COLLECTIVE INMATE ACTION:
A Broad Overview of Prisoner-led Organizing in North America

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This CURE paper is a condensed document originally intended as baseline information on prisoner-led organizing for the Prisoner Correspondence Project. An overview of organizing obstacles and a sketched timeline of activity is presented. Additional areas including organizing strategies and related policy are found online at www.convergencejournal.ca

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Obstacles to Prisoner-led Organizing

The fundamental nature of organizing, a collective process of self-determination and autonomy, runs in direct conflict with the fundamental aim of correctional institutions: to establish and maintain obedience and control (Law, 2009). A summary follows of the external and internal realities that pose challenges to advancing collective action within prison communities.

Public Perspective

The prevailing public desire to maintain a clear and palpable distance away from people imprisoned (and subsequently the issues this marginalized community endures), creates a climate that effectively reinforces and sustains the policies and legislation that hyper-regulate and obstruct opportunities for organizing in prison. Prisoners most likely to engage in organizing (i.e. people with long-term sentences) are viewed as the most degenerate and unworthy which further drives the lack of public support (Huff, 1975). Given the prevalence of prejudiced attitudes towards inmates, incidences of resistance are frequently documented and interpreted as riots as opposed to legitimate and worthwhile human rights-based actions (Mathiowetz, 2010). British Columbia's Public Safety Minister, Vic Toews, responded to union organizing efforts by stating "we will not concede to the requests of prisoner advocates who continue to put the rights of criminals first" (Lindell, 2011). The absence of mainstream media coverage of the week-long strike in Georgia that occurred simultaneously in ten prisons across the state further reflects the public's detachment (Mathiowetz, 2010).

Prisoner Reality

A culture of apathy and individualism is a key obstacle inhibiting people from coming together and taking action (Ferranti, n.d.; Landrum, 2007). Landrum (2011) writes of the increasing presence of indoctrinated individualism, its subsequent erosion on prisoners' capabilities to think of the well-being of others, and identifies the need for collective mobilization for transformation. Prison Legal News founder and jailhouse lawyer Paul Wright explains that prisoners are "demoralized, beat down and defeated, and don't think they can fight for their rights" (p.3, Ferranti, n.d.).

Administrative efforts to suppress access to politically-conscious and radical texts helps to conserve prevailing beliefs that action is either unwarranted or fruitless (Ferranti, n.d; Landrum, 2007). Wright explains it is easier for prison administrations to manage and manipulate "an ignorant and uneducated class... than an educated and politically conscious one" (Ferranti, n.d). On a practical level, illiteracy further hinders access to consciousness-raising texts and limits the ability to disseminate one's own ideas and proposals for change (Law, 2009).

The nature of the issue at hand also influences the accessibility for prisoners to join initiatives. For instance, organizing around the issue of HIV/AIDS evokes fear of anticipated ostracization for association with a stigmatized community (ACE, 1998).

Community Reality

Divisions among inmates is emphasized as a significant barrier. Boundaries defined by social location (particularly between racialized and non-racialized groups), and drawn between social and political prisoners enable prison authorities to encourage discord and conflict through favored treatment, targeted violence, and rumors towards marginalized sub-groups (Bisonnette et al., 2008; Mathiowetz, 2010; Whitehorn, 2011). Additionally, increased levels of surveillance and purposeful interference from officials amplifies difficulties for particular sub-groups such as political prisoners (Law, 2009). In reference to the community's reality, Elaine Lourd (Superintendent at a New York Correctional Facility in the 1980s) asked the question "how can you talk about community organizing in a prison when prison is a community paranoid by definition?" (ACE, 1998).

Finally, the constant turnover of prisoners due to transfers, illness or death, parole, or other factors, compounds the struggle to maintain organizing momentum (ACE, 1998; Bissonette et al., 2008).

Administrative Structure

Prisoner mobilization is often seen as a direct threat to the power and authority of correctional officers who have used their prospective unions to instill guards' work stoppage (or threat thereof) to prevent inmate initiatives from garnering power and momentum (Bissonette et al., 2008; Huff, 1974).

