

containing the crisis:

*A History of Mass Incarceration and
Rebellion in the Rustbelt*

Rustbelt Abolition Research Collective

*a project of MAPS: Michigan
Abolition and Prisoner Solidarity*

PROLOGUE

In a small town in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, about an hour north of the Mackinac Bridge, a 50-acre site surrounded by two perimeter chain-link fences, monitored with electronic security devices, topped with razor-ribbon wire, and patrolled by armed personnel holds 1,200 people that have been labelled criminals. They are fathers, husbands, workers, activists, comrades. Many of them are from the Detroit area. This means they are held 5 hours from their homes. This prison is named Kinross Correctional Facility. It is part of an archipelago of similar facilities found across the state of Michigan and holding a total of 43,000 prisoners.

On September 9th, 2016, with the go-ahead given by some of the Kinross prison officials, the prisoners organized a work stoppage in which no person went to their assigned jobs. On the following day, September 10th, they organized a peaceful demonstration to draw attention to the inhospitable conditions of the facility. But the prison officials lied through their teeth and responded with violence. Despite the Michigan Department of Corrections' attempts to cover up the repression that followed, we now know that a tactical team descended upon the prison armed with rifles. These cops ripped hundreds of men out of their cells, zip-tied them, and left them in the prison yard for hours in the middle of a rainstorm. The suppression of the rebellion cost the state upwards of \$900,000. And now many of these prisoners are facing two years in solitary confinement. Suddenly the national spotlight was

shined on these people and the conditions that spawned their rebellion.

But these conditions were not created overnight. The growth of prisons in Michigan, as in the broader **Rustbelt** region, is a response to decades of crisis. To understand the Kinross Rebellion, and to build a stronger movement of resistance to state violence, we must look at the history of the rise of mass incarceration in the Rustbelt region and analyze the specific reasons for this growth of State control and repression.

1. INTRODUCTION

The crisis of mass incarceration is a crisis of racial capitalism

How are we to make sense of the crisis of mass incarceration? This zine lays out a material analysis of the rise of mass incarceration in the **state** of Michigan. According to the most recent data from 2016, about 1 in 46 people in the United States are subjected to some form of **State** supervision. This number includes those on probation, those released on parole, and those locked up behind bars in both prisons and jails. In Michigan, this rate is about 1 in 42, which is higher than the national average. Michigan also has the highest incarceration rate of the Midwest. Of course, not everyone faces the violence of the State in the same way. Although black folks are just 14% of Michigan's overall population, they make up 49% of its prison population. Most incarcerated folks in the state come from the lower end of the national income distribution. And while the vast majority of prisoners are men, black women are the fastest growing prison population nationwide.

state vs. State: *we capitalize (and emphasize) "State" when referring to the entity which organizes and coerces a population, by violence or otherwise, to obey a certain set of laws and social standards, i.e. "State power," "the violence of the State," etc. For purposes of clarification and comparison, we use "state" in lower case when referring to "the state of Michigan." At a basic level, the state of Michigan is one particular instance of the State.*

How we frame a problem shapes our response to that problem. Given that mass incarceration affects not only folks who are locked up in jails and prisons but also those who have gotten out on probation or parole, it's clear that this crisis has to do not only with prisons (and much less with only private prisons) but with State power more generally. And beyond this, it has to do with a particular kind of State power, one that serves to maintain and reproduce a society characterized by both racial domination and capitalist exploitation. We call this kind of society **racial capitalism**. As the geographer and activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore tells us, "capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it."

By tracing the history of mass incarceration in Michigan, we show that the crisis of mass incarceration is a crisis of racial capitalism. When we talk about mass incarceration we are talking not only about the number of prisons and prisoners but also about the organization of life and death under racial capitalism. Our response must go beyond reducing the number of prisons, or prisoners. Instead we must consider seriously the proposition of abolishing the very society that makes those prisons possible and necessary. We hope that these pages may serve as a space to imagine how we want to live, what a society without walls and cages, without domination and exploitation, might look like...

