

Storming the Gates

The New Wave of Frontal Attacks on Prisons, Jails, and Detention Centers

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In response to a viral video prisoners released detailing moldy conditions inside of the Dekalb County Jail, fifty people flooded the jail in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 12, 2019, clashing with correctional officers and setting off smoke bombs inside the jail and fireworks outside it. The following month, a group twice as large marched to the jail, facing down over 100 police officers. Prisoners smashed the windows in their cells in order to communicate directly with the protesters outside. Smaller actions at the jail and outreach to the families and friends of inmates are ongoing, exerting pressure on the administrators, who have stopped commenting to the news, and contributing to a growing tide of anger against the facility. This is just the latest flare-up in a nationwide wave of struggles against jails, prisons, and other detention facilities from outside as well as within. In the following text, we review some of the highlights of these struggles, address why they are so pressing today, and discuss the necessity of an emancipatory politics that opposes both traditional means of incarceration and the alternative forms of control that are emerging from the restructuring of prisons, jails, and borders.

Timeline of Resistance

Let's start by reviewing recent rebellions against carceral infrastructure from outside the walls. When we understand the following events as a constellation, it appears that a new strategic perception is developing across the United States. This list leaves out the countless beautiful and dignified acts of rebellion taken by prisoners or detainees directly—from individual subversion to coordinated nationwide strikes—in jails, migrant detention centers, prisons, juvenile holding facilities, and involuntary in-patient medical institutions; it also does not include individual acts of sabotage.

July 21, 2017 — St. Louis: When the air conditioning was cut off in the St. Louis County Workhouse, temperatures rose to 108 degrees. Prisoners reached out for help; some could be heard desperately shouting from their windows. When protesters arrived, including anarchists and others close to those who were incarcerated inside the facility, some people in the crowd attempted to tear down the outside fencing of the jail, pulling one section entirely out of the ground.

June 17, 2018 — Portland: When Stephen Miller's family-separation policy for undocumented migrants became a public scandal, a small number of anarchists initiated an encampment in the doorway of the Oregon headquarters of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), in Portland. Later, more people arrived and blocked ICE employees from exiting for a full night. Eventually, hundreds joined the encampment, facing down repeated police attacks despite promises from the Mayor that they would be permitted to protest there.

July 2018 — Nationwide: Occupy ICE blockades, encampments, and protests spread to facilities in Tacoma, Olympia, San Antonio, San Francisco, Charlotte, Los Angeles, Louisville, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Tampa, Sacramento, New York, and elsewhere nationwide. In Lincoln, Nebraska, courageous individuals smashed windows out of the Republican Party headquarters and painted "Abolish ICE" outside of it. At some encampments, clashes

broke out between protesters and police; elsewhere, fascists attacked the demonstrators. The encampments in Los Angeles and Philadelphia drew massive support, including widespread participation by the homeless. In multiple cities, liberal mayors paid lip service to the demands of the movement. Even celebrity politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez adopted its slogans, albeit watering them down. In some cases, city contracts with ICE were nullified completely.

February 3, 2019 — Brooklyn: The electricity at Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC) in Brooklyn, New York was partially shut off, disabling the heat. Inside the facility, temperatures plunged to 49 degrees. In response, a determined crowd forced its way into the atrium of the facility and clashed with police. The following day, lines of anti-riot police surrounded the MDC to keep protesters and journalists out. Electricity and heat were soon returned to the entire facility.

April 12, 2019 — Atlanta: After inmates released a viral video decrying moldy food at the Dekalb County Jail, inside the perimeter of Atlanta, 50 protesters forced their way into the atrium of the jail, many of them masked, and clashed with police outside, throwing firecrackers, smoke bombs, and traffic cones while spray-painting the outer veneer. Police made multiple arrests, but demonstrators surrounded their vehicles, temporarily preventing them from conveying arrestees through the hostile crowd.

May 15, 2019 — Atlanta: Following the melee in April, a larger crowd blocked Memorial Drive, a major east-west artery outside the Dekalb County Jail. Inmates smashed over a dozen windows in three different buildings and shouted out of their windows to protesters below, who were able to communicate with them via megaphone. Around 100 police officers from multiple jurisdictions formed cordons, also blocking on-ramps to the highway next to the jail. Police attacked protesters, who defended themselves, resulting in only three arrests.