At a higher level, the on-the-ground governance of prison institutions is widely recognized as in the hands of the person in charge of the facility (i.e: warden or superintendent). A prisoner organizer from ACLU's Prison Project states "most prison wardens don't want prisoners to play active, decision-making roles while they're in the facility" (Kaplan, 2008). The potential for administrative suppression or support is closely correlated with the disposition of the warden, leading to either ample space for prisoners to shape and change their environments (as exemplified by John Boone's advocacy and sympathies that paved the way for abolition at Walpole) or excessive and inconsistent restrictions (i.e: refusal of ReCon's request for outings lifted only after a change in wardens) (ACE, 1998; Bissonette et al., 2008; Kaplan, 2008; ReCon, 2011).

Facility Regulations and Prohibitions

Inside facilities, the monitoring and censorship of mail is a continual obstacle for people to access and discuss organizing action (Landrum, 2011; Law, 2009; Whitehorn, 2011). Depending on the facility, tightened restrictions or outright bans on media, sharing resources or material with other prisoners, and prohibited inmate to inmate correspondence present further communication barriers (Law, 2009). Regulations on movement within a facility also limit opportunities for people to meet and interact (ACE, 1998; ReCon, 2011).*
The constant shifts and changes made to a facility's rules and regulations pose yet another difficulty as this underlying instability threatens the sustainability of organizing gains (ACE, 1998; ReCon, 2011).

The requirement for pre-approval of clubs, activity groups, or associations creates a near impossible climate for organizing efforts that involve regular meetings (i.e: self-help, support, or education-related groups) without the active support from outside individuals and organizations and cooperation of prison authorities (Law, 2009; ReCon, 2011). Policies that mandate the presence of a prison staff member at meetings are particularly problematic when groups need to discuss topics concerning prohibited behaviour such as drug use or sexual activity (Clark and Bowden, 1990; Whitehorn, 2009). Structurally, some areas in the

* During early efforts, PEPA (Prisoners Educating Prisoners on AIDS) dealt with a policy that restricted the maximum number of inmates who can gather to six by having two leaders meet concurrently in groups of six with one person shouting back and forth to communicate (Kaplan, 2008).

United States go as far as to prohibit the formation of prisoner groups altogether (Kaplan, 2008). The use of legislation to suppress prisoner advocacy is also evident with the US Prison Litigation Reform Act and its prohibition of people imprisoned to legally challenge prison conditions without proof of a lasting physical injury (Law, 2009).

Anti-Gang Legislation

Canada's "Tough on Crime" agenda magnifies the suspicion and scrutiny of prisoner-led activity. This climate outside of prison walls provides increased leverage for correctional authorities to strengthen efforts to interfere with activity suspected to be linked to organized crime (Rankin, 2005). Presently, prison administrations are employing active measures to destabilize gang activities such as increased and changing scheduled roll-calls, heightened individual surveillance, and increased restrictions on visiting and allowable materials (Rankin, 2005; ReCon, 2011). Moreover, the intensified anti-gang legislation has created an influx of individuals imprisoned for gang-related activity, augmenting the number of people with longer sentences and assumed connections to organized crime, in turn fueling authorities' efforts to quell activity proactively (Rankin, 2005; ReCon, 2011).

Fear and Reprisal

Reprisal, or fear thereof, is the historical, universal, and frequently immediate response to activity rooted in rights-based action behind bars. Beyond the widely-known occurrences of physical violence and sexual aggression from guards which have immediate consequences on an organizers' emotional and physical well-being and capacity for continued action, correctional forces employ numerous other avenues of reprisal.

Segregation

Segregation and isolation measures (i.e. solitary confinement, Special Housing Units, therapeutic segregation, control units), especially those directed towards identified leaders, is a direct impediment on organizing activity as it fractures momentum, morale, and ability to communicate. The harsh conditions that accompany segregation often act as an effective deterrent to continued efforts to affect change as even the threat of isolation can be sufficient to quell prisoner-led activity (Huff, 1975; Law, 2009). Lockdowns are another common form of isolating and punishing inmates for mobilizing outside established facility structures (Bissonette et al., 2008; Huff, 1975; Law, 2009).