RACIAL CAPITALISM: *Capitalism is a way of organizing society in which some people (the capitalists) own the things most people need in order to survive, such as: land, machines, buildings, and money. This means, on the one hand, that other people are forced to sell their labor to capitalists in exchange for a wage; and, on the other hand, capitalists must exploit other people's labor or steal their resources to compete with other capitalists. The word "racial" indicates that capitalism has always divided society into different populations to which different capacities and obligations are attributed. Since the African slave trade and the colonization of the Americas, capitalism has always been both racial and racializing. Capitalism needs inequality to exist, and racism helps to uphold that inequality. The carceral State also plays a key role in upholding this society by using policing, imprisonment, and surveillance to implement and enforce certain laws (such as that of private property).*

2. DETROIT, MICHIGAN, AND THE FORMATION OF THE RUSTBELT

The formation of Rust Belt Detroit began in the 1970s when the post-war period of high wages was eclipsed by the devastating effects of unemployment and intensified capitalist automation.

In order to understand the rise of mass incarceration in the 1970s, we have to start with the conditions of the Detroit **proletariat** after World War II and the subsequent formation of the Rust Belt. We treat the city of Detroit as a microcosm which allows us to analyze the dynamics of racial capitalism in Michigan and the Rust Belt more generally (after all, most prisoners in Michigan are “produced” in the Detroit metropolitan area). While our hypothesis is that our analysis holds in other Rust Belt cities, we invite the reader to test this for themselves.

By the mid-twentieth century, Michigan was the corpo-

PROLETARIAT: *this term refers to a class of people that are defined by their relationship to the economy. It usually means either “workers” or “industrial workers.” Sometimes it is used to describe anyone who does not own the means of production or reproduction. In other words, anyone who has to sell their labor in order to survive.*

RUSTBELT: *an area covering territories left behind by industrial capital, stretching between upstate New York, and western Pennsylvania, Minnesota and as far west as cities such as Oakland, California. For decades this region’s economy was based in heavy manufacturing. During the past few decades, these industries have left the region, leaving empty and rusted factories in their wake.*

rate home of the “Big Three” automobile manufacturers (that is, the Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler corporations). Migrants from all over the United States and the world came to this industrial hub looking for jobs that, due to struggles waged by rank-and-file workers and unions like the UAW, were better-paying than industrial jobs elsewhere. This partially explains the Second Great Migration of black folks who migrated from rural southern states to Rust Belt cities like Detroit, as well as the mid-20th century migrations of Arab workers to nearby Dearborn (where Ford headquarters is located).

In this post-war “Golden Age” of industry, so-called “Fordist capitalism” kept unemployment low and both labor productivity and wages high. Due to the Great Migration, by the late 1960s, the majority of workers in Detroit’s auto plants were black, although they were often employed in only the most deadly jobs. While higher than the white workers’ unemployment rate, the unemployment rate among Detroit’s black workers by 1970 was at the lowest rate it had been in two decades (9.8%). By 1980, however, the black unemployment rate in the city of Detroit had shot up to a post-war high of 22.5% (twice the rate of white workers). By the same time period, more than half of the black working class employed in industry lost their jobs. While there are multiple reasons for this increase in unemployment during the 1970s, the most important factors were the long and steady process of

automation and deindustrialization.

AUTOMATION: *the process by which workers are replaced with machines. Under racial capitalism, this means higher productivity and lower costs for capitalists, and lower wages and growing unemployment for workers.*

Automation is

the process by which industrial capital replaces workers with machines. In principle, this can be beneficial since it frees up workers from having to do certain activities. However, *capitalist automation*

DEINDUSTRIALIZATION:

the process by which companies relocate factories (from cities to suburbs, other regions, or other countries) in order to reduce production costs. This process throws workers out of employment.

