“NO REGRETS”

ACCOUNTS & REFLECTIONS FROM THE 2016 NATIONAL PRISON STRIKE

Blackbird Publishing is a small anarchist publisher. Our catalog primarily features works by folks who are currently or formerly incarcerated, concerning the struggle against prisons, capitalism, white supremacy, and the State. We offer this free resource as one small tool in the struggle for freedom.

In particular, we send our love and solidarity to the thousands of prisoners across the state of Alabama, who are currently on strike once again.

-October 2022-

A Brief Reflection on the Successes and Failures of the 2016 Prison Strike

The 2016 prison strike took place on September 9th, the 45th anniversary of the Attica Uprising. According to most mainstream media reports, an unprecedented 24,000 prisoners participated, from between 20 to 40 different facilities. The chronology in this text is incomplete, as reports of participation continued to reach the outside weeks and even months later, but it gives a brief idea of the diversity of facilities and tactics that were involved: men's and women's facilities; black, white, brown, native; state, federal, and immigration centers—all kinds of people and facilities worked together to make this happen.

Initially called for by the Free Alabama Movement and Free Ohio Movement, two organizations on the inside in their respective states, the organizing for the strike began almost a year prior. I was involved in this process on the outside in North Carolina. For a year or more we coordinated with people on the inside, set up support funds, pushed media outlets into covering the story, and made plans for solidarity actions on the outside. "Let the Crops Rot in the Fields," an essay and proposal for strike action written by FAM, was a guiding document in our work. Rather than rally at statehouses, or send petitions to politicians—activities that activists had pushed for decades with little success—we centered our agitation and organizing around the prisons themselves, where the self-activity of the prisoners could drive the movement forward.

Groups on the outside like the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC), as well as dozens if not hundreds of smaller radical publishing groups, books to prisoner programs, affinity groups, Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) chapters, and abolitionist crews formed the foundation of outside strike agitation and solidarity. When September 9th finally arrived, thousands took to the streets, staged noise demos outside prisons, dropped banners, painted graffiti, sabotaged businesses that use prison labor, and

organized media campaigns to break through the walls of silence that typically suffocate prisoner-led action. When the dust settled, we spent months organizing phone zaps to discourage guards from retaliating against strike leaders, and raised funds to help prisoners going through periods of punitive segregation.

On the inside, rather than agree nationwide to a single central set of demands, prisoners in their local facilities developed their own messaging and demands based on their own experiences and conditions, as well as their own tactical choices. Some prisoner groups like FAM emphasized non-violence, while others rejected this position in either ideology or practice. Rather than seeking to centralize messaging or tactics, outside organizers encouraged local leadership. Conditions tend to vary wildly from one facility to the next, as do traditions of struggle—this decentralism allowed for people respond most appropriately to their own situation, while still acting in coordinated solidarity with the whole. Despite the year of agitation, and some mainstream media descriptions, most prisoners who participated were not members of formal "political" groups like FAM, FOM, Jailhouse Lawyers Speak, ABC, or IWOC, and thereby had to build their actions from already existent networks of friends or gangs, or simply by spontaneous word of mouth.

In some facilities this resulted in a high degree of ingenuity and creative planning, and in other places prisoners expressed a regret they hadn't prepared better. Better preparation and forward planning on the inside might also have opened more space and time for outside groups to organize solidarity actions directly with family members of prisoners. From my own perspective, this was also a failure of the 2018 prison strike, which built off the 2016 strike's momentum but was called for and organized with far less lead-up time than the 2016 action. By contrast, family members seem to be taking a leading role in the current strike under way in Alabama prisons, which is beautiful.

A problem which was raised repeatedly in our correspondence

with prisoners in the year leading up to the strike was the fact that only a small percentage of US prisoners actually have "jobs," properly speaking. Some do work internally in prison workshops, kitchens, or laundries, but in a crisis guards themselves are often able to fill these positions, and only a small percentage perform labor contracted by outside companies. This was a clear obstacle for an action built initially around the idea of labor refusal.

Fortunately, the tactical diversity and organizational decentralism of the 2016 strike allowed it to bypass this limit. Where a traditional refusal to work was neither possible nor relevant, prisoners chose other tactics that equally cost the State money or interfered with the day-to-day management of the facility: peaceful hunger strikes, sit-down protests in yards, the destruction of prison property, and attacks on guards themselves. This strike both expanded and exploded the definition of what a "labor strike" can mean.

