

The History of Critical Resistance

Guest Editors

CRITICAL RESISTANCE (CR) WAS FORMED IN 1997 WHEN ACTIVISTS CHALLENGING the idea that incarceration is the panacea for all of our social ills came together to organize a conference that examined and challenged the phenomenon we have come to call the prison-industrial complex. Held in September 1998, the conference brought together over 3,500 activists, academics, former and current prisoners, labor leaders, religious organizations, feminists, gay, lesbian, and transgender activists, youth, families, and policymakers from every state in the U.S., as well as from other countries. The three-day event featured almost 200 panels and workshops and included a multitude of cultural events and a film festival.

Although the conference was a huge success, CR recognized that its work had only begun. The goal of CR was not simply a conference. The objective of CR was, and continues to be, the building of an international movement to challenge the prison-industrial complex. In pursuing that goal, the work of CR continues.

Critical Resistance Mission Statement

Prisons and incarceration have become the panacea for all of our social ills. Where once the United States looked to the welfare state to alleviate social problems, today the U.S. looks to prisons, prisons, and more prisons. Critical Resistance uses the term prison-industrial complex (PIC) to describe this phenomenon and the corresponding reality — that capitalism flourishes from locking people in cages. CR recognizes that an integral component of the PIC is the dramatic increase in the incarceration of people of color, women, and the poor, along with the continued imprisonment of political prisoners.

CR is strongly committed to challenging the existing structure of “criminal justice,” which is based on revenge, punishment, and violence. As part of the emerging international movement for penal abolition, we envision a society in which fundamental social problems are no longer “solved” through the mass warehousing (and periodic torture) of human beings, the overwhelming majority of whom are poor, people of color, and nonviolent. CR’s mission is to build a national and international campaign to challenge the prison-industrial complex.

What We Do

In building a movement against the prison-industrial complex, CR employs strategies as varied and bold as suing the California Department of Corrections to stop construction of a new 5,000-plus bed prison, spearheading a grass-roots

campaign to defeat California's Juvenile Crime Initiative (Proposition 21), and building unprecedented and powerful coalitions.

No New Prisons: CR has filed a cutting-edge lawsuit, *Critical Resistance v. The California Department of Corrections*, aimed at stopping California from building a new \$335 million, 5,160-bed maximum-security prison, with half the beds slated to implement California's Juvenile Crime Initiative. The suit has generated unprecedented coverage of the irrationality and rank opportunism of prison construction, including stories in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Examiner*, other local newspapers across the state, and even on German public radio. CR has effectively made California the national poster child for a disastrous "prisons as public works" policy and has generated a statewide rallying cry for schools, not jails.

Coalition Building: In conjunction with the lawsuit, CR has built an unparalleled and powerful coalition that reaches far beyond the criminal justice community. The coalition includes environmental, civil rights, and social justice organizations. It is a testament to CR's commitment to reaching beyond the converted and assembling new coalitions that place the PIC within all people's sphere of concern.

CR Film Festival/Video Series: CR continues to recognize the importance of cultural work in the fight against the PIC. CR is planning the First Annual CR Film Festival, distributes the video documentary of the conference, and has compiled a video series about the PIC, which is available through CR. Those interested in screening these films should contact us by email at critresist@aol.com or by phone: (510) 444-0484.

The Dialogue: CR is holding a mini-conference to examine how prisons constitute new forms of environmental racism and environmental injustice. The groundbreaking conference, to take place in California's Central Valley, where most new prisons are located, will also look at how we might use environmental strategies to stop the construction of new prisons. The conference promises to provide a unique look at issues that will change the way we think about the PIC and will hopefully generate enough excitement to consolidate already-existing activism around the environment, local economic development alternatives, and the PIC.

Juvenile Injustice: As part of the Freedom Winter Coalition, CR fought California's Juvenile Crime Initiative (Proposition 21) through grass-roots outreach, using the initiative to raise consciousness about the PIC. CR's juvenile justice campaign continues with its battle to stop the state from building a new prison slated to house youth convicted under the initiative.

CREast: CR activists in the Northeast are organizing a regional CR conference that will take place March 9 to 11, 2001, in New York City. The Northeast conference will unite activists, prisoners and their families and loved ones, former prisoners, political prisoner supporters, students, teachers, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered activists, cultural workers, and community members to create a resistance movement against prisons that will continue the work begun at the

1998 National CR Conference. Contact: CR East, PMB# 4053, 341 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012; (212) 561-0912, critresisteast@aol.com, www.criticalresistance.org/creast.

CR New Haven: Organized primarily to assist the ongoing work of existing community and campus groups, CRNH provides technical assistance, training, and funding distribution, and also facilitates communication among local groups resisting the PIC. Recent efforts include helping to coordinate a large rally at the state capitol in Hartford in opposition to the state's attempt to send its prisoners out of state and to police violence in the Connecticut's largest cities. Contact: CRNH, P.O. Box 200786, New Haven, CT 06520; (203) 772-4334, anita.seth@yahoo.com.

How to Start a CR Affiliate in Your Community: The movement against the prison-industrial complex is growing by leaps and bounds. Within the span of a few years, "prison-industrial complex" has become a defining term in the movement challenging the race to incarcerate. A critical part of CR's effort to expand the movement against the PIC is the creation of CR affiliates. Below are some basic ideas for forming a CR affiliate in your community. For more information, please contact CR's national office. The movement needs you!

Screening the Documentary: Screening the CR Video Documentary in your living room, at your school, or in a local community venue is a great way to bring folks together to discuss the issues and the possibility of starting a CR affiliate. A core group of just a few truly dedicated people can successfully launch the effort.