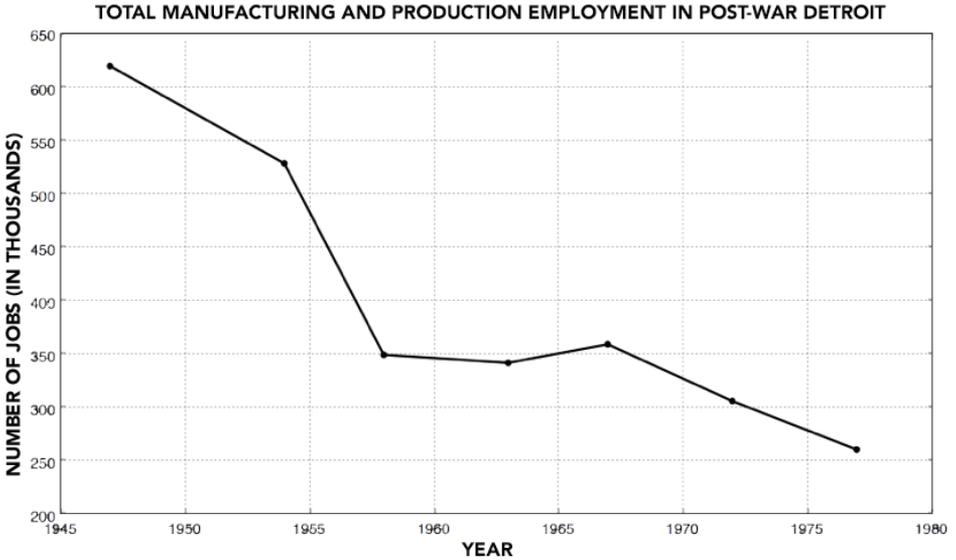
means, on the one hand, increased output and reduced costs for **capitalists** and, on the other hand, reduced wages or no wages at all for workers. As production becomes increasingly auto-

mated, workers become increasingly unnecessary to capitalists. Similarly, deindustrialization refers to the process by which corporations physically moved their factories, first leaving the cities for the suburbs, and later leaving the suburbs for other countries. As a result, people living in the former centers of industrial production are left without access to waged work.

While automation and deindustrialization were constant processes throughout the post-war era, they particularly intensified in the 1970s. As an example, while the number of manufacturing firms in Detroit grew 2.7% between 1947 and 1958, that number fell in the following decades, dropping 14% between 1958 and 1967 and a whopping 51% between 1967 and 1977. Below is a graph that depicts the decline in both manufacturing and production jobs in Detroit. As you can see, by the mid 1970s the total number of these jobs in Detroit was at a post-war low.

CAPITALISTS:

People who own the major parts of the economy, sometimes called “the means of production.” These are folks who make money by exploiting workers’ labor.



Data from Table 5.2 in “The Origins of the Urban Crisis” by Thomas L. Sugrue

The restructuring of global capital in the mid-1970s through automation and deindustrialization generated big profits for capitalists and massive unemployment for workers—black workers in particular. Entire populations were rendered “useless” to the needs of capital. These processes are directly connected not only to the birth of the Rust Belt but also to the rise of mass incarceration in Michigan and the United States.

3. DETROIT 1967: RIOTS AND WORKER INSURRECTION

The 1967 Rebellion offered law-and-order politicians a convenient rationale to justify mass incarceration. But this is only one piece of a larger picture: we need to understand mass incarceration as a response to the broader social crisis created by racial capitalism.

During the post-WWII period, despite the high wages, the city of Detroit was a site of intensive exploitation both in the ghetto and on the shop floor. Additionally, by the 1960s industrial decline and “decentralization” by the Big Three auto manufacturing companies gradually undermined the city’s tax base and led to its impoverishment. Detroit was racially segregated through what the historian Thomas Sugrue calls “a direct consequence of a partnership between the federal government and local bankers and real estate brokers.” Additionally, the Detroit Police Department was an often deadly threat to the safety of black Detroiters. The poor and black Detroiters who experienced these conditions organized against them and prepared the kindling of rebellion for the inevitable spark.

