.

Sharky picked up a lot of game from his experience in this action and dealt with each level of the admin in their counterrevolutionary process. He saw the entire subsequent procedures of information and data collection, investigation, and backlash repression first hand, on all tiers of the administration. In the coming years people who participate in something like this need to have a plan and be prepared for the blowback to be expected though never feared. Other prisoners kept coming by after it was all over and asking what was up with the action, he said this may have inspired some folks, or at least made them curious. He continues to create study groups and ad hoc law libraries in so-called common areas. Sharky believes phone zaps work and its was actually crazy to witness one from the inside, unable to really see out. He said the flooded phone lines had the admin stressed, frantic, and pissed. They thought it was his family incessantly calling. Thought that was funny. He has every "visit" they made to his floor/cell on paper. Has a whole stack of evidence in a folder confirming all this. He says they were methodical in their documentation of events as well. In the aftermath of all of this Sharky tried to retreat for a short while a recuperate, then begin political education around strategy/tactics and circulating the old "Agreement to End All Hostilities" statement (from 2012) as a teaching tool. I've been mailing him materials and distributing his zine to fellow prison activists. Please write to Sharky, his information can be found on our website https://trueleappress.com/2017/10/13/visual-schematics/


THE FUTURE IS NOW

The Selected Writing of Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin

We will be self-publishing ***Don't Worship Anybody, Not Even Me: The Selected Writings of Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin—Black Revolutionary Community Organizer***, possibly under a university press "imprint." It is not your typical academic printed book of formal scholarship, but it is an incredibly important (and provocative) set of scholarly texts that should be treated as archival material, as theory, and as living "praxis" in the anarchist, abolitionist, and Black radical traditions. Lorenzo's writings are linked to over four decades of concrete practical experience in movements for Black liberation from the 1960s onward.



Infrastructure, Finances, and Logistics

Our distro operator currently is the outside facilitator for over a dozen different PIC abolitionist study groups around the country, and several existing groups of imprisoned abolitionists have begun to borrowing from our materials. This catalog shares information about the materials we send in. The content we provide comrades inside—all at no charge for the recipient—include photocopied educational materials and zines on such topics as the prison industrial complex, abolition, prison movement history, transformative justice, Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, Native Studies, gender and sexuality, disability justice, anarchist theory, organizer's toolkits, jailhouse lawyers guides and legal handbooks, catalogs from books-through-bars groups, and other informational resources. Our literature is also circulated by grassroots groups like Chicago Books to Women in Prison and the South Chicago ABC Zine Distro.





We are constantly scavenging for funds and donations to keep our distro afloat and sustain the organizing work that it enables. This requires a wide range of expenses including: cost of mailing and packaging zines, maintaining correspondence, supporting comrades' through commissary and funds for the phones during emergencies, making photo-copies of our journal for distribution inside and other special printing tasks. Our greatest expense is postage, costing $100-$300 dollars every month. Stamps alone most months decimate the fragile pot we pull from. We currently have several imprisoned activists whose communication our distro operator funds out of pocket.

The zine-to-prisoner distro's biggest project as of lately has been building back up a network of study groups with Stephen Wilson, recently transferred from SCI Smithfield to SCI Fayette. In the middle of this past summer, prior to Stevie's censorship, removal from gen pop into an RHU, and transfer to another part of the state, there were approximately 80 people participating actively in four different abolitionist study groups at Smithfield. Stevie held this formation together, and the network inside Smithfield started becoming a mutual aid network and inside/outside direct action group just prior to his becoming a target by administrators (record of our work at Smithfield can be found at: *www.abolitioniststudy.group*). Now at Fayette, we are at work building up the grounds for a similar formation. Donations for this network can be made online at: www.patreon.com/abolitioniststudy.

Understanding our "Role" in the Movement

We really appreciate your patience during these first few years of operation. The scope of our work and reach of our networks of distribution, circulation, and study has been doggedly expanding. Sometimes our methods are insufficient in the face of prison administrators and mailroom staff. Our focus is also frequently interrupted by crisis after crisis. There is always a new individual fire to be put out—our enemy is after all the largest prison-police state in world history. While we appreciate the labor of groups who take the lead on organizing "phone zaps," commissary support, and other actions that support comrades inside, if we are to be effective as a source of information and political education for imprisoned activists we can't get too involved in such tasks as coordinating strikes, actions, or protests on the inside. We can serve as connectors from time to time. This is an inevitable facet of the work. But we cannot do peoples' individual bidding on a regular basis. Our role is to provide quality political education materials and to do this consistently. We are not your secretaries or personal assistants, and we don't offer legal services. To counteract this dilemma, however, we have included a list of resources and addresses of national and regional accomplices who can provide the support or access the services you need.

Some final points of clarification:

If you are interested in sending us contributions for any our open projects, please feel free to send us your work. We do not promise a response, but if we see promise in the draft you send us we will offer feedback. If its good shit but not a fit for us, we'll likely pass it on to friends with other publishing opportunities. If you have not heard back to us after a month, there is definitely something wrong. We hold two monthly volunteer nights, where friends and accomplices fill orders and write letter. And our distro manager is quite consistent and nearly always at work in his personal downtime. So please be persistent, we are all (to varying degrees) working under conditions of duress.