Transfers

The threat or actualization of transferring an individual to other units or facilities is an additional tool used by administration to destabilize efforts or penalize individuals involved in organizing (Bissonette et al., 2008; Huff, 1975; Kaplan, 2008; Law, 2009). This

form of reprisal is particularly undesired as it severs an individual's relationships, secure work placement, and established life in an institution (Law, 2009). Transfers may involve placement in a higher security facility or a mental institution as experienced by Christiana Madraza who was sent to a psychiatric institute after filing formal complaints regarding her rape by an officer (Law, 2009). Transfers may be additionally punitive as evident in the instance of Delores Garcia whose grievances and communication with outside advocates concerning inadequate medical care resulted in her transfer to an institution that entirely lacked the resources for her necessary medical treatments (Law, 2009).

Misconduct Tickets

Misconduct tickets pose an additional deterrent as they precipitate delayed parole and are used to justify segregation (Law, 2009). The heightened surveillance, arbitrary shakedowns, and cell searches that follow an administration's suspicion of undesired activity often result in excessive tickets for minor or absurd offences (Law, 2009). For instance, Mary Glover (plaintiff for a class-action suit regarding rights violations) received an out-of-place misconduct ticket (major misdemeanor) for not having a pass to stand under a tree (Law, 2009).

Health Care Control

Control over one's health care is used to hamper inmates' advocacy. For instance, limitations imposed on necessary medical care and the use of sedation or "the nod" (as referred to by lead Walpole organizer Bobby Dellelo in the 1970s) substantially compromise one's ability to carry out organizing actions (Bissonette et al., 2008; Law, 2009). Dellelo describes how Talwin, a highly-addictive substance used in the preparation of Oxycontin, was systematically used by officers to garner information by placing people in segregation units until symptoms of withdrawal led to the exchange of information for Talwin.

Designation

Labels such as "Multiple-Griever" (an official classification for those deemed as submitting too many complaints) or "security-threat" (attributed to those perceived as involved in anti-government or gang-related groups) come with increased surveillance and often restricting conditions to lift the categorization (Commissioner's Directive; Law, 2009).

Parole Deferral

The direct implications for early parole or release is a significant barrier to a person's willingness to organize (Law, 2009; ReCon, 2011). Marcia Bunney, plaintiff for the Shuman v. Wilson lawsuit regarding medical cruelty, summarizes this reality with the statement "I have been told that I will never leave prison if I continue to fight the system" (p.9, Law, 2009).

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Program/Privilege Interference

The threat or actual cancelation of privileges like family visits and valued programs serves as another disincentive to taking action (ACE, 1998; Bissonette et al., 2008; Law, 2009). In light of significant mobilization within the Black community at Walpole, administration implemented an arbitrary lockdown the evening of a planned cultural celebration, turning away prearranged bus loads of family and allies (Bissonette et al., 2008). Officials also interfere individually by refusing family members during visiting hours with unfounded, arbitrary reasoning (Law, 2009).

Outside Support

Outside ally assumptions and ideals can be obstacles to advancing mobilizing efforts (ACE, 1998; ReCon, 2011; Whitehorn, 2011). For instance, early ACE (AIDS Counseling and Education) training sessions were banned after health care allies suggested writing to the Commissioner to advocate against condom and dental dam prohibition (ACE, 1998). An ally's refusal to "play the system" also creates an immediate obstacle to prisoners' leverage to execute non-confrontational organizing (ReCon, 2011).

Post-Organizing Structure

Once a prisoner-led group or movement is established, issues of professionalization or cooptation can threaten the maintenance of an initiative's foundation (ACE, 1998; Bissonette et al., 2008; Huff, 1974). For instance, following substantial administrative support (i.e: funding, work placements, official training, formalized membership), ACE organizers struggled to balance favorable relations with administration with the need to safeguard authentic peer-to-peer relationships (ACE, 1998).

Prisoner-led organizing is confronted with a number of challenges rooted in the fixed structures embedded in a prison environment. Issues that arise from allyship (or lack thereof), the navigation of correctional regulations and reprisals, and divisions among social groups generate a particularly rigid climate to mobilize for rights-based change. In response to these challenges, those imprisoned employ targeted strategies including unification, consciousness-raising, community-building, and strategic timing and leadership. An overview of prisoner-led organizing strategies is discussed in the Convergence Journal's online edition.

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