In July 1967, the poor, black, and unemployed of Detroit rose up against their living conditions and temporarily lib-

erated large sections of the city from State control. They fought back against the racism embedded in everyday life and the various forms of State domination to which they were subjected. During what became known as the Great Rebellion, the looters targeted businesses not on the basis of the race of their owner but on the basis of how much they exploited their customers. One survey found that lower-class black folks did not care if a shop owner had black or white skin because both were “very much alike . . . in the way they treat[ed] customers.” Even in Detroit’s auto plants, workers struggled against the conditions that were killing them: in response to speed-ups of the assembly line and an intensification of exploitation, the years between 1967 and 1971 were one of the highest periods of (wildcat) strikes in the postwar period.

The State interpreted and responded to the rebellion in various ways. As a direct response, 7,200 people were arrested. In the long term, the insurrection was used by the State to justify an increase in repressive measures. Liberal Democrats, including Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh, clamored for more “law and order” policies. During the Rebellion, Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the nation and asserted that “The criminals who committed these acts of violence against the people deserve to be punished—and they must be punished.” Additionally, a 1968 federally-funded study on urban “disorders” argued that the conditions of the ghetto create an “environmental ‘jungle’” and recommended, among other things, that cities increase the use of undercover police and other specialized policing units. Detroit took this advice seriously and debuted a specialized unit called “Stop

the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets” (STRESS) that proved to be an especially murderous arm of the police department, carrying out the execution-style killings of a more than a dozen black men in the space of a few years. The city also officially introduced police into Detroit public high schools in 1969.

Following the 1967 Great Rebellion, the State solidified its view of unemployed (“surplus”) workers as security threats. Both Democrats and Republicans began to campaign for public office by promising more policing and more prisons under the guise of “law and order.” The black and poor lower class articulated the connections between the growth of the **carceral state** and the exploitation in the plants. One article in a black Marxist newspaper from 1970 described how a Chrysler plant and the Wayne County jail were “both parts of the same thing . . . a system that puts profits above the welfare of the human beings

that live in it and produce the profits it feeds on.”

CARCERAL STATE: *a mode of governance that needs to police, imprison, and surveil (different forms of “incarceration”) its population in order to function at all. The widespread use of surveillance, the violence of police, and the magnitude of imprisonment are all specific historical developments that have emerged in response to different social crises in the U.S.*

Faced with a crisis that threatened their very lives, the black underclass in Detroit fought back

against the structures of racial capitalism. Politicians responded by using the insurrections to justify the project of mass incarceration, hoping to prevent future rebellions by containing the populations that fueled them behind walls and barbed wire.



“The early Cold War’s countersubversive demonology was rearticulated as a counterinsurgent discourse about the rule of law. This demonization of the ‘domestic enemy’ has underpinned mass criminalization... The logic of counterinsurgency has traveled from the suppression of subaltern insurrections to the confinement of actually or potentially rebellious populations rendered surplus by capitalist restructuring.” (-Jordan T. Camp, Incarcerating The Crisis)

4. THE PRISON BOOM

The response to the crisis of racial capitalism is mass incarceration, transferring money, jobs, and power from the urban black population to the rural white population.

It was only after 1973—in the context of the crisis of racial capitalism and in the aftermath of the rebellion of 1967—that a major shift took place in Michigan’s prison system.

From 1973-2006, the state’s prison population skyrocketed from just under 8,000 to more than 52,000. The growth of the prison population also required massive new investment in Corrections on the part of the state, and over the same period the state’s annual prison expenditures grew by nearly 5,000%, from \$38 million to \$1.87 billion. This spending went toward building new prisons and expanding the Corrections workforce. The state built 31 new prison facilities—more than any other Midwestern state—and the number of Corrections employees rose by roughly seven times. In fact, the ratio of state employees working in Corrections spiraled from about 1/20 in 1973 to nearly 1/3 by 2006.