Yours in the struggle,
Casey

Any inquiries or requests for materials can be directed to the following addresses:

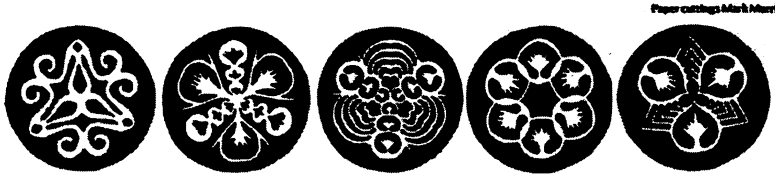
True Leap Press & Distribution
P.O. Box 408197
Chicago IL, 60640

Our catalog and several other original works can also be requested free of charge from:

South Chicago ABC Zine Distro
P.O. Box 721
Homewood IL, 60430

Chicago Books to Women in Prison
4511 N. Hermitage Ave.
Chicago IL, 60640

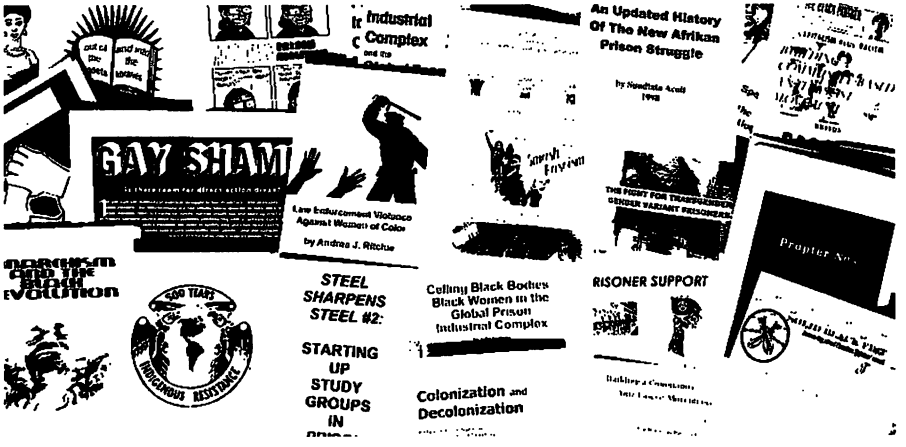




Propter Nos *5$/FREE FOR ALL PRISONERS*



Issue	**Year**	**Title**
#1	2016	Reflections on the "Movement Moment"
#2	2017	Insurgency/Exhaustion
#3	2019	Anti-/Non
#4	2020	Invention [*available for pre-order*]



To order zines please send us a letter stating either of the following:

List the specific title/#'s from below that you would like to order. 3 picks max. each order, you can list two additional in case we are out of your requested selection.

OR

Choose a topic from the listings below that you wish to learn more about

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TOPICS

Black Studies
Ethnic Studies
Native Studies
Marxism
Feminism and Womanism
Queerness and Gender Violence
Disability Justice
Self-Care
Community Accountability
Security Culture
Organizing Toolkits
Transformative Justice
Abolition
History of Prison Industrial Complex
Prison Radicalism
Anarchism



2020 Listings

Zines & other educational resources, available for order

True Leap Press

P.O.Box 408197 Chicago, Illinois 60640

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1. Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*
2. Critical Resistance, *What is Abolition?*
3. Liz Samuels, *Improvising on Reality: The Roots of Prison Abolition*
4. Prison Research Action Project, *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists*
5. *Abolitionist Keyterms and Thumbnail Definitions*
6. Linda Evans & Eve Goldberg, *Prison Industrial Complex in the Global Economy*
7. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Globalization and U.S. Prison Growth*
8. Angela Davis and Dylan Rodriguez, *The Challenge of Abolition: A Conversation*
9. Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Historical Present of (Prison) Slavery*
10. Sylvia Wynter, *Slave Revolts as the First Form of Labor Struggle*
11. Frank B. Wilderson III. *The Prison Slave as Hegemony's Silent Scandal*
12. Greg Curry, *Repression Breeds Resistance: On the Lucasville Uprising and its Aftermath*
13. Angela Davis, *From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Fredrick Douglas and the Convict Lease System*
14. Ben Turk, *Why Prisoner Lives Must Matter to the Movement for Black Lives*
15. Ivan Kilgore, *Not Worker But Chattel*
16. Heriberto Sharky Garcia, *The Future is Now: Insurrectionary Abolitionist Art, Theory, & Practice*
17. Kevin Gardner, *Blood and Ink*
18. Kevin Rashid Johnson, *Art Attack: Early Writings and Drawings*
19. Kevin Rashid Johnson, *Kill Yourself or Liberate Yourself: The Real U.S. Imperialist Policy on Gang Violence versus The Revolutionary Alternative (2010)*

20. Brown & Proud Press, *Confronting Anti-Blackness in Our Communities*
21. *500 Years of Indigenous Resistance*
22. Luana Ross, *Inventing the Savage: The Social Construction of Native American Criminality*
23. *Overt Hostility and the Role it Plays in Daily Prison Life*
24. Frantz Fanon, *On Violence*
25. Catherine Baker, *Against Prisons*
26. Angela Davis, *Political Prisoners, Prisons and Black Liberation*
27. George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye, part 1*
28. George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye, part 2*
29. George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*
30. Marylin Buck, *Prisoners, Social Control, and Political Prisoners*
31. Safiya Bukhari, *Coming of Age: A Black Revolutionary*
32. Claude Marks, *Lessons from Cointelpro: Building a Movement in the Face of Oppression*
33. *Security and Counter-Surveillance: Information Against the Police State*
34. *Security Culture: a handbook for activists*
35. *Misogynists Make the Best Informants*
36. *Sisters Speak: The Experiences of Womyn in the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense*
37. *Social Detox: Recourses for Men Against Sexism, Misogyny, and Patriarchy*
38. Assata Shakur, *Message From Somewhere in the World*
39. Marilyn Buck, *Dispatches from a Political Prisoner: September 11, 2001*
40. *Black August: Origins, History, Significance*
41. *The Untold Story of W.L. Nolen*
42. South Chicago ABC, *First Amendment Primer for Prison Mailrooms*
43. Kijana Tashiri Askari, *George Jackson Speaks, vol. 1*
44. Kijana Tashiri Askari, *George Jackson Speaks, vol. 2*
45. Kijana Tashiri Askari, *George Jackson Speaks, vol. 3*
46. Kijana Tashiri Askari, *George Jackson Speaks, vol. 4*
47. *The W.L. Nolen Mentorship Program Guidebook*
48. *New Afrikan Prisoner Health-Fitness 101*
49. Sundiata Acoli, *An Updated History of the Black/New Afrikan Prison Struggle*