May 16, 2019 — Atlanta: A 40-person march with an armed escort marched to the jail again, forcing the police to mobilize 100 officers once more. Inmates banged loudly on the windows. Because of the previous day's actions, inmates were able to call local prison abolitionist groups who had left their information on the sidewalks in chalk. The facility later blocked the phone number, but a new one was circulated among prisoners via word of mouth. A week later, the jail administration blocked all of the exterior windows of the facility, while prisoners continued to report abuses to local abolitionists outside. During the May 16 protest, the mother of Damien Christopher Boyd spoke on the news about the death of her son in Dekalb County Jail in 2018. Via telephone, prisoners detailed other unreported deaths in the facility.

Confronting the Carceral Future

Culling the laboring classes in ritualized cycles of warfare and internal violence is one of the original mainstays of statecraft. Prison and deportation also serve as ways to control the population of those the market deems expendable—what some economists call the “surplus population.” Historically, the incarceration and deportation of a particular demographic have died down whenever a role opened up for it in the market—for example, the Chinese

immigrants who built railroads across the US in the 19th century—and escalated as soon as that market niche contracted.

In the period of urban de-industrialization that started in the 1970s, black workers were laid off from factories and firms across the rust-belt via “last hired, first fired” policies. Automation and global outsourcing emptied urban centers and rural resource extraction zones of their working populace. At the same time, the “War on Drugs” served as an excuse to imprison millions just as they were losing their jobs and, in some cases, resorting to illegal forms of commerce to make ends meet.

Since the 1970s, workers have poured into clerical and service-sector industries as manufacturing, logistics, and other heavy industries have automated, replacing large segments of the workforce with machines. Now, those service and clerical jobs are being restructured, as firms such as Amazon and Uber develop cost-cutting logistics and artificial intelligence to reduce their reliance on human labor. If the role of prisons is to facilitate the management of unemployed and “undesirable” populations—including the racialized, neurologically atypical, and otherwise criminalized—then we can be sure that mass automation, austerity measures, and layoffs will dramatically increase the number of prisoners.

At the same time, thanks to the introduction of various “smart” devices, more and more of our activities are becoming unwaged work, yielding considerable profits for the technocapitalists while enabling unprecedented surveillance. Just as unwaged labor has proliferated, the disciplinary logic of the factory is penetrating our “leisure time” as well. In the future, it will be less and less necessary to pay us for the labor that keeps the system running, and each of us will be more and more expendable in the eyes of the market.

This is why everyone has a stake in opposing the development of carceral technologies and infrastructure. A system of government dedicated to securing wealth and power for a few, regardless of the consequences for the vast majority of human beings and other life forms, requires the constant pre-emptive militarization of space, the suppression of all forms of participatory resistance, and the balkanization of the population into rival groups in segregated zones, each with its own localized system of control. If we wish to be free—or simply to survive—we need to normalize resistance to this on every level. We have to fight the logic, the technology, and the physical infrastructure and facilities of incarceration.

Today, Trump’s racist call to “build the wall” is the latest discourse to legitimize the continued militarization of police around the country and expanded coordination with foreign law enforcement. In cities and along the borders, the military technologies first deployed throughout the Middle East and North Africa are appearing in “peacekeeping operations” against the poor and desperate. Technology firms are developing facial recognition infrastructures, predictive analytics, tracking service, and drone surveillance tools that will be used—not coincidentally—to facilitate both commerce and repression. In the same way that weapons designed for warfare are being used in a time of “peace,” technologies designed for trade are proving useful to carceral contractors.

“Just as it has been necessary to deploy troops around the world to secure the raw materials that keep the economy afloat, it is becoming necessary to deploy troops in the US to preserve the unequal distribution of resources at home. Just

as the austerity measures pioneered by the IMF in Africa, Asia, and South America are appearing in the wealthiest nations of the first world, the techniques of threat management and counter-insurgency that were debuted against Palestinians, Afghans, and Iraqis are now being turned against the populations of the countries that invaded them. Private military contractors who operated in Peshawar are now working in Ferguson, alongside tanks that rolled through Baghdad. For the time being, this is limited to the poorest, blackest neighborhoods; but what seems exceptional in Ferguson today will be commonplace around the country tomorrow.”