How do we explain the rapid growth of Michigan’s prison system? Many people believe the answer is simple: “crime.” Weren’t all these prisons built, they say, to punish the criminals who fueled a massive crime wave? Don’t

prisons address crime and violence? If that were true, we would have seen rising crime rates, then the prison boom, and finally decreasing crime rates. But as Gilmore has demonstrated, what actually happened is almost exactly the opposite: *crime went up, then crime went down, and only then did the prison boom take place.* There is no historical correlation between incarceration and crime rates, and the idea that prisons solve crime and violence is a calculated myth.

So if the prison boom can't be explained by "crime," we need to consider other factors. First, from the perspective of State and capital, the crisis of racial capitalism had generated a major threat to the stability of the system. As we have seen, a growing mass of largely (though by no means

e n t i r e -
ly) black
workers
had been
cast out of
the labor
process as
a result of
the auto-

RACIALIZED SURPLUS POPULATION:

as a result of automation and deindustrialization, certain sectors of the population (especially black and generally poor folks) are made unnecessary for the capitalist production process and thrown out of work. . The racialization of these groups as "dangerous," "criminal," and "disposable" gives way to and legitimizes their incarceration by the State.

the auto-
mation and relocation of the factories. Without access to wage labor, and with the dismantling of the welfare state, this **racialized surplus population** was pressed by necessity into the informal economy and a precarious life. The rise of mass incarceration seemed to offer a convenient solution to this threat: removal and containment.

Second, to the extent that Michigan's white population, which had by this time largely abandoned urban cen-

ters through “**white flight**,” was also affected by deindustrialization, the state-financed construction of prisons also provided them with relatively stable and well-paid employment. This is because prison construction was centered primarily in the rural areas of the state—more than two-thirds of the state’s new facilities in this period were built in rural towns with predominantly white populations. As a result, the prison boom contributed to a major geographic shift, by which

WHITE FLIGHT: *the process by which white populations abandoned urban centers (associated with black folks, “crime,” and “violence”) and relocated to suburbs, taking their tax dollars and other resources with them. In Detroit, this process started in the late 1950s and continued through the 1970s.*

the disproportionately black incarcerated population from urban centers like Detroit was transferred to new rural prisons largely staffed, in newly-created positions,

by white guards. The historian Heather Ann Thompson argues that this process redirected public funds and job opportunities away from “cities like Detroit, ravaged by incarceration, to sparsely populated towns that held large prisons, like Ionia.”

Third, by warehousing growing numbers of black folks from the cities in rural prisons run by a largely white Corrections workforce, Michigan’s prison boom played a major role in reconfiguring the balance of political power in the state. For one thing, incarcerated folks can’t vote, and those convicted of a felony are stripped of the right to vote after their release. But beyond this, political representation is calculated on the basis of the county population as recorded in the state census. Mass incarceration

contributed to the depopulation of largely black cities like Detroit while at the same time boosting the population of largely white rural counties like Chippewa, Ionia, Jackson, and Luce. As Thompson points out, four state senate districts and five house districts drawn after the 2000 Census only met the minimum population requirements set by the federal government because of the prisoners they claimed as constituents. Without importing non-voting black prisoners from Michigan's urban centers, these districts would have been stripped of political representation.

5. MAP OF PRISONS IN MICHIGAN



● Correctional Facilities

1. Ojibway Correctional Facility
2. Baraga Correctional Facility
3. Marquette Branch Prison*
4. Alger Correctional Facility
5. Newberry Correctional Facility
6. Chippewa Correctional Facility
6. Kinross Correctional Facility
7. Oaks Correctional Facility
8. Earnest C. Brooks Correctional Facility
8. West Shoreline Correctional Facility
8. Muskegon Correctional Facility
9. Central Michigan Correctional Facility
9. St. Louis Correctional Facility
10. Saginaw Correctional Facility
11. Carson City Correctional Facility
12. Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility
12. Ionia Correctional Facility
12. Michigan Reformatory
12. Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility
13. Thumb Correctional Facility
14. Macomb Correctional Facility
15. Woodland Center Correctional Facility
16. G. Robert Cotton Correctional Facility
16. Charles E. Egeler Reception Guidance Center*
16. Parnall Correctional Facility
16. Cooper Street Correctional Facility
17. Special Alternative Incarceration Facility
18. Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility*
19. Lakeland Correctional Facility
20. Gus Harrison Correctional Facility
21. Detroit Detention Center
21. Detroit Reentry Center