This tactical flexibility is a mirror image of the anti-police riots and occupations of the last ten years on the outside. Just as slavery was a major theme in the George Floyd uprising, "prison slavery" was also a central theme in the 2016 strike. In this context, the prison came to be discussed less as a workplace than as a plantation. This language led some to push for constitutional remedies that might address the problem, for example by changing the language around "involuntary servitude" in the 13th amendment. But this was a recuperative dead-end. The logical trajectory here was not to democratize prisons with paperwork, as some might propose for a workplace; it was to empty and dismantle them. Certainly this trajectory was also due in part to the strong element of anarchist abolitionist participation in the strike.

While the strike was initially called as a one-day affair, the broad diversity of tactics and demands meant that in some cases the strike was short-lived, or fizzled completely, but in other places continued to grow and evolve for weeks, with outside supporters having no idea, given the lockdowns and mailroom censorship. This was a somewhat predictable problem, perhaps with no solu-

tion: Communication barriers, especially in prison populations with no cell phone access, made it difficult to know who was still on strike, and what kind of solidarity and messaging they still needed. Even had the initial call included a hard end-date, it's likely that individual facilities would have chosen to expand and continue their action anyway, to the ignorance of many of us on the outside. This problem also made it difficult to utilize the click-bait and image-driven nature of the 24-hour news cycle.

Evaluating the success of such a broad and varied day of action(s) is difficult, and ultimately prisoners themselves must draw their own conclusions. It can be said that in many cases prisoners' local demands were met, and in other cases retaliation was swift and brutal; probably most common was some combination of the two. As stated publically by prisoners from Jailhouse Lawyers Speak in South Carolina, as well as anecdotally to me by many in North Carolina and Alabama, resistance on the inside has contributed to guard resignations and staff problems, resulting in states' inability to fill CO positions in the years that followed 2016, and further heightening staff shortages later caused by Covid-19. This is not dissimilar from the difficulties many cities have reported post-2020 in finding personnel for their police departments.

That inability to staff prisons has at times made life worse for prisoners in the short term, but it has also been cited by state governments as the reason for thousands of people being released early from their sentences, including here in NC. It is an indirect line, but a line nonetheless, that starts with prisoners making their facilities ungovernable and ends with them being sent home. I believe this approach, which centers prisoners' own power and bases its strategy off of broad, structural understandings of prisons, police, racial capitalism, and the state, has borne far more fruit than state-centered strategies that ignore prisoners' own organizing and instead narrow their focus to elections, legislation, or the wording of the 13th amendment.

Regardless of its successes and failures, the 2016 prison strike was

undoubtedly the most concerted and geographically broad assertion of prisoner power and "convict unity" in the last 50 years. It raised the bar forever for what could happen when inside and outside forces coordinate together, and for the most part the collectives, publishing projects, and organizations that organized solidarity on the outside continue to exist and evolve in some form or another. Speaking personally, it was a period of struggle that forever changed me and what I believe anarchists in North America, both in and out of prison, are capable of.

As I type this, prisoners are once again refusing to work across facilities in Alabama. I hope this zine finds its way through the bars so that the courage of 2016 can inspire new waves of self-organization and action on both sides of the walls.

Until Every Cage is Empty,

John

Partial Chronology of Strike Participation

This is only a snapshot of the activity from the strike. For weeks and months later more and more news came in about participation, small and large.

September 6th

- Wisconsin: Prisoners remain on hunger strike.
- Lincoln, NE: Fires started at prison.
- Nassau County, Long Island: Inmates refuse to go back to cells. Clashes with guards.

September 7th

- Bonifay, FL: Riot at Holmes prison, 4 dormitories taken. Florida Department of Corrections wrote: A major disturbance occurred on Wednesday, September 7, involving several hundred inmates housed in multiple dorms. One inmate on inmate injury occurred during the incident. No staff were injured. Visitation was cancelled and lockdown continued through the weekend.

September 8th

- Guantanamo Bay: Several inmates at Camp 6 remain on hunger strike.
- Nebraska: Inmates place paper over their windows to block the view of the staff.

September 9th

- Gig Harbor, WA: Strike by women prisoners. Alabama: Work stoppage in Holman.

- Bonifay, FL: Sit down strikes and work stoppages at Holmes.

- Wewahitchka, FL: A riot kicks off involving a large number of inmates at Gulf Correctional Institute. Officials said the riot involved several hundred inmates housed in multiple dorms.

