

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 & amp ; # 160 ; and a prison farm . The prisoners & # 82 17 ; demands were pretty simple : basic human rights , educational opportunities & amp ; # 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 & amp ; # 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 & amp ; # 160 ; Texas , & amp ; # 160 ; Alabama , Virginia and Ohio & amp ; # 160 ; called for a national general strike among prisoners on Sept . 9 . That 's the 45 th 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 & amp ; # 160 ; and & amp ; # 160 ; a href = " https :// www . spl center . org / 201 40 604 / cruel - confinement - abuse - discrimination - and - death - within - alabama - prisons " type = " external " > medical neglect ; a href = " https :// www . spl center . org / 201 40 604 / cruel - confinement - abuse - discrimination - and - death - within - alabama - prisons " type = " external " > 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 13 th Amendment was ratified & # 82 30 ; they started the first wave of mass incarcerating black people , & # 82 21 ; 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 & amp ; # 160 ; a href = " https :// www . themarshallproject . org / 2015 / 05 / 01 / prison - plantations # . G Z b 6 C f M V B " 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 . & # 82 21 ; 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 & amp ; # 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 & amp ; # 160 ; a href = " https :// freealabamamovement . wordpress . com / 2015 / 02 / 26 / let - the - crops - rot - in - the - fields / " type = " external " > essay & amp ; # 160 ; titled & # 82 20 ; Let The Crops Rot in the Fields , & # 82 21 ; 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 & # 82 21 ; 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'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 , & # 82 21 ; Council said . In 2007 , the entire population at Holman prison , including Council , & amp ; # 160 ; a href = " http :// legacy . decaturdaily . com / decaturdaily / news / 070 808 / hunger . sh tml " 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't & # 82 17 ; have any mercy , & # 82 21 ; 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't & # 82 17 ; have morals . & # 82 21 ; 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 , & # 82 21 ; he & amp ; # 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 . & # 82 21 ; Alex Friedmann , the managing editor of Prison Legal News , a publication of the Human Rights Defense Center ,