6. ATTICA IS ALL OF US: THE 2008 CRISIS AND THE 2016 KINROSS PRISON REBELLION

As the federal government bailed out Detroit's automotive giants in 2009, Michigan initially closed down some of its prisons to mend its budget deficit—but reopened them in 2015. One of these prisons was Kinross, which erupted in rebellion on September 9, 2016, the 40th anniversary of the rebellion that had taken place in New York's Attica prison in 1971.

As we have seen, Michigan's prison population peaked in 2006, in the lead-up to the financial crisis that began the following year. The financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the crisis of the automotive industry from 2008-2010 were contained and controlled by State intervention. In 2009, the State stepped in and saved Detroit's "Big Three" from bankruptcy with a \$100 billion "bailout" package. In the midst of this crisis, the state of Michigan shut down 10 prisons in an effort to close its multibillion-dollar budget deficit. Michigan was particularly hard hit, though another 25 states also cut correction spendings in 2009 for sim-

ilar reasons.

What is now known as Kinross Correctional Facility was originally opened as Hiawatha Correctional Facility (HTC) in Michigan's Upper Peninsula in 1989. HTC was one of the prisons that was closed during the 2009 crisis, but it was reopened in October 2015 after the old Kinross prison (a former Air Force base) was shut down. Below is a description of the conditions inside Kinross in 2015, written by someone who was imprisoned there during the 2016 rebellion.

AS YOU MAY KNOW ALL THE INMATES AT THE, WHAT IS NOW KNOWN AS KINROSS, WERE TRANSFERRED AS A WHOLE TO THAT FACILITY IN THE FALL OF 2015. THE "NEW" FACILITY WAS APPARENTLY UNDER THE HEALTH AND SAFETY STANDARDS REQUIRED TO OPEN IT. WHEN WE ARRIVED THERE WAS NO HEAT, THE PLUMBING DIDN'T WORK, THE ROOM AND CELL FURNISHINGS THAT ARE REQUIRED BY CFA POLICIES COULD NOT BE MET, I.E. BLANKETS, SHEETS, WASH CLOTHES, TOWELS, ETC. THE VENTILATION SYSTEM WHEN TURNED ON CAUSED 3 PEOPLE TO HAVE TO BE RUSHED IMMEDIATELY TO THE HOSPITAL, 26 PEOPLE TOTAL ENDED UP GOING IN TIME, THE CROWD HALL WAS WORKFULLY INADEQUATE TO FACILITATE 1150 INMATES, THE CABLE DIDN'T WORK AND THERE WERE NOT ENOUGH OUTLETS FOR THE 8 MEN REQUIRED TO LIVE IN CRAMPED CUBES BUILT FOR 4 MEN, IN FACT THERE WERE ONLY 2 OUTLETS. THERE WERE NO SHELVES FOR THE INMATES BUNKS, NO CURTAINS, NO FANS, NO SPRENKLER SYSTEM FOR FIRE SAFETY, WE WERE FEEL WELL BENEATH CALORIE AND NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS! THERE IS MORE BUT I WILL STOP HERE SO THAT THIS

In many ways, the abhorrent conditions of the reopened Kinross facility in 2015, as described by our incarcerated comrade above, spurred the March 2016 food unity actions. These actions led to the September 2016 rebellion in that same facility. In those days of September, thousands of prisoners at Kinross refused to do the *reproductive labor* of maintaining the prison (such as cooking and cleaning). The strike was sanctioned by the warden, but as folks went back to their cells an Emergency Response Team entered and assaulted the strikers—arresting hundreds and retaliating against organizers, participants, and even non-participants. As far as we've been able to find out, the long-term effects of the retaliation include at least 180 Kinross rebels being transferred and put in administrative segregation, a.k.a. "the hole." But the conditions have not changed, and so we expect that the rebellions will continue—both inside and outside.