- Florida: Further "disturbances" at several prisons in the state including Mayo Correctional Institute. The disruptions ranged from a handful of inmates refusing to perform their work assignments to "major" revolts.

- Milton, FL: Inmates at Santa Rosa facility took part in strike.

- Troy, VA: Women at Fluvanna prison participate in the strike.

- North Carolina: Prisoners refuse work.

- Nebraska: Prison staff assaulted by inmate.

- Leavenworth, KS: Chelsea Manning announces hunger strike.

- Jefferson City, MO: Prisoners launches hunger strike in concert with prison strike.

- Chowchilla, CA: Work strikes and lockdown at Central California Women's Prison. Brief report says: A few women incarcerated people refused to work and because of the nationwide prison strike, and fear of an uprising, the prison was locked down stopping ALL slave labor!

- Kansas: Women prisoners strike at an unnamed facility.

- Tecumseh, NE: Three guards injured by inmate.

- Greenville, SC: Riot breaks out after prisoners refuse to return to their cells. Other South Carolina prisoners on strike put forth a list of demands.

- Taft, CA: Reports of partial strike by inmates.

- St. Cloud, Minnesota: Full strike by inmates reported.

- Wisconsin, Waupun Prison: More prisoners join the long standing hunger strike.

September 10th:

- Alabama: Work stoppages continue in Holman.

- Kincheloe, MI: Four hundred inmates march inside Kinross prison.

- Kincheloe, MI: Over a hundred prisoners, deemed to be the instigators of the earlier protest, are transferred to different facilities. This sparks a riot in which housing units were trashed and fires were set.

- Merced, CA: Inmates across two jails are on hunger strike despite repression. Kincheloe, MI: Fire set and attempted escape from Kinross.

- Oaklahoma City: Women's prison reports unrest.

September 12th

- Hunger strike begins at Lucasville and Ohio State Penitentiary, called by the Free Ohio Movement.

- Columbia, SC: Confirmed strike at Broad River Correctional Institution:

- Florida: More prisoner uprisings broke out on Monday night at Columbia Correctional, the fifth inmate uprising in less than a week. About 40 inmates engaged in civil disobedience by refusing officers' orders and taking control of at least one dorm Monday evening.

September 13th

- Chelsea Manning ends hunger strike. Army agrees to grand demands of gender transition surgery.

September 14th

- Support Prisoner Resistance reports prison lockdowns in Arizona.

September 15th

- Jailhouse Lawyers Speaks, a group in South Carolina facilities, releases an update that declares that tensions and resistance to guards have peaked to the point where many guards are starting to quit.

September 16th

- Merced, CA: Supporters report another block joins hunger strike.

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Report from Inside the Kinross Facility in Michigan

By Mangaaka Ade

A prisoner strike had been organized to take place on the morning of September 10, 2016. It was to be a peaceful demonstration of solidarity, a statement of opposition to the oppression and the egregious conditions we endure day and night at the Kinross Correctional Facility in Michigan. Here, black mold creeps out from the institutional-white, rust-proof paint intended to contain it. It loiters around the bases of toilets, seeps from under floor tiles and scales the walls of showers. Eight men pack cubicles designed for six. The food tastes indigestible; some staff are verbally abusive. These and a long list of other grievances made the prison we call "Hiawatha" a ripe atmosphere for resistance.

There had already been several demonstrations of unity amongst the incarcerated population. For instance, most of us prisoners would line up together in the cellblock for 20 minutes when "yard time" was called, in complete silence, then simultaneously disperse when we decided we felt like going about our usual routines. This was done three times, but the administration just brushed it off.

When the 10th of September arrived, staff were clearly expecting us not to show up to our work details, ready to report our non-compliance to their bosses. It was obvious that one of their inmate-pets had informed them of the strike.

Breakfast came and instead of hot meals, the staff handed out brown paper bags containing a cold cheese sandwich, milk and six duplex cookies. Clearly their way of showing displeasure in our solidarity.

Shortly after returning from chow, I noticed out my cell window a small assemblage of men on the common yard. Within minutes,

their numbers started to multiply. When they began to march around the perimeter, I naturally felt compelled to hop off my bunk and join them.

Out the doors I went. I stood with the crowd, applauding as more and more men arrived. The throng grew fast, and in an hour, hundreds of Hiawatha's population were out on the yard, chanting in unison, "No justice, no peace!"

The Kinross facility had officially lost its treasured “control.”

