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How the Ongoing Prison Strike is Connected to the Labor Movement

Kim Kelly

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It's a tough time to be a worker in America. The Trump administration has slashed important workplace safety regulations to ribbons; the economic gap between the poor and working classes and the 1% continues to widen at an alarming rate; poverty remains rampant; and overall, union membership, which affords protection to workers throughout the country, hovered around only 11% for 2017. Headlines alleging worker exploitation at Silicon Valley giants like Amazon, Tesla, and Uber bombard our screens; even "progressive" media organizations swept up in the digital media organizing wave are struggling, as BuzzFeed founder Jonah Peretti has repeatedly spoken out against unionizing, while Slate and Thrillist employees who have unionized have accused the companies of using anti-union tactics and stalling the process. And the most vulnerable worker populations—sex workers, immigrants, and undocumented people—face increased repression from the government.

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There is hope, though. For centuries, a worker's most potent weapon against exploitation from capitalism and oppression from the powers that be has been direct action: the strike. And right now, America's prisoners are on strike. Incarcerated workers across the nation are standing up to protest their inhumane living conditions and buck the horrific yoke of prison slavery with organized labor's strongest weapons—solidarity and collective action.

The prison strike was organized by workers both inside and outside detention facilities, spearheaded by Jailhouse Lawyers Speak (JLS), and supported by the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC) and the Free Alabama Movement (FAM), and sparked by [deadly uprisings at Lee Correctional Institution in South Carolina earlier this year that cost seven prisoners' lives. The strike began on August 21 and ends on September 9, dates that reflect the legacy of rebellion in American prisons: on August 21, 1971, George Jackson was killed by prison guards in San Quentin, and his death was met by protests from other prisoners across the country, culminating in the famed September 9 uprising at the Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York. By choosing these dates, participants in the prison strike of 2018 are drawing a direct line between their current struggle and the struggles of those who have come before, emphasizing the stark fact that very little has changed in terms of conditions or opportunities for those who are locked up and held by the state since the birth of the modern prison system.

The striking prisoners of today have released a list of ten demands, which calls for improvements to the current living conditions in prisons, increased rehabilitation programs, educational opportunities, and specific policy goals. This essentially articulates the idea of non-reformist reforms, a central plank of prison abolition. By illuminating the barbarity of the current prison system and calling for its abolishment while advocating for an improvement in current conditions, they are—to para-

phrase French socialist André Gorz—asking not for what can be achieved within a current system, but for what should be possible.

As of August 21, across 17 states (and one Canadian province), these incarcerated workers are demanding real, tangible prison reform, and the abolition of one of America's great enduring shames—the loophole enacted by the 13th amendment that decrees slavery can be used to penalize those convicted of a crime. This is where the term “prison slavery” originates, as director Ava DuVernay laid out in her groundbreaking 2016 documentary *13th*, which argues that slavery never ended — it was just repurposed by the prison industrial complex and blossomed as mass incarceration. Her documentary argued that the new American plantations don't grow cotton, they work prison jobs churning out license plates and other cheap goods, for which prisoners are paid mere pennies on the hour—if at all. Meanwhile, prison labor generates an estimated \$1 billion per year, proving to be quite a profitable business for the private companies and corporations who benefit from prisoners' work.

Prison labor is used to manufacture a vast array of consumer goods, from Christmas toys and blue jeans to military equipment, lingerie, and car parts. Incarcerated people also frequently serve as a captive labor force for prisons themselves as kitchen and maintenance workers, and for a variety of other services, from shoveling snow after a Boston blizzard to harvesting oranges in Florida. (California recently made headlines when it was revealed that it was using prison labor to fight its deadly wildfires, which it has done since the 1940s; the prisoners (which included some juvenile offenders) were reportedly paid \$1 per hour plus \$2 per day to risk their lives, and are barred from becoming firefighters after their release.) Prisoners are paid very little for their work; the average wage in state prisons ranges, on average, from 14 cents to 63 cents per hour for “regular” prison jobs, and between 33 cents and

\$1.41 per hour for those who work for state-owned businesses, and while they are working full-time jobs, prisoners do not always have the benefit of basic labor protections, such as minimum wage, sick leave, or overtime pay. Given that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with 2.3 million people currently behind bars, the prison industrial complex would collapse were it to pay incarcerated workers the minimum wage—which creates further incentive for them to keep locking people up.

Many prisoners welcome the chance to work during their incarceration, because it gets them out of their cells, allows them to make purchases from commissary, and gives them the opportunity to send money home to their loved ones, but not everyone is given a choice: according to *Newsweek*, some prisoners in eight states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas—are not paid at all for their labor in government-run facilities.

Unlike most other workers, prisoners cannot simply walk off the job; they are forced to get more creative. Participants in the strike have several options available to them, according to *Mother Jones*, including commissary boycotts, work stoppages, sit-ins, and hunger strikes, and reports of participation are continually coming in from different facilities. In addition, these workers also have much more to fear in terms of retaliation, and several organizers say that they have already endured punitive measures.

Participating in a prison strike is a matter of life or death, but for prisoners seeking justice, if not freedom, there is really no other option.

There has been a huge amount of media coverage over this prison strike, a massive contrast to the last major national prison strike in 2016, which was said by some to be the largest prison strike in American history and involved what one organizer estimated as roughly 20,000 incarcerated workers and across at least 20 facilities yet received little to no mainstream

media coverage. The tide seems to be turning, buoyed by a number of factors, from the continuing outcry over police brutality and more visible conversations over the horrors of the prison industrial complex to the overtly racist practices of the Trump regime. More people on the outside are waking up to the terrible plight of our siblings behind the walls, but awareness isn't enough: they need support, solidarity, and action. It bears remembering that, above all, this strike is a human rights campaign.

Ending prison slavery and supporting incarcerated workers is absolutely a labor issue, and every union and labor activist in the nation should be standing up to support their efforts. The companies who profit off of this modern day slavery have blood on their hands, just like history's craven factory owners and coal bosses who oversaw the deaths and degradation of previous generations. We need to equate monetarily supporting companies that use prison labor with crossing the picket line, and to scabbing for enslavement.

The fact that there are human beings housed in cages who are forced to work for slave wages is completely unacceptable by any metric, and fixing (if not completely abolishing) this wretched system should be a priority for those who consider themselves part of the labor movement, or on the right side of history. An injury to one is an injury to all, and our fellow workers on the inside are bleeding out.