7. NOT JUST PRISONS: THE CARCERAL STATE BEYOND PRISON WALLS

Prisons are just one piece of a repressive State apparatus that includes immigration detention centers, probation, police, and surveillance. The carceral State reaches far beyond the prison walls.

“All America is a prison and jails are just a prison within a prison.”
- Malcolm X

Until now, we have been talking specifically about prisons as particularly brutal sites of exploitation, as a warehousing system for populations that the structures of racial capitalism have deemed undesirable and therefore disposable. But we must

ask: does the carceral State really end at the prison walls? What about other forms of State supervision, from immigrant detention facilities to parole and probation? And what about the police who keep the prisons full? These questions point to the fact that merely replacing prisons with other techniques of surveillance and social control will not solve the problems generated by racial capitalism.

The logic of incarceration and disposability extends to all corners of our society.

One way that the State has responded to *recurring economic crises* is to cut funding, impacting allocations towards corrections facilities. We have seen this in Michigan: in the wake of the financial crisis, 10 prisons were closed down or consolidated. But these processes are a minor change in the *organization of incarceration* rather than a solution. Indeed, closing these prisons actually made the living conditions of incarcerated people much worse, as evidenced by the overcrowding and uninhabitable conditions at Kinross. Additionally, the slight increase in the number of probationers and parolees—in other words, *the “replacement” of imprisonment with probation*—should be seen, in the words of a former Michigan corrections official, as “just another burdensome condition of extending . . . incarceration.”

The process by which the State built up its capabilities to repress populations meant the simultaneous dismantling of social welfare programs. In many cases this looked like direct attacks on the security of poor women of color. For instance, the Clinton administration put the last nail in the coffin of *Aid to Families with Dependent Children* in 1996. In conjunction with the processes of the formation of the Rust Belt and organized abandonment of these populations described above, these reforms have left women, particularly black women, in violent precarious life conditions. Black women are now the fastest growing population of prisoners.

Similarly, the systematic and everyday forms of vio-

lence faced by imprisoned women through State-sanctioned sexual assault in the form of strip searches continues beyond the walls of prisons—in the streets, at work, or in their homes. The criminalization of sex work itself leaves women—trans women in particular—in precarious life conditions, as they often face sexual and deadly violence with little to no recourse. In short, the carceral State renders their lives without value and their bodies as disposable both inside and outside prisons.

As President Trump begins to use the deportation machine that was created under Obama, the forms of incarceration targeting migrants are playing a more central role in the larger carceral state. In parallel to the criminalization of the black, urban poor, immigration police and detention centers operate over a population that has been racialized in a different way. Millions living and working inside the borders of the U.S. are deemed “illegal” because of their immigration status and are targeted for deportation. Indeed, Hispanics now make up more than a third of all federal prisoners as a consequence of the escalation in immigration raids and criminal prosecutions of immigration violations.

The general logic of incarceration extends to many aspects of everyday life. Some Detroiters described the increase in policing after the 1967 Rebellion as a way of turning the ghetto into an “open-air” prison. Today, these forces have intensified as security cameras are found on every corner and local police are armed with military-grade weapons and vehicles. Downtown is now filled with private security guards from Guardsmark Inc. employed by the billionaire Dan Gilbert, “trained to spot potential trouble

and to deter thieves, drug dealers, muggers and even aggressive panhandlers.” Detroit police officers are in radio communication with Gilbert’s private force, and they work in tandem to remove unwanted people from the Greater Downtown area. Gilbert has also installed a multi-million dollar surveillance system of over three hundred cameras that captures most of what happens in Downtown. And all of it is seen by Gilbert’s security staff, who monitor the live feeds twenty-four hours a day from a Downtown “command center.” The Movement for Black Lives has addressed the general increase in surveillance, demanding an “end to the mass surveillance of black communities, and the end to the use of technologies that criminalize and target our communities (including IMSI catchers, drones, body cameras, and predictive policing software).” The targets of the State’s surveillance war, however, are not only the black community; the spying and surveillance of other populations such as Muslims and domestic revolutionaries have increased significantly as well. These technologies serve a dual purpose: they increase the capacity of the carceral State to *monitor and control*, while at the same time helping to *normalize our prison society* by turning surveillance and policing into just another facet of everyday life.