A list of demands, including better food and higher wages, was served on the warden, who had come outside to watch, and a few prisoners vehemently negotiated the terms with him.

The prison’s authority had been curbed for several hours now. Through the crowd, though, confused whispers could be heard from men wondering what our end-game was. How long were we going to protest? Guys were tiring and getting edgy.

The warden had gone back inside to consider the terms of our negotiation. When he returned an hour later, he spread word that he was reluctantly considering most of our demands.

Our negotiators shouted, “We won!”

Then we were instructed back into our units to be counted. I was relieved to get back and relax, but my intuition warned me to stay on my toes. I couldn’t escape the question: Were they really going to let us get away with taking control of their facility and making demands?

Count was made, followed by an announcement that chow would be brought to the units. When those same detestable sack meals arrived, I sprang to my feet and frantically began packing my property, hoping to keep it safe in the chaos to come. I told my cubies, “Something is about to go down!" I knew the bag meals meant the prison wasn’t really ceding to us.

And just as I was saying it, we heard over the officers' radios the coded instruction, "1019! 1019!" The staff reacted like track runners anticipating a starter pistol.

At once, they all abandoned their posts and made a dash for the control center in the administration building. They even had ATV's suddenly parked and available to rescue the staff who couldn't retreat fast enough. It was comical to watch, but the situation was extremely serious.

Within minutes, we were alone without any supervision. Panic ensued as everyone braced for the inevitable attack. Five minutes after the distress code was given, the ERT stormed the compound. They formed groups of about 30 and marched toward each unit in single-line formation.

Anyone attempting to exit got riddled with chemical rounds from their anxious rifles. I continued packing as the spray consumed the air. Guys started arming themselves with any material that would cut, stab or be used as a bludgeon.

The ERT had us divided and trapped, savoring the revenge in their grasp.

Some younger prisoners with appetites for destruction had been rebelling, looting and demolishing as much as humanly possible—their own cells, the bathrooms, public areas, staff offices, everything. Once the surveillance cameras were painted out or papered over, many hold-outs gladly joined in the destruction. My senses were overwhelmed. The smells of gas, paint, smoke and burnt wires mingled to create noxious fumes. Then there was the relentless din: yelling, glass shattering, sinks and urinals being smashed to bits, music blaring, the fire alarm wailing, and steel being rubbed against the concrete as men forged crude weapons.

Grasping the degree of chaos around me, I couldn't recognize the place anymore. Everything that was not bolted down was in ruins. Broken glass shimmered on the ground like precious

jewels. Prisoners' files from the counselor's office were strewn about the floor. The washing machine and dryer had been relocated through the front window and onto the yard.

The ERT entered one unit at a time, targeting specific prisoners for immediate "ride-outs," where they would be sent to other prisons. Starting with A-Unit, they worked their way back to H-Unit, where I was housed. It was 11:00 p.m. when an angry man's voice barked through a bullhorn, "Get inside your assigned cubes and on your bunks!"

This demand was instantly followed by two flash bangs that caused those intending to resist to run for the safety of their cubes. Red beams penetrated the smoke, searching for marks.

When the ERT reached the cubicles, they instructed each man to touch the sky and walk backwards down the hallway out the back door where a group of officers were waiting to cuff and identify us. Men were seated on the ground and others were being dragged away.

When I informed the officer of my name, she yelled, "This one's riding!" Two officers promptly snatched my arms and dragged me to the chow hall, now converted into a kind of processing center.

There, a stubby officer wearing a sadistic-looking facial expression and holding a Taser looked me in the eye and yelled, "Strip!" No privacy existed in this open space, and male and female staff were everywhere. In no mood to be tased, I complied. Standing there naked as he meticulously searched my clothing, I considered my ancestors on an American auction block.

After my personal effects were thrown in a junk pile, and Taser Man was satisfied that I had no contraband up my ass, I was ordered to dress, got chained, and lined up with other prisoners waiting on the next bus out.

The restraints served as more razor wire binding me, cutting

deep into my ankles and wrist, and I knew it would be a long, miserable ride ahead. I was sent to a maximum-security facility after participating in the "disturbance," and left there until they decided to relocate me again.

No regrets.

Accounts from Florida Facilities

To the surprise of supporters on the outside, Florida ended up being one of the first and largest prison populations to participate in the September prisoner-led mobilization. Starting with the massive protest in Holmes C.I. on September 7, which left much of the prison unusable from prisoners severely damaging the dorms, at least nine additional prisons would report "disturbances" related to the September events, ranging from major disturbances to smaller sit-ins and mass work refusals. The following accounts are from three different Florida facilities:

Account from Michael Skinner, FDOC prisoner at Taylor C.I.

