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Slave Labor Discipline: An Ongoing Injustice and Cause for Action

In the old antebellum system of slavery, white planters and government officials recognized that the slavery regime could survive only with the most repressive and bestial force imaginable. Plantation managers used a variety of tortures: the “empetre” or chain, shackles three feet long with two iron rings fastened at each end to secure the slave's lower legs to impede walking; “cachots effrayants”, small maximum security cells without light; the “nabot”, a large iron circular device weighing six to ten pounds that was cold-riveted to the slave's foot; castration; amputation of the feet and/or limbs; forcing gunpowder into the anus or vagina of a slave and then blowing him/her up with a light - “to burn a little powder in the ass of a nigger”; burying them in the dirt up to their necks and smearing their heads with sugar so flies and ants would devour them; forcing slaves to eat animal and human excrement; roasting rebellious slaves barbeque-style over hot coals or an open fire; the whip or lash, inflicting physical cruelty tearing into the flesh of the slave until blood ran. (Source: Manning Marable, 1983)

“Thoughtful white Southerners recognized the barbarism inherent in the U.S. slavery system. One Mississippi slave-owner wrote in 1846 that a certain class of overseers were extraordinarily cruel to Black women and men alike. ‘It is this unrelenting, brutalizing drive, watch and whip, that furnishes facts to abolition writers that cannot be disputed, and that are infamous.’ One South Carolina judge confessed in 1847 that many slaveholders ‘deserved no other name than fiends’ because they delighted in the torture of their chattel.”

- Manning Macable, 1983)

However, in the new forced labor system of modern-day slavery, prison officials still apply repressive and unconscionable methods to retain order and obedience from prisoners resisting inhuman treatment. Prison enslavers enforce a number of psychological tortures, including prolonged solitary confinement in small cages for 23 to 24 hours a day for months, even years without any environmental or social support; loss of phone for 4 to 12 weeks or longer; loss of yard for 4 to 12 weeks or longer; loss of canteen to purchase stationary, food, and hygiene items for 4 to 12 weeks or longer; loss of good time credits making one's stay in prison longer; food loaf, taking one's meal (i.e. a breakfast of scramble eggs, grits, biscuits, or a dinner of rice, red beans, cornbread, carrots, cake) and mixing it all together into one big mass for serving; isolation, removing mattress from cell from 5:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. for 10 days or longer; stripcell, a policy that permits prison guards to strip a prisoner of all belongings, including his mattress, for up to 30 days; retaliation, all of the above and more.

In antebellum slavery, enslaved people said that when they were sold, or otherwise forced to move, they had been “stolen.” Enslaved people used a newly common tongue to make their own personal histories part of a larger story, and they made it clear that this common story was a crime story. Buying and selling people was a crime. Buyers and sellers were criminals. Thus, enslaved people began preparing a radical assault on enslavers' implicit and explicit claims to legitimacy, one that would lay an axe to slave owners' every excuse that their slaves had been obtained by orderly business transactions, well recorded in the law. "I am more than what the law says, more than a body to be sold, raped, tortured, and divided from my children at the will of whites", said Myra, a slave in the Old South. (Source: Edward Baptist, 2014)

In postbellum slavery, we have faced systemic backlash against Reconstruction, the broken promise of reparations, the advent of convict leasing, Jim Crow laws, gentrification and renter displacement, the War Against Poverty, voter suppression, FBI counter-intelligence programs to vilify and destabilize Black leadership movements, CIA-Nicaraguan Contras drug trafficking and illegal gun-running network, the perverse War on Drugs, increasing patterns of income, education, environmental, and housing segregation, and prisons. These are historic problems in race, politics, economy, and society. Our enslaved forebears employed the language of being “stolen” to organize and fight for the abolition of slavery. Likewise, their descendants today employ the language of being “marginalized”, “criminalized”, “oppressed” and thereby “disenfranchised” or “stolen” to organize and fight back against prison enslavers for their freedom. As noted by Manning Marable (1983): “about one third of all prisoners were unemployed at the time of their arrest with the majority averaging less than \$15,000 in annual income prior to their arrests.”

"the truth is...that we know perfectly well how often that (poor blacks) are the victims of police discrimination and judicial unfairness and that their poverty and ignorance make them the scapegoats of our present criminal law. "

W. E. B. Du Bois, "Postscript", Crisis, Vol. 38 (January 1931)

We recognize that imprisoned people are human beings not animals, and that use of the words convict, offender, criminal and such dehumanizes and provides an excuse to perpetuate slavery. Better to drop the punishment philosophy and adopt a humane one that encourages society to engage with prisoners on a humane level and as members of the community who are in the workshop and will be released one day. From this standpoint, we urge everyone to support justice for all and to stand in solidarity with efforts to abolish prison slavery.