Gathering Members: Once you have decided to start a CR affiliate, one way to raise public consciousness and recruit members is by screening selections from the CR Video Series. The series covers a wide range of topics: political prisoners, the use of prison labor, women in prison, etc. In the Bay Area, CR screened a film every Thursday night over an eight-week period at a local college. A speaker accompanied each film.

Make sure everyone signs in at the door with names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses. Give everyone a flyer announcing the next meeting of the group or the next event. Having something for folks to plug into immediately is essential.

Regular Meeting Times and Places: Having a regular meeting time and place is critical. Sympathetic political organizations, churches, or schools might donate meeting space. Folks will likely come back if meetings are run in an organized, timely, and democratic fashion.

Choosing a Focus: Interest is peaked when the organization has a focus, i.e., a concrete campaign for folks to work on. CR East has chosen to focus on organizing a Northeast Regional Conference and Strategy Session. CR New Haven joined forces with local community groups to fight a new prison planned for New Haven and was involved in a statewide rally at the state capitol in Hartford, which drew about 300 people to protest out-of-state prison transfers. Midwest activists held a Critical Resistance Solidarity Rally on the steps of Ohio's

state capitol in Columbus on September 28, 2000. In the Bay Area, CR's national office, located in Oakland, has worked on local campaigns against California's Proposition 21, the Juvenile Crime Initiative, and on a campaign to halt construction of a new \$335 million, 5,000-bed maximum-security prison in Delano, California. CR activists in the Northwest targeted prison labor by placing cards reading, "This garment was made by prison labor, please return it," in Victoria's Secret lingerie.

How CR's National Office Can Help: The CR web page (criticalresistance.org) can host a page for your CR affiliate. CR's national office makes available the CR Documentary and the CR Video Series, as well as literature in the form of primers on the PIC and related issues and a reading list. In addition, CR's database may already contain a list of activists in your community who are interested in challenging the PIC. CR can provide contact information. CR can also help you build alliances by locating existing organizations in your community that might be interested in joining you in a campaign against the PIC.

CR Publications Collective: At an April 1999 meeting to assess the effects of the September 1998 Critical Resistance conference and the current status of our organization, six people volunteered to work to publish materials in the spirit of CR. In our initial publications meetings, we considered four projects: a special issue of either *Social Justice* or the *Black Scholar*, an anthology, and an organizing guide. This special issue of *Social Justice* is the first production of the CR Publications collective.

As a group, our working process developed gradually. We gathered at the home of two members around a big table; began with conversation and food, which was available throughout the meeting; followed an agenda; and ended all meetings in two hours, usually by 9:00 P.M. We solicited articles and conducted interviews. As papers began to arrive, we met twice a month to review, edit, and plan to fill the gaps in our collection. After eight months of work, we had two slow periods. Each time, almost two months passed without a meeting. Some people dropped out because of other commitments, but with concentrated effort and some new volunteers, the issue came together.

Among our biggest challenges were assuring that the voices of diverse communities were heard in the issue, including prisoners (whose materials came more promptly than those of most free-world writers, despite more arduous conditions of work); dealing with the pros and cons of e-mail communication; finding meeting times that accommodated seven to 10 very busy people; and keeping track of all the papers, which were initially collected by the section coordinators.

The rewards of this project have been great: we got to know each other and our discussion of the articles and the issue's goals have been stimulating and politically educational. We are proud of the final set of writings and there was a great deal of good food, inspiration, and laughter — usually about our own process.

Publications Collective Members

Rose Braz is the Program Director for Critical Resistance and a criminal defense attorney in Oakland, California. She was on the original Critical Resistance organizing committee and also works with the National Lawyers Guild Prison Law Project.

Bo(rita d.) Brown is a 50ish white, working-class butch dyke and ex-political prisoner who spent eight years in federal confinement due to her participation in the George Jackson Brigade, an armed underground revolutionary group that operated in the Pacific Northwest in the late 1970s. She continues to do anti-prison work wherever she is.

Craig Gilmore co-edits *Prison Focus* and is active in the California Prison Moratorium Project.

Ruthie Gilmore is an abolitionist working with Critical Resistance, the California Prison Moratorium Project, and other organizations. A scholar-activist, Gilmore teaches geography at U.C. Berkeley.

Donna Hunter, a Ph.D. from U.C. Berkeley, works for The Beat Within, a nonprofit that conducts writing workshops in juvenile halls around Northern California and at California Youth Authority/Chad and publishes these writings weekly.

Christian Parenti is the author of *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (Verso, 2000).

Dylan Rodriguez is a 26-year-old Pinoy student/teacher/activist who is currently finishing his Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He is part of CR's organizing committee and identifies as a penal and prison abolitionist. His current project concerns the social and political thought of radical U.S. prison intellectuals.

Cassandra Shaylor is the Co-Director of the Women Prisoners Justice Center, a new organization that trains students to provide legal services to women in prison in conjunction with community organizing. She is also a Ph.D. candidate in the History of Consciousness Department, U.C. Santa Cruz, where she is working on a project on women in solitary confinement.

Nancy Stoller is a professor of Community Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she trains grass-roots organizers.

Julia Sudbury is a Nigerian-British zami activist and writer. Her book, *Other Kinds of Dreams: Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation* (Routledge, 1998), was inspired by her involvement in the black women's movement in Britain. She is currently an assistant professor of Ethnic Studies at Mills College, Oakland, and an organizing committee member of Critical Resistance.