Prisons are fundamental to the functioning of the capitalist economy in the 21st century. The number of prisoners helps to keep the unemployment rate deceptively low. Additionally, 70 million people in the United States today are barred from certain kinds of employment because of criminal history or other imprints of the carceral State. If you add to this the number of undocumented folks who

face severe barriers to working, the total number (over 80 million) is *half of the total U.S. workforce*. By keeping half of the workforce precariously employed or unemployed, the carceral system enables the hyper-exploitation of poor and working people in general. It also helps to keep these potentially revolutionary classes disorganized by imposing restrictions on voting, housing, public benefits, and other services for people with criminal records. In other words, the racial logic of incarceration plays a central role in the ongoing operations of capitalism as a global system. The problem is not prisons *themselves*, but rather *the general system* that must expel certain classes of people from liveable conditions and employment and expose them to “premature death.”

8. Abolition now!

“Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages.” —Angela Davis

Throughout these pages we have tried to analyze the processes that have created the conditions for mass incarceration in the Rustbelt. We explored how time and again prisons did not solve the broader problems created by our current society, which we have called racial capitalism. If this is the case, why do we spend so much money funding them? For example, Michigan currently spends over \$2 billion a year on corrections; the United States currently spends \$80.7 billion a year on prisons, jails, parole, and probation. If we include all other elements of the carceral State (such as courts, prosecutors, and police) the total annual cost comes to \$182 billion. What else could we do with all of these resources? These are the kinds of questions that prison abolitionists ask.

Imagining and creating a world without prisons also means seriously confronting the task of community ac-

countability. When someone harms someone else, what practices of justice could actually attempt to address the victim's material needs and process of healing? What can we do to build a society that has at its foundation *principles other than revenge*? What collective processes can we develop to hold each other accountable that do not involve locking people in cages or shackling them with ankle bracelets?

Abolishing prisons also means much more than creating alternative systems of social accountability: it means re-imagining society in a fundamental way. Releasing folks from prison alone will not solve the problems created by capitalist exploitation nor racial and gender domination. As such, as abolitionists we imagine not only a world without prisons, but a world beyond racial capitalism.

At this historical moment, we mostly take prisons for granted as a “normal” part of our society. But it was not always this way. Prisons, much like racial capitalism, have a history, a small piece of which we have tried to explore here. If mass incarceration and the carceral State are *historical constructions*, that is, if they aren't just a “natural”

ABOLITION: *a political prospect drawing on long tradition of workers and racialized groups (in Amerikkka: black and brown people) fighting for freedom. Abolition means re-making society in a fundamental and revolutionary way so that prisons—and the broader carceral State—are not a means to solve social problems. “Prison abolition” means both ending the carceral State and building alternative forms of justice and organizing society that meet the needs of most communities, not the needs of the State nor capital.*

or “necessary” part of human existence, they can be transformed and ultimately abolished. As revolutionary Assata Shakur writes in her poem *Affirmation*: “a wall is just a wall, and nothing more at all, it can be broken down...”

SUGGESTED READINGS

Books

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Michigan Abolition and Prisoner Solidarity (MAPS) came together in the wake of the nationwide September 9, 2016, prisoner strike to organizer in solidarity with prisoners against the violence of incarceration. We're joining a nationwide fight to end the prison and police systems that pose a constant threat to our communities. We see support work as key to that political commitment and work to amplify the voices of the incarcerated. See more of our work at: michiganabolition.org

contact us at maps@riseup.net

When you've finished reading this text, please consider printing more copies and hosting a reading group in your community.

Or, at the very least, pass this copy along to someone who might appreciate its perspective.

You can find the PDF online at michiganabolition.org

To print as a zine, open with Adobe and print as a booklet, double-sided, and "flip on short edge".