50. Sundiata Accoli, *Bits and Pieces: Selected Writing, Poetry, and Stories*
51. Sundiata Acoli & Jalil Muntaqim, *National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons: Hearings on Control Unit Prisons in the United States*
52. Michigan Abolition and Prisoner Solidarity, *Containing the Crisis: A History of Mass Incarceration and Rebellion in the Rustbelt*
53. Michigan Abolitionist Prisoner Solidarity, *The Opening Statement*
54. Anthony Rayson, *More Effective Prisoner Support*
55. Anthony Rayson, *How Prisoners Use Zines to Empower Themselves and Subvert the Mass Incarceration Slave System*
56. *South Chicago ABC Zine Distro Catalog*
57. *The Artwork of Todd Heung-Rei Tarselli*
58. Stevie Wilson, *Print Media and Prison Activism*
59. Coyote, *Steel Sharpens Steel: Starting Study Groups in Prison*
60. Coyote, *Starting Your Own Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) Prison Chapter*
61. *Meeting Facilitation Methods*
62. *Guide to Practicing Group Consensus*
63. SeaSol, *Build Your Own Solidarity Networks*
64. *Anti-Mass: Methods of Organization for Collectives*
65. *Storytelling and Narrative Writing Strategies (worksheet)*
66. Khalfani Malik Khaldun, *Handbook on Surviving Solitary Confinement: A Survival Guide for the Targeted Prisoner*
67. D. Michael Salerno, *How to Use a Law Library and Write Your Own Legal Work*
68. ACLU National Prison Project, *Know Your Rights: Legal Rights of Disabled Prisoners (2019)*
69. *The Civil Rights Gang: Legal Self-Help Pamphlet (Legal Research)*
70. John Two Names & Sekou Kambai, *Tricks to Testifying*
71. Martin Sostre, *The Trials of Martin Sostre, Revolutionary Jailhouse Lawyer*
72. Martin Sostre, *Prison Letters of Martin Sostre*
73. Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution: The Idea of Black Autonomy*
74. Sean Swain, *Application of Anarchist Theory to the Modern Day Prison Struggle*
75. *Basic Principles of Anarchism*

76. Lucy Parsons, *Principles of Anarchism*
77. Bakunin, *The Capitalist System*
78. Alexander Berkman, *ABC's of Anarchism*
79. Hibachi Lamar, *Writings of a Ghetto-bred Anarchist*
80. Hibachi Lamar, *The Deprived and Depraved*
81. *The Anarkata Statement on Black Anarchist Community Organizing*
82. Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, *The Progressive Plantation: the Internal Racism of the North American Left*
83. Liz Appel, *White Supremacy in the Movement to Abolish the Prison Industrial Complex*
84. Chicago Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC), *An Open Letter for the Incarcerated Youth during the 2019 CTU Strike*
85. James Adrian, *Survivors Guide to Youth in Prison*
86. *Chicago Books to Women in Prison (Book Request Order Form)*
87. Victoria Law, *The Invisibility of Women Prisoners' Resistance*
88. Assata Shakur, *Women in Prison: How it is with Us*
89. *No Lady*
90. Julia Chinyere Oparah, *Celling Black Bodies: Black Women and the Prison Industrial Complex*
91. Cassandra Shaylor, *"It's Like Living in a Black Hole": Women of Color and Solidarity Confinement in the Prison Industrial Complex*
92. Andy Smith, *Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy*
93. Mariame Kaba, *No Selves to Defend: Poems About Criminalization & Violence Against Women*
94. *Supporting a Survivor of Sexual Assault*
95. *The Combahee River Collective Statement*
96. *The CR-INCITE! Statement on Gender Violence and the Movement to Abolish the Prison Industrial Complex*
97. Mariame Kaba, *Who's Left?: Prison Abolition* (comic)
98. *Joining Forces: Stopping Prison Expansion in Delano California*
99. *The Sweet Defeat of the Prison in Crete*
100. Casey Goonan, *Conferences as a Vehicle for Abolitionist Organizing*

101. Karyn S. & Andrew Szeto, *A Growing Asian-American Movement Calls for Prison Abolition*
102. Dylan Rodriguez, *The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*
103. *An Escalating Fight in the Village of Dwight*
104. *The Abolitionist #33: "Tearing Down the Walls from Both Sides" – Launch Party Zine*
105. *Abolition in Action: News Briefs from The Abolitionist*
106. George Ciccariello Maher, *Every Crook Can Govern: Prison Strikes as a Window to the New World*
107. Rachel Herzing, *Tweaking Armageddon: The Limitations of Contemporary Movements Against Solitary Confinement*
108. Casey Goonan, *Black Liberation and the Movement to Abolish the Prison Industrial Complex: an Interview with Rachel Herzing*
109. Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC), *Destroy All Prisons Tomorrow*
110. *Down: Reflections on Prison Resistance in Indiana*
111. *Fire Inside: On the 2016 National Prison Strike*
112. Donald C-Note Hooker, *What If Amy Goodman's "Democracy Now" Covered the Millions for Prisoners Human Rights March*
113. *Jailhouse Lawyers Speak - Guidebook and Membership Request*
114. Amani Sawari, *Solid Black Fist: Newsletters from the 2018 National Prison Strike*
115. Alejo Stark, *Crisis and the Prison Strike*
116. ABC Boston, *Attacking Prisons at the Point of Production*
117. IWW, *A Workers Guide to Direct Action*
118. *Death 2 Authority: From Study Groups to Campaign of Direct Action*
119. Earth First!, *Defending the Earth Through Direct Action*
120. Gay Shame, *We Need Direct Action Divas* (newspaper-style zine)
121. *Out of the Closet and Into the Libraries: A Collection of Radical Queer Moments*
122. Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power*
123. Cheryle Clarke, *Lesbianism: an Act of Resistance*
124. *Militant Flamboyance: a brief history of the stonewall riots and other queer happenings*