I'm currently being held at Franklin C.I. because of the September 9th sit down. I was at Taylor Main Unit and have been there since 2009. We got wind of all of it pretty late but were able to pull together at least half of the compound. Peacefully we conducted ourselves and everyone who participated did not attend any services, call outs, canteens, chow, or recreation – if it had something to do with the state, we didn't go. So, the Assistant Warden Surles and Colonel Mitchell walked to every dorm and told us that as long as we were peaceful they had no problem with what we were doing! Good, or so we thought, a couple hiccups but nothing major or violent. So, the cops that night in the dorm started mistreating everyone with verbal abuse and it progressed through the weekend, with myself included on my way to a visit.

On Tuesday night, following Sept. 9th, the colonel had 30 extra officers stay and work late to do a round-up of everyone involved. Seven officers came to my house and took me to the laundry room, cuffed me, and put 26 of us in confinement under investigation for illegal gang activity. I'm not nor have I ever been in a gang! I saw blacks, whites, Spanish – all kinds – but we all had one thing in common: we were all a part of September 9th. We were viewed

as the orchestrators of it on the compound. On the 16th day in confinement they walked us all up front in shackles and cuffs, split us up in 6 different groups, put us each on different vans and took us directly to our new camps. And now I'm at Franklin. And that's my September 9th story.

Some of us believe in what y'all are doing, so don't give up!

Account from Justin Curtis, FDOC prisoner at Gulf CI Annex

My name is Justin M. Curtis. I am 35 years old and have been incarcerated in Florida for almost 14 years straight (minus a brief 2 month taste of freedom in late 2004) and the atmosphere within the FL DOC has been extremely oppressive to say the least.

I've talked to other people who have done time in other states and heard of the unity on the part of inmates, but here in Florida that is not the case. Down here the majority of inmates are out for self, don't care if their fellow inmates have or have not, and the violence, manipulation, and general disregard that occurs from inmate [to] inmate is sad and frustrating. The guards and administration are taught psychological warfare/divide-and-conquer tactics that they implement in plain view for us inmates to see, but due to the majority outlook and selfishness there is never any type of united effort on any front. Several of us talk about standing up, but that's it… until September 9, 2016.

Like I said, the letter detailing the purpose of 9/9/16 came to be on 9/8/16. It was forwarded from another institution I had been transferred from. I immediately took action, by passing the letter around, going around and speaking to other inmates who had influence and we agreed that on 9/9/16 we would all participate in a "peaceful sit-down protest." At the time I was assigned to work in food service. I was on the 2 a.m. wake up crew, and we were the ones who would have to start the action. When the COs came to get us up for work (we had already been up all night

anxious and excited), we refused to go.

The administration was already well aware of what was going to happen and already had plans implemented to bring inmates from the work camp to run the kitchen. So we were placed on lockdown status. We watched out of our windows as they called each dorm for chow. Not many people went, except for one dorm where all the inmates went. That is when things got a bit more tense. As I said, we had no time to plan or prepare, so a lot of people weren't on the same page. Some dudes were arguing "What are we standing up for?" and there were times of tension within our dorm between us. But there was also a sense of unity that I'd never seen. At a certain point the administration felt it necessary to step down on us.

They came in, surrounded the compound with armed police officers, came to our dorm and had us all face down on our bunks, screaming at us through a bullhorn to "Get down!," they had guns over us and totally took the whole thing out of hand. Overreaction puts it very lightly…

After leaving our dorm, the Rapid Response Team (RRT) in full riot gear headed to the "two man cell dorms," where they rushed in without warning, firing tear gas grenades and rubber bullets at unsuspecting inmates. There were several people punished with bogus Disciplinary Reports (DRs) which all said the same exact thing, and several inmates were transferred to other facilities.

I received a DR for "Inciting a Riot" and have been on lockdown since 9/10/16. I am now on Close Management (CM II) status, where I will be on lockdown for at least 7-8 more months at Suwannee C.I.

I have no regrets at all besides that there wasn't any time to prepare and have things work out different and perhaps even effect a positive change within this corrupt, oppressive system. But it was a learning experience and I am glad I participated and took action regardless of the consequences…

Account from Christopher Reber at Franklin C.I.

