control space' and passage through it" (189). While not very successful in keeping and maintain the carceral spaces, the specifics of prison riots all revolve around the importance of taking over and controlling space. The brief narrative we provided of the Kinross riot demonstrates this point.

[46]https://shadowproof.com/2018/08/16/im-for-disruption-interview-with-prison-strike-organizer-from-jailhouse-lawyers-speak/

[47] https://unheardvoicesotcj.wordpress.com/2018/04/24/the-announcement-of-a-national-prison-strike-to-take-place-across-the-nation/?_e_pi_=7%2CPAGE_ID10%2C8566630939. See also FAM's "Campaign to Redistribute the Pain."

[48] https://fireinside.noblogs.org/2018prisonstrikes/

[49] Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.* p. 162.

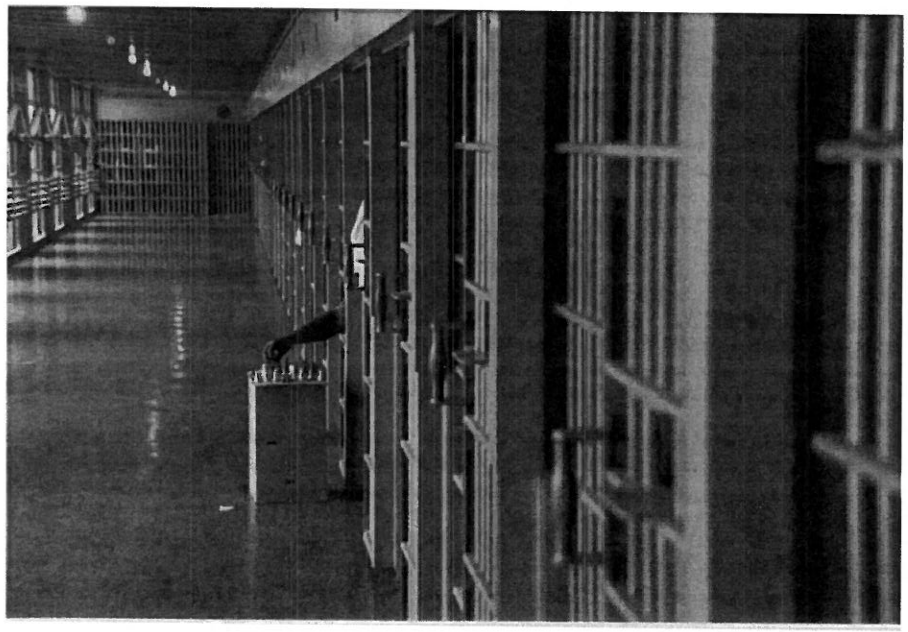
[50] Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, p. 190-191

[51] George Jackson, *Blood in my Eye*, p. 86. Emphasis mine.

[52] Ibid., 124

[53] Ibid. 126. Italics mine.

True Leap Press: Zine Distro
P.O. Box 6045
Concord, CA 94524



Like a Game of Chess: The Prison Strike and Abolitionist Strategy

September 6, 2018 by abolitionjournal

by Alejo Stark

Abstract

The 2016 prison strike was the most widespread coordinated action undertaken by prison rebels in the history of the United States. Today, we are in the midst of a second wave of such extraordinary actions. But what is the prison strike, the specter that haunts the racial capitalist state in an "age of riots"? To begin to

answer this question, this essay thinks the relation between the prison strike and the recurrent crises of state and capital, showing that the terrain of struggle of the recent waves of prison strikes is partially produced by state budget cuts in the wake of the 2008-10 "financial" crisis. I then proceed to defend an abolitionist strategy of "disruption" of the reproduction of the carceral state apparatus. Lastly, I provide one possible framework that might help us think the relation between the prison strike and other contemporary flashpoints of Black struggle, such as the 2014 Ferguson rebellion.

[*featured image above: Inmates playing chess from prison cells, Attica Correctional Facility, Attica, New York – photo by Cornell Capa – via The Robert