125. Laura Whitehorn, Linda Evans, and Susan Rosenberg, *Dykes and Fags Want to Know: An Interview With Lesbian Political Prisoners*
126. Stevie Wilson, *Ain't I a Prisoner, Too?*
127. Stevie Wilson, *Selected Correspondence and Dispatches from the Frontlines 2019*
128. S. Lamble, *Transforming Carceral Logics: 10 Reasons to Dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex through Queer/Trans Analysis and Action*
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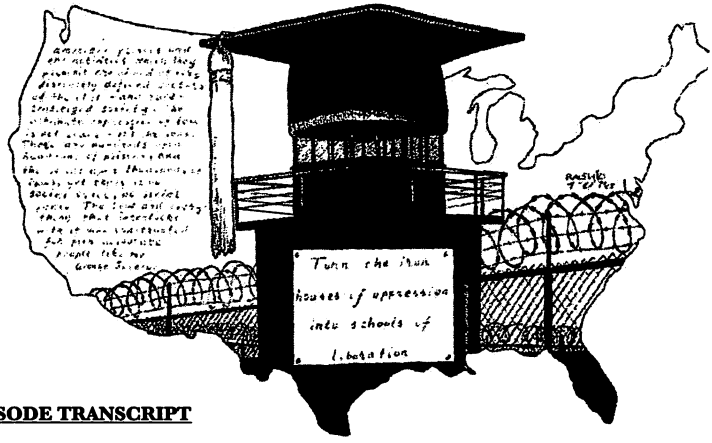
Abolitionist Study with Stevie Wilson

Interviewed by Rustbelt Abolition Radio



EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

"Welcome to Rustbelt Abolition Radio, my name is Kaif Syed. In this episode, co-producer Alejo Stark speaks with Black and queer abolitionist writer Stevie Wilson. Stevie is being held captive by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and was recently released from solitary confinement. He speaks about the importance of abolitionist study, as a space of common encounter that undermines the hold that the carceral state has on our lives, both inside and outside prisons."

> ***Alejo:*** *My name is Alejo and you're listening to Rustbelt abolition radio, an abolitionist media and movement-building project. Today we speak with Stephen Wilson. Stevie is a Black and Queer writer, activist, and student who is currently held captive by the Pennsylvania department of corrections. Hello, Stevie, and welcome to our show.*

Stevie: Oh, hello. Thanks for having me.

> **Alejo:** *It's good to have you on. We're glad that you're out the hole. We know that you recently got released from, from solitary, I believe on October 17. Right?*

Stevie: Yeah, I got transferred from SCI-Smithfield and I'm now at SCI Fayette. Um... you know sometimes when you're an ally with others behind the walls, what is required is significantly more than mere allyship, it's more like being an accomplice really, co-conspirators of transformation. There was a situation where a prisoner was attacked by two guards and our outside supporters held an action online. The administrators found out about the accident. I was behind it and so they moved to get me out of the way and bury me in the hole. Thankfully because of the support of people I had outside, more "phone zaps" placed pressure on the admin and they removed me from the hole. DOC then transferred me to another prison. So now I'm—I was three and a half hours away from my family. Now I'm six hours away from my family, about 40 minutes South of Pittsburgh.

Alejo: *Wow. So this is all in direct retaliation against organizing on the inside, right?*

Stevie: Definitely. It's something that's to be expected though. When you do this type of abolitionist work behind the walls, it's not about being an ally. You will as I'm saying become an accomplice, and whatever that person is doing they're going to try to do to you also. I knew at one point they were trying to bury the young man (mentioned earlier) in the hole because when they attack us they try to flip it and say, you know, *we* attacked them. So they'll bury us from six to nine months in the hole. And because we were successful in getting this man out of the hole and into a safer prison, you know, I became a target after that he was gone. I was able to bother them and I did, once again, because of the support of people and groups like Critical Resistance. I was able to be released out the hole, I did about two months battling with these people. Placed at Fayette now. But the work doesn't stop. The work doesn't stop, you know?

Alejo: *Do you have a sense that this is also an indirect attack on the sort of self-organized abolitionist study groups inside as well?*

Stevie: Yeah. I think, I think...well, I'm gonna tell you something: That prison [Smithfield] was a little different than a lot of places because many of the study groups that we were holding were actually took the place of programs that they had actually discontinued. There was a lack of programming there. So we were

putting together the transformative justice group and it was something that they apparently liked, they gave us space for it. They gave us space for it you know, and what's happening in Pennsylvania is because the rehabilitation programs have been gutted. The educational programs have been gutted. There is a space opened up for prisoners to initiate groups, right? So we did it at Smithfield that way, you know, and I'm here at Fayette, where it's kind of the same thing. People don't have anything to do when the prison wants to them to do something, you know. So once again, there is an opening for us here.