I was at Franklin during the September protests and it wasn't a complete stoppage but many did participate – much more than I had predicted – and the prison's administration responded with a partial lock-down of the prison and disciplinary action against those participating. The average disciplinary action taken was a loss of 30 days (or more) gain time and a loss of canteen access for at least 30 days. While it was good to see prisoners come together on an important issue, it was amazing to see people outside of prison standing up for us. Thank you for your letter and your support. Having support and a voice through people on the other side of the wire is a prisoner's most valuable asset.

Account from Julius Smith at Franklin C.I.

A good friend of mine handed me the print out he received from you because he knew I had the drive and influence to unify and inform inmates in my section of the prison. First it was the print out of information about the riot in Attica's state prison. Then he showed me the 2nd print out informing us about the prisons participating in the Sept 9th sit down.

I read it to my dormitory, letting them know that we have people on the streets who care and are fighting for our cause. Also, that our efforts are not for nothing. The death of our movement is inmates who think, "It won't make a difference anyway."

I explained how we had the power to make a change in mass incarceration, ridiculous gain time percentages, and slave labor.

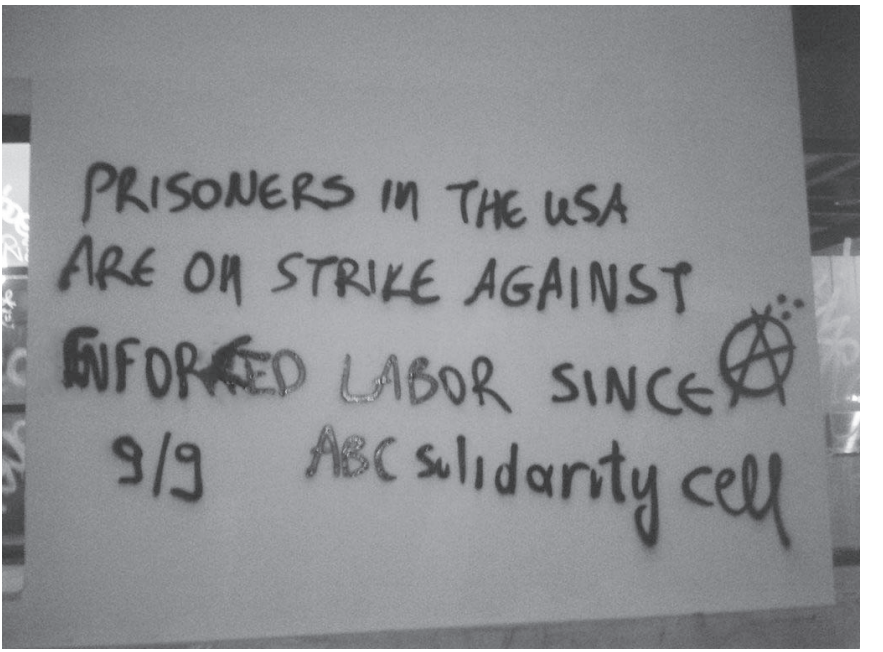
During the Sept. 9 protest, most of the young guys wanted to riot and destroy the dormitories. I passionately protested. Things like that only result in us getting hurt, shot with riot guns, pepper sprayed, beat on and possibly facing more criminal charges… This compound has already had 3 riots in 2016. Still the same corrupt guards are employed. Still nothing has changed.

Those are the kinds of actions we need to steer clear of. It sends a bad message that we are all savage animals that deserve to be locked behind bars and segregated from our communities—a stereotype that the media will advertise to voters and taxpayers. This makes it almost impossible to get voters to petition on a bill to kill mass incarceration. We need to make the public believe that incarceration is a lot more negative than positive in this generation.

The institution had caught wind that something was brewing and their first reaction was fear. The warden and his administration walked through our dorms giving us constant lectures and speeches acknowledging that he was aware of the protest. As long as we kept it peaceful he wouldn't retaliate but if it got violent he had a team ready for action. He stated that he felt like our protest wouldn't affect change, that our people on the streets had to be active for change. He believes that gain time should be lower and that he doesn't believe we should be paid for our labor because we get free food and housing.

I believe you should get religious groups and gangs involved… Muslims, Christians, Jewish, Bloods, Crips, Gangster Disciples, Latin Kings, Aryans, Hell's Angles, etc. They are the forces of discipline and unity. They have the power to make large groups of men unite. Despite their different views and backgrounds, there's one thing they agree on: *It's us against them*.

Hope for change of how they treat us is the power.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