

On May 1, prison labor came to a halt in multiple prisons in Alabama. Starting at midnight that day, prisoners stayed in their dormitories & # 82 12; refusing to show up for work at their assigned posts: the kitchen, the license plate manufacturing plant, the recycling plant, the food processing center & # 160; and a prison farm. The prisoners & # 82 17; demands were pretty simple: basic human rights, educational opportunities & # 160; and a reform of Alabama & # 82 17; s harsh sentencing guidelines and parole board. The strike in Alabama was just the latest in a series of strikes at US & # 160; prisons. On April 4, at least seven prisons in Texas staged a work strike after a prisoner sent out a call with the help of outside organizers. About a month earlier, prisoners in states such as & # 160; Texas, & # 160; Alabama, Virginia and Ohio & # 160; called for a national general strike among prisoners on Sept. 9. That's the 45th anniversary of the Attica Rebellion, where guards and inmates died during a prison revolt in upstate New York. The labor strikes are a turn from the most familiar type of political protest behind bars: the hunger strike. While hunger strikes pull at the moral heart strings of the public, work stoppages threaten the economic infrastructure of the prison system itself. The strike in Alabama was organized by the Free Alabama Movement, a nonviolent grassroots organizing group created by prisoners that focuses on the human rights of Alabama & # 82 17; s imprisoned. Not only does Alabama have one of the highest incarceration rates in the United States, but it also has one of the most overcrowded prison systems. The system & # 82 17; s current population sits at about 80 percent over capacity. With nearly double the inmates that the prisons were designed to hold, the packed prisons produce violence, unsanitary conditions & # 160; and & # 160; a href="https://www.splcenter.org/2014/06/04/cruel-confinement-abuse-discrimination-and-death-within-alabama%E2%80%99s-prisons" type="external">medical neglect. Prison laborers and an excavator operator help construct an emergency pipeline to increase supplies of potable water in Willits, California February 25, 2014. Noah Berger / Reuters & # 82 20; We view prison labor as real slavery & # 82 30; [in] 1865 when the 13th Amendment was ratified & # 82 30; they started the first wave of mass incarcerating black people, & # 8 221; said Melvin Ray, co-founder of the Free Alabama Movement. In the years after slavery, a formal prison system formed in the South. Some plantations were bought by the state and a href="https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/05/01/prison-plantations#.GZb6CfMVB" type="external">turned into prisons. & # 82 20; They use [these prisons] as a tool of control. They target African-American communities. They target politically conscious people, politically conscious organizations. And they use these prisons as a form of social control in addition to a plantation [that & # 82 17; s] generating revenue. & # 8 221; In 2014, when Ray, along with Robert Council, founded the Free Alabama Movement, they organized a work stoppage at the Holman and St. Clair prisons. The strike at Holman prison, where Council was incarcerated, lasted from Jan. 1 to 22. Immediately afterward, both men were thrown into solitary confinement. Ray stayed there for more than a year and was just recently released to general population. Council remains in solitary confinement to this day. Prison officials list a number of reasons for Council & # 82 17; s segregation, including that he allegedly administered the Free Alabama Movement Facebook group, and he was a leading and significant factor in the work strike. In the past, hunger strikes have targeted solitary confinement. The well-known hunger strike in 2013, where tens of thousands of prisoners across California refused to eat for 60 days, protested the state & # 82 17; s use of indefinite solitary confinement. It was coupled with other political organizing, including lawsuits and another smaller hunger strike in 2011. Two years after what was called the largest hunger strike in US & # 160; history, California agreed to limit its use of solitary confinement. From Robben Island to Guantanamo to San Quentin, the hunger strike and the penitentiary seem attached to each other. Yet the organizers of the Free Alabama Movement have intentionally moved away from the practice. In an a href="https://freealabamamovement.wordpress.com/2015/02/26/let-the-crops-rot-in-the-fields/" type="external">essay & # 160; titled & # 82 20; Let The Crops Rot in the Fields, & # 8 221; Ray and Council laid out a plan for tackling mass incarceration. The essay argues that the old ways of protesting in prisons & # 82 12; including hunger strikes and letter-writing campaigns & # 82 12; are not sufficient. Instead, organizers should attack the economic incentive of prisons. The answer, then, is to stop working & # 82 12; and remove the corporate profit from the prison industrial complex. The title was a reference to work strikes conducted by people who were enslaved in the South. Members of the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, the prison-organizing group of the Industrial Workers of the World labor union, started sending copies of & # 82 20; Let The Crops Rot in the Fields & # 8 221; to prisoners in other states. The labor union, apparently the only current union that welcomes prisoners, has about 800 members behind bars across the country. The essay has inspired prisoners in Virginia, Ohio, and Mississippi to organize to participate in the National Day of Strike in September 2016 and, for Texas, to have organized a work strike of their own in April. Inmates work in the furniture shop during a media tour of the Curran - Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 7, 2015. Mark Make la / Reuters Ray and Council haven & # 82 17; t always held these views. & # 82 20; Over the years we & # 82 17; ve tried a few other different things. We & # 82 17; ve tried letter-writing campaigns. We & # 82 17; ve tried marching, protesting, filing complaints in the court. We & # 82 17; ve tried basically all of the avenues that can be used that are made available to people who are incarcerated, & # 8 221; Council said. In 2007, the entire population at Holman prison, including Council, & # 160; a href="http://legacy.decaturdaily.com/decaturdaily/news/070808/hunger.shtml" type="external">participated in a hunger strike. The prison was in a deplorable state & # 82 12; backed-up sewage issues, mold on the walls, collapsed and rusted pipes. The prisoners demanded that internal affairs and reporters be allowed inside the prison to document the conditions. Ray and Council met in prison when they were both jailhouse lawyers, assisting other prisoners with filing lawsuits and complaints about the issues in the prison while also writing their own. As their incarceration continued and their lawsuits and grievances against the prisons went nowhere, Council, Ray, and other prisoners began to have a change of heart on how to bring about change. & # 82 20; We were begging [officials] to please follow the rules. Please have mercy on me. We & # 82 17; re asking some people to have mercy that just don & # 82 17; t have any mercy, & # 8 221; Council explained. & # 82 20; That revelation brought us to the fact that you can & # 82 17; t appeal to the moral [part] of a system that doesn & # 82 17; t have morals. & # 8 221; The sentiment echoes the thoughts of the late Stoke ly Carmichael, a civil rights leader and organizer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which led the civil rights movement among youth in the South. & # 82 20; In order for non violence to work, your opponents must have a conscience, & # 8 221; he & # 160; said in 1967, two years after the assassination of Malcolm X and a year before Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. & # 82 20; The United States has none. & # 8 221; Alex Friedmann, the managing editor of & # 160; Prison Legal News, a publication of the Human Rights Defense Center, /s/