> **Alejo:** *Tell us a little bit more about the abolitionist study groups inside that you run. Can you tell us more about what y'all do? You facilitated something like four consistent ones at Smithfield?*

Stevie: Well, the first one we called "9971", obviously in reference to Attica, was a general penal/PIC abolitionist study group. We started with something like "Are Prisons Obsolete?" by Angela Davis and what we do is we do a chapter reading and our next meeting we'd pose discussion questions. We focus a lot on terminology and definitions because this is often the first time many people are hearing about abolition. You know, when you think of a world without prisons, way back they thought we were crazy. The first thing out of their mouths is always "what are we going to do with the murderers and rapists and things like that?" We had to really talk about basic definitions and things like safety, harm, criminalization, and community. 9971 was the largest group because it was more generalized.

We had a smaller group called Circle Up, which is a transformative justice group, most of those men there were under the age of 25, about 23 young men. And they were doing a program called Circle Up and it was talking about transformative justice. How we apply these transformative practices inside (and in spite of) the prison in and our families and our communities. We also had a Queer Abolitionist group. That group we started because it is sometimes difficult to talk about certain things in 9971. This group went through books like *Captive Genders* and *Queer Injustice* and works on queer/trans struggles from an abolitionist perspective.

Last we had a book club which ten prisoners were involved in, Bold Type Books which used to be Nation Books would send in a book each month. For

the monthly discussion questions we would meet—it's like a book club. This has been taken over by Haymarket books now. So here at SCI Fayette we are going to be doing this and Haymarket will be providing the books for us. We're happy to have a program like this still continue.

> **Alejo:** *Can you tell us more about the importance of studying for you? It seems like it's pretty much part of the programming, which is not a good thing that you're saying, but also it's also part of sort of abolitionists studying ...together with folks inside...*

Stevie: Actually the first thing is to understand that many people in prison don't have a strong academic background, right? We didn't have very good experiences in school. And so what I found was that it was easier to photocopy out chapters of books and work through readings with fellow prisoners together, collectively. Especially thinking about definitions how the things we read—this activist work—applies to your particular life, your experiences. In fact, zines were really big for us because it is more intimidating to give someone a book that's 200-300 pages long. If they see this, they probably wouldn't pick it up. But if I gave someone a zine and it was three or four pages long, they could take a week and read that and we'll come back and discuss it. So I tell you, the zines play a major role in the work inside the prison also because, even for me to disseminate zines and books, it's less costly, and the administration doesn't see it circulate as easily.

If I went to the yard and tried to give out ten books, I wouldn't make it through the gate. But if I have ten zines on me, I can pass them out pretty quietly, you see? So part of it also is knowing the landscape inside here because, remember this much: learned prisoners are an affront to the PIC. Okay? So you have to do things on a sly, on the slip sometimes. Zines come in handy, really handy here. So it was a lot of meeting with people at first. It was about distilling an debating definitions. It was about meeting people where they are... All sorts of other things too, you know? Some people don't read well, so we had to sit in groups and read but they can express their experiences, they can talk about their experiences. So I think it was important. I think one thing that's very surprising to me is that you have to explain that prisons are *unnecessary* to prisoners.

That was the thing that was most surprising to me because we're sitting here every day. We realized how this doesn't work, but people think there's no alternative to this, you know, and as soon as I you realize there is alternatives to this way of life, you begin to see it every day. Abolition is not something that is something far, far away. Actually, some of it is here today. But everybody doesn't get a chance to be a part of that process. You know, you understand what I'm saying when I say that?

> **Alejo:** *There's a way of undoing also the ways that the prison itself is naturalized to the inside. Even though of course folks face the brutality of imprisonment and captivity, there's still a way in which that's naturalized as you're saying right? That's still sort of totally fully normalized?*

Stevie: What I was trying to explain to people when I say "abolition"... this is why I asked that question because I want people to understand that abolitionism is not something that's always and only in the future. I was explaining to them that if someone like, say, a wealthy white person breaks the law... Okay. What are the chances of this person being put in a prison? It's not gonna happen. Same if a guy had a substance abuse problem and this guy is 21 years old, is white, he lives in the suburbs, has a substance abuse problem, he breaks into his neighbor's house, burglarizes the house, gets caught, he gets locked up. Are they going to *keep* them locked up? No. They're probably going to send him to some drugs treatment place, that's what's going to happen. Now the treatment part: that's in essence abolition! That's abolition. Instead of locking him up, we'll go to send you where you need to be: treatment. You see, and that is abolition also. So I'm trying to explain to people that no, the solution isn't always "call the police" and isn't always a jail or prison. There are other ways we can deal with harm.

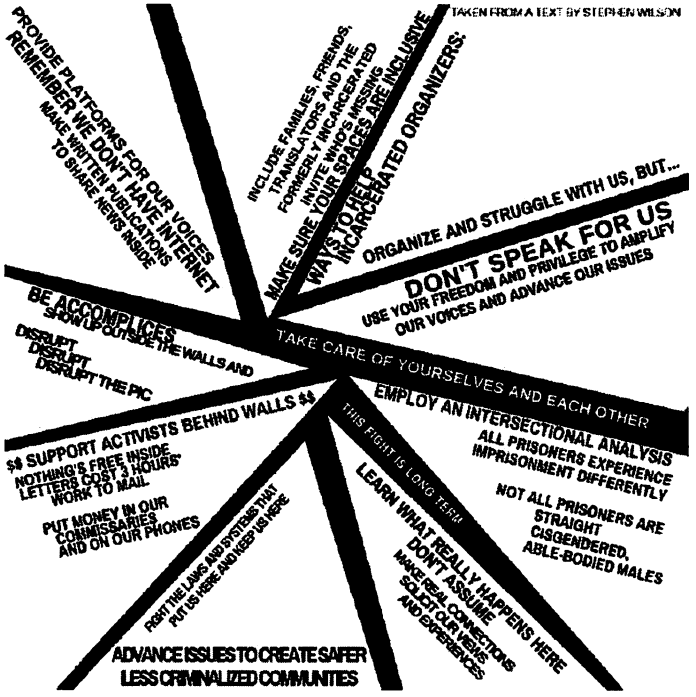
And so when I explain it this way to them, then they see, "Oh it's here, abolition is here." Now everyone doesn't get a chance to be a part of that process. Most of us don't. How can we open it up to everybody? If a person is getting high and then the committing crimes to get high, then why would we lock that person up? That's not the issue. We don't call the police and lock them up. No, then let's get them help with their substance abuse problem. And that's abolition, you know? So my task, a lot of time, in here actually translating the