-The Thin Blue Line is a Burning Fuse

From the burning hills of Los Angeles and the hurricane-ravaged cities of the Gulf to the flooded neighborhoods of Jakarta, the disasters wrought by climate change will continue to trigger mass human migration at an unprecedented scale. In the decades to come, some nations may collapse as a consequence of mass migratory flight and nativist violence. Elsewhere, technology firms, xenophobic militias, and police forces will work together in hopes of facilitating the swift transfer of refugees through the country, containing them in sophisticated carceral environments, and transforming all urban space into a highly repressive terrain—and sometimes slaughtering them en masse. New markets will emerge in weapons and remediation as corporations cash in on disasters. The overwhelming majority of those industries will require very few workers; they will rely largely on robotics, forced prison labor, information gathering, and artificial intelligence.

We can already see signs of this future today. As the overall population of federal prisoners begins to wane, the number of people locked in county jails and migrant detention facilities is increasing, as is the number of people subject to punitive forms of supervision such as probation, pre-trial diversion, house arrest, and drug court. Technology firms such as Securus and Global TelLink are already making profiles and permanent accounts not only for inmates who use their services to call family and lawyers, but also for those on the outside who receive the calls—logging and storing audio files, card information, and phone numbers.

Soon, we will have to expand bail funds to cover arrest and probation fees. Noise demonstrations outside of jails and prisons may be replaced by vigils outside of the homes of those who are trapped inside them as a cost-cutting practice by the state, so the government will no longer be responsible for housing, feeding, or providing healthcare to those caught in the system.

When I saw the video from inside the Dekalb jail, I knew we would have to respond. I myself have been imprisoned in this jail, with its wet walls and moldy food, and so had many of my friends. In my case, I was in a car stopped on account of an automated license plate scanner affixed to the back of a police cruiser; they took me in for a “failure to appear” for a traffic citation. I wasn’t even the driver of the car.

Around me, our small crowd had donned masks and were preparing to storm into the facility by any means necessary. This time, the Correctional Officers were the ones backing up in confusion, taken by surprise by the growing rage against them and the suffering they administer. We entered the building. A trash can crashed through the metal detector; drums reverberated off of the walls around me. The element of surprise is exactly what all of their tools and technologies are designed to prevent. There weren't many of us, only a few dozen, but we were determined. At that moment, we had gained the upper hand. We knew we could not keep it for long, but we were going to make the most of the time we had.

An Emerging Strategy: Frontal Attack, Complete Refusal

Since 2010, a prisoner-led movement has spread throughout the United States. In December 2010, thousands of prisoners throughout Georgia used smuggled cell phones to coordinate work stoppages and hunger strikes with almost no outside support. The Pelican Bay hunger strike of 2011 drew the support of anti-prison groups throughout the Bay, especially anarchists. Over the following years, smaller strikes and protests occurred in North Carolina, in Florida, in Indiana, and elsewhere.

After the uprising in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, prisoner struggles became more militant around the country. In Alabama, at the Holman Correctional Facility, C-block prisoners have repeatedly ambushed and overpowered guards and engaged in mass actions and strikes. In 2016, a nationwide prison strike grabbed national headlines as prisoners across the country refused forced labor. During the strike, rebellion, rioting, and arson broke out in multiple facilities around the South. Strikes and other acts of resistance have become normal at facilities across the US; another nationwide strike took place in 2018.

The determination to resist debasing conditions in jails, prisons, juvenile detention centers, and migrant holding facilities is growing across the country, as is outside support for those activities. It is especially inspiring to see combative outside actions accompanying prisoner rebellions. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the cartographer of the gulags, wrote in the third volume of *The Gulag Archipelago* that such outside actions would have made all the difference for prisoners struggling against the total repression that prevailed under Stalin's regime.

At the dawn of a new carceral century, this couldn't come too soon.

If we don't succeed in changing the course of history, tomorrow's freedom will look like the probation of today. From the ways that our smartphones track our movements to the new round of anti-abortion laws threatening reproductive autonomy in the Southern US, the matrix of repression is penetrating ever deeper into our lives.

Some well-meaning prison reformers will unwittingly play into carceral discourse by demanding early-release programs and the like. If these are granted, it will be on the condition of increased surveillance at home, the suspension of the Fourth Amendment rights, reduced freedom of movement, exile, anti-association clauses, ankle monitor tracking, fees

and fines. Our opponents will not hesitate to import repressive tools and techniques from loss-prevention firms, from fraud-detection alert systems, from anti-graffiti legislature, from any area, army, country, government, or firm they can find—nor will arms manufacturers or firms that produce censorship technology turn down new markets.