work for the people in here. And that's one area I think that we're not doing too well. And I don't think we're going to do well in that area if all the stuff that's being published and circulated isn't actually accessible to a lot of people behind the walls.

> **Alejo:** *Stevie, I wanted to ask you precisely about this point: So in your writings also you consider yourself a translator, right? And you just stated that right now; The necessity of sort of translating queer abolitionist theory to other prisoners is one of the key things that you find yourself doing. So I wonder if you could talk, one, a little bit more about that, but also do you find yourself that you are also translating and thinking theoretically inside for those on the outside? So in that sense it's sort of a two-way process of translation, right? Rather than a one-way process?*

Stevie: Yeah. I think one of the things that I learned early on is the necessity of translating. I found that many of the works that I was reading, when I gave the book or an article for someone else, they really didn't comprehend it. And when I broke it down in talk, they got it. That was the way my study groups changed. It was no longer about giving people the assignment and coming back the next week—we just assumed that we were ready. It was actually about creating questions that would test the comprehension of the study group members. And part of it also was that it was important for me that they were able to apply what they were learning to their lives, actually holding up to their lives. "Do I find it to be true?" "I'm reading something by this author and this thing XYZ, Do i find that my experiences are X, Y, and Z?" "Do I have another way or I'm paving something else?" And that's something that is important in pedagogy and organizing behind the wall. A lot of times if you hear it's about divisions, like "gangs," "racial" divisions and things like that. Well, I've been throughout the Pennsylvania system and that's simply not the case. In Pennsylvania the racial divisions are fragmented geographically. It's that people are Philadelphia versus Pittsburgh, Harrisburg versus Allentown. And so when we would read certain things that would talk about the divisions based upon racial gangs and racial difference it didn't apply to our experience in Pennsylvania. So guys would say that—this doesn't apply here and, well, tell us how does it apply? Well, you know, it's really spatial, territorial, geographical. You know how it goes down. I would have to tell people who are working in Pennsylvania

that, you know, this is not how it goes here. At least the prison movement. It's not that it's about gangs or race, it's more about geography in terms of preexisting unity. A black guy and a white guy from Philly would get along better than a black guy and a black guy from Pittsburgh. I think that works both ways. There's some things that we think we need to let people outside know so that we can work together better.



And I think people outside should think about how to make the work more accessible *across the board.* Oftentimes the writing of scholar activists is not written towards prisoners or even written for prisoners. That's just not their audience. Their audience is other academics, you know, or some other journal versus.... I ask myself "Who writes for prisoners?" And that's the big question.

If we could get over this or everyone could somehow learn to get this, then we would see many more people in prison declare themselves abolitionists and working toward PIC abolition—we would see it.

> **Alejo:** *I have a question about that. It seems like, on the one hand, you do sort of take or think about translation as a two way process, right? Inside and outside. Because I assume that, you know, also part of what you're saying is that folks in the outside also aren't necessarily understanding what, you know, the theory that's happening on the inside, right? So that's why will tend to push back on the sense of like, translation is a two way process, right? We have to translate stuff going in and stuff coming out, but we might even think about translation as an abolitionist practice in some ways, right? You kind of continually undermine the walls and cages that seek to continuously separate us. Right?*

Stevie: Yeah, two points about that. First, take abolition, and especially like work strikes...And I was trying to explain to people, abolitionists outside—that, a strategy like this doesn't work in Pennsylvania. I was trying to explain that to them. It's not like down South where, for like Alabama, the guys working and you don't pay them. Pennsylvania incarcerated folk work and some of these people make $150 a month and that's money you have coming in. In these material circumstances, many of you aren't willing to go on strike. You understand what I'm saying? I had to explain this to people in the outside, many not even from this state, why a work stoppage doesn't work in PA. I think one thing that we have to think about also is that different things work in different regions to build something like this up. We can say what works in California and Arizona is going to work in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Because PA and Jersey are right next to each other and they're very different as far as the prison systems and the culture. And so I think that that's important too.

The other thing about translation is that my background personally that I worked for 11 years in nonprofits before I was incarcerated. And so what happened was I was used to dealing with a population where I had to do the same exact thing. I worked in aid service organizations and I'd be dealing in the field with people and I had to do the same exact thing where I was trying to explain what people needed to the administrators, right. And I was trying to explain what the administrators wanted to the people being served.

I think that's why I still have that skill where I'm able to talk to prisoners, other prisons about abolition, and then talk to abolitionist activists outside and say, look, this is what we need, or can you do this? So I think that, uh, maybe what it was that I was prepared for because of the type of work I did before I was incarcerated. You know, I think that that's why I have this viewpoint, but I just realized that if the communication isn't there between us a lot of times, for people inside and outside there's not really good communication and good context. I said this before to the comrade Casey.. if someone says that you're involved in the American prison movement or you are a penal abolitionist and you're not in direct contact with somebody inside the prison, you are wrong. *You're wrong.* [said with pronounced emphasis] I don't understand how you know what's going on if you're not in direct contact with somebody you're writing or talking to, emailing or something. I don't know how I even know what's going on inside these walls. I don't understand it. So I think that's the problem is more communication needs to happen. Better communication needs to happen.

> **Alejo:** *Yeah. Communication also, as you're saying, it's sort of translation, also geographically, that's happening not only within inside and outside the walls but also across different States, across different territories, different populations. I mean it's certainly the case with the work strike, which you were mentioning, it was this constant process of translation, right? Which, which I think you see also as your theoretical and political practice inside. So I think also what you would say, and what you also mentioned in your, in your writing is the importance of sort of criticism, right? And self criticism. Can you tell us?*

Stevie: Yeah. Yeah. I think it's very important. That's always there. I think it's important for us to all look at what we're doing and holding it to critique. What I've found is that, in this place, people would know their own pain.

Everyone knows their own pain they're going through. So most people here to talk about racism, they understand anti-black racism. They understand. But they don't understand misogyny, homophobia and things like that. And so the thing is that what I realized is that people could see when they were being wronged but they couldn't see how they're wronging other people, they couldn't understand that they could be contributing to someone else's

oppression. And so it's important for us always to look at what we're doing and making sure we're not creating more oppression. It's always important to look at what we're doing and make sure we're not harming other people. I think it's always about having a conversation about our values, that we are actually we're sticking with our values, you know, talking about them. I just think that they've missed that—behind the walls we're not getting a lot of critique. And what happens is that the people on the outside, I said it before, people on the outside don't want to critique the people inside. Do you understand what I'm saying? It's a totally one-sided approach. You know, I've had situations where someone will get on like I'm on an interview right now. Someone on an interview and you're doing an interview and you're talking about something from prison. And they make a statement and it's misogynistic, homophobic or whatever. And the person on the interview will not check them on it. Well I say wait a minute—and they just let it go. Okay. And that does not help our movement at all because the thing is that we have many people who are saying they are abolitionist or they're against this, this prison or against this oppression but they only get one type of oppression. Their vision of freedom is truncated. Their vision of freedom does not extend to other people that are not like them. Or different from them.

And so I think that a lot of times—I'm doing it from here—but I think that people on the outside—I call it "freedom guilt." That's what I say. People on outside feel that they can't critique people, activists and writers on the inside, because "I'm free and who am I to sit there and say something to them about what they believe or what they're going through"—yes you are part of the same movement! It's part of the same movement! So if there's a guy who, okay, I don't care how much of an abolitionist or anti-prison activist you think he is, if he's saying something that's homophobic or misogynistic, you need to call it out for it, you just say, whoa, wait a minute, wait a minute...

And I think that's what's not happening and that's why I make that point because it's always important to realize that because you know, there's a hierarchy in here and when you are queer, a trans, disabled, neurotypical person, you at the bottom, you're at the bottom here and you will find people who are in this movement, who are behind the wall and some activists who will sell those people down the drain for a little bit of a perk. So I think it's important to check. Say, listen, what are you doing? What are you calling for? You know, in

Pennsylvania we had a piece of legislation that went up that said basically, if you're life without parole—and they were trying to get rid of this thing—well basically if you committed a homicide and you know, you're in X, Y, Z category, we'll think about getting some numbers, what they brought or shouldn't do on a rescue people. And some people were for that. They were like, okay, yeah, that's what the, the one, the rest of them, I can't support that. I can't support that. I think sometimes when we think about what's being put forward, we had to be more critical. And I think that a lot of times people outside are afraid or what I call it, freedom guilt, or whatever it is, to say to people inside, listen man, that's real homophobic, that's misogynistic, that's not abolitionist what you're thinking. You know, that's not abolitionist. The only way we can get better in this prison—people behind this wall—The people outside who are our partners need to hold us to higher standards. They gotta hold us to higher standards, they really do.

> **Alejo:** *At the same time, right, It's not just denunciation and stepping back, right? You emphasize the Black Liberation Army's practice of "Unity-Criticism-Unity," so there's a way of criticizing that's not simply just pushing out because otherwise...*

Stevie: First of all, when I say critique and criticize, first of all, it has to be done from the perspective—First of all, I've always analyzed what I do as radical compassion, I always talk about radical compassion and I think it's important to understand that when I'm critiquing somebody, it's not because I'm trying to tear you down but because I want to make us better... make you better. And so my critique actually comes from a space of love for the person because, honestly, I find it hard to even be concerned with someone if I don't care about you.

That's me personally and yet people would do things and I don't really say anything to them because I really don't care what you're doing cause you're a very negative person and I don't want to get involved. That's just how I keep myself safe behind the wall. But what I'm saying is that my critique comes from a place of compassion for people. My critique comes from a place of love, it's not about tearing someone down, it's about building you up and building us up. So I do think there's a way that you can do it and the way that we should do it—it's about community. I don't think about tearing anybody down or just

putting someone out there or consider someone disposable "we don't really need you"—That's not how it's supposed to be. You have to meet people where they are and give them the opportunity also to say things that they feel honestly, you know, even if it is messed up, because well if that's how you feel let's talk about it. But I gotta give the opportunity and the ground to say that, you know.