The weapons that are used against those who are lower on the social hierarchy today will eventually be turned against nearly everyone. This is why we must not prioritize the freedom of some over the freedom of others, by defining some as “innocent” or “nonviolent offenders.”

Alongside the immediate physical destruction of all carceral facilities, we should advocate and fight only for unconditional early release, the reduction of sentences, earlier termination of probation, and guaranteed access to parole. We must oppose the proliferation of tracking devices and coercive technological identification on every front, while normalizing and defending practices that preserve anonymity.

Above all, we have to completely discredit the discourse that legitimizes punishment and control of any form, so that struggles against existing jails and prisons do not simply provide cover for the authorities to extend new oppressive measures into the so-called free world in the guise of humanitarian and economical pragmatism. To this end, we should also be experimenting with transformative methods of conflict resolution that leave no space for coercive institutions of any kind.

As we were marching up, a traffic jam piling up behind our banners, police already forming lines to confront us, inmates in the jail began to smash their windows up above us. We could see the glass crack and shatter—first in one building, then another, then another. We held our position, blocking the street below as police grabbed and shoved the people in our front line, slamming them to the ground. A few bottles flew over my head, but mostly we just held on to one another tightly. I knew they could not arrest all of us, however hard they tried. The solidarity of our crowd was too great; I was being embraced by people on every side, just as I held them in turn. In refusing to unblock the streets, we had preserved the publicity of our action: a line of commuters was watching from their cars, filming the police, and occasionally expressing solidarity with us.

Inmates were yelling down to us for help, shouting that they were being pepper-sprayed. Rarely have our struggles intersected so viscerally. Imagine if the walls themselves were smashed, instead of simply the windows?

Against All Authority—Against All Confinement

The time is ripe for mass struggles against confinement. Already, protests against ICE have drawn popular support. Even Republican Senators acknowledge that prisons are overcrowded, if only to justify increased funding. In terms of both carrying capacity and perceived legitimacy, the carceral system is nearing a breaking point. Carceral reformists hope to use this opportunity to introduce adjustments that will stabilize the regimes of confinement and

control for another century. But at this juncture, inspiring actions could catalyze a confrontational movement that pushes for abolition rather than reform.

Many contemporary struggles take on ideological opponents, such as fascists and other white supremacists, or political leaders and legislation. These limited points of intervention rarely facilitate the emergence of long-lasting and uncompromising movements. But the struggle against incarceration is no single-issue campaign. It offers a point of departure for a movement that could span from resisting borders and migrant detention facilities to opposing juvenile holding facilities, police weaponry manufacturers, city jails, forced work arrangements, companies that profit on incarceration, and the police and courts themselves.

In a world that is continuously rearranged to foreclose the possibility of unforeseen developments and unanticipated encounters, the struggle against incarceration is also a struggle against the contemporary organization of our lives. This particular element of governance is absolutely necessary to the functioning of the system, yet large sections of the populace hate it.

It remains only to demonstrate that together, we can do something about it.

Chants could be heard from inside the prison: “Help, help!”—“Unclean Water!”—“Let us out!”—“Shut It Down!” Inmates put their arms through the grates and twirled towels, spreading a banner between two windows reading “HELP!” At one point, we could hear the inmates singing. The words were indecipherable; we could only make out a beautiful, low, melancholy harmony.

Three hundred hundred strong, we advanced, creating a cacophony with pots, pans, air horns, and bells, the front line of the march attacking the fence itself, shaking the outer ring and removing the clasps that adhered it to the poles. Several people took advantage of the gap under the fence to crawl underneath it, scale the second fence, and shout to inmates, before climbing down and scurrying back under to avoid arrest.

The police begin to form lines between the workhouse and us. They know that we won’t stop at ripping down the fence, that when we get the opportunity, we’ll rip the whole place apart, brick by brick.

Sooner or later, all walls fall.

Further Reading and Viewing

- Taking a Global View of Repression
- *A Crime Called Freedom*, Os Cangaceiros
- *Carceral Capitalism*, Jackie Wang

- *Locked Up*, Alfredo Bonanno
- *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aime Cesaire
- Inside-Out—Sub.Media

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