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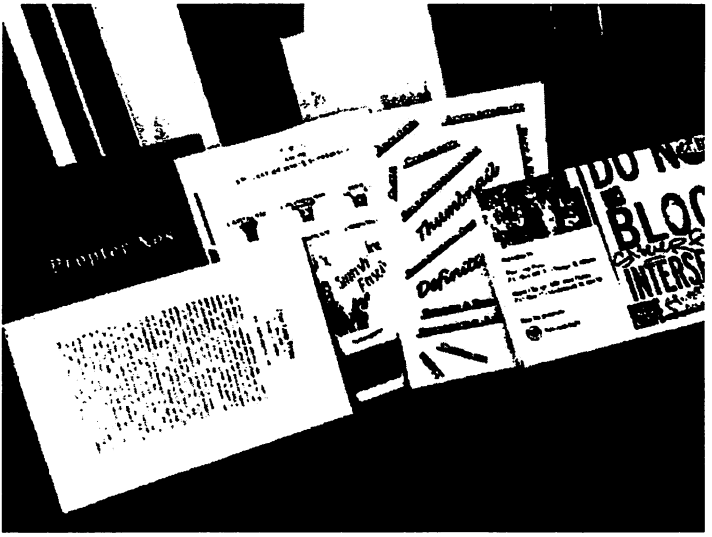


"People get used to anything. The less you think about your oppression, the more your tolerance for it grows. After a while, people just think oppression is the normal state of things. But to become free, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave."

Assata Shakur (*Modern Day Maroon)*

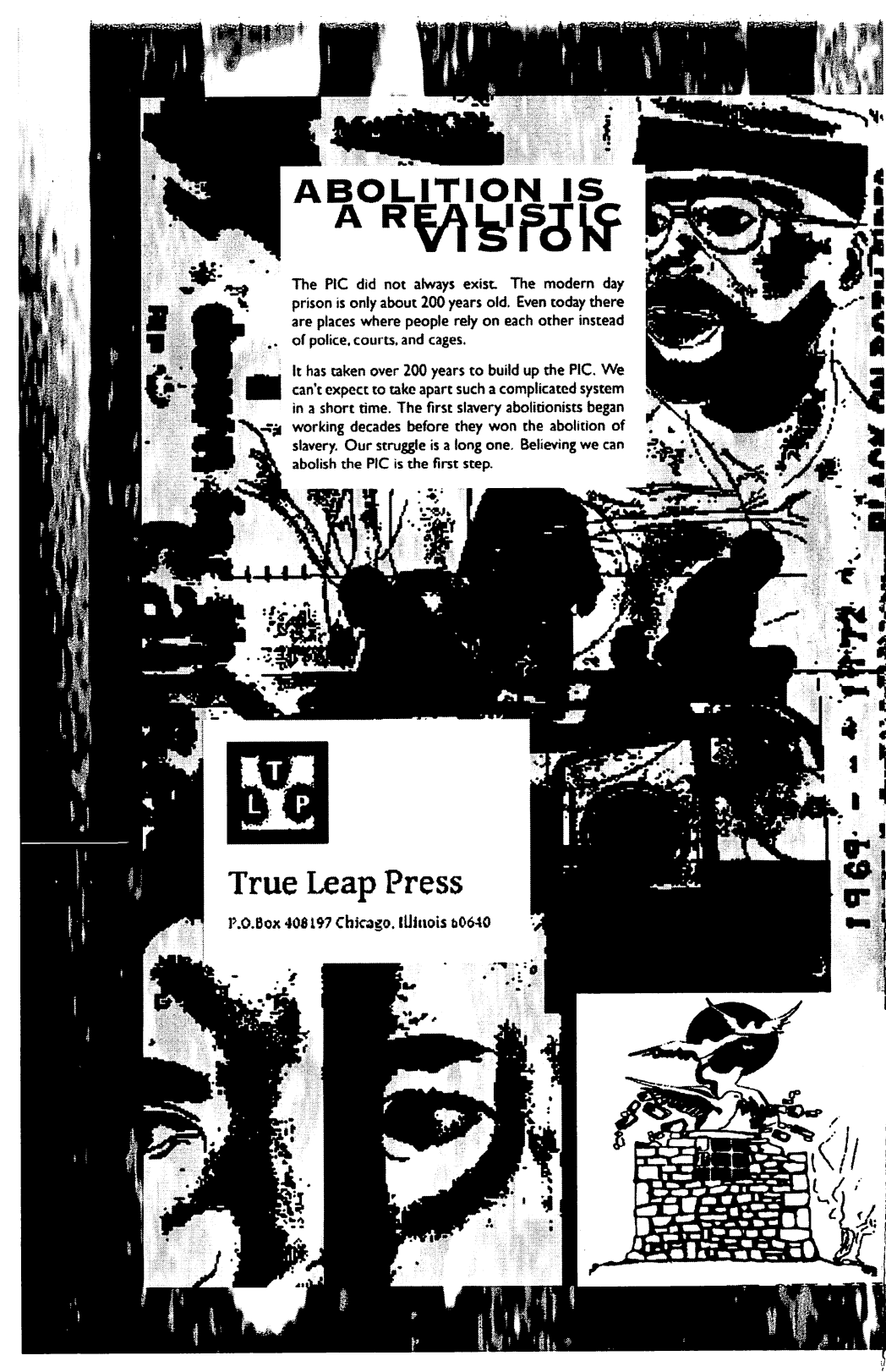


SHREVEPORT
PIC

ABOLITION IS A REALISTIC VISION

The PIC did not always exist. The modern day prison is only about 200 years old. Even today there are places where people rely on each other instead of police, courts, and cages.

It has taken over 200 years to build up the PIC. We can't expect to take apart such a complicated system in a short time. The first slavery abolitionists began working decades before they won the abolition of slavery. Our struggle is a long one. Believing we can abolish the PIC is the first step.



True Leap Press

P.O.Box 408197 Chicago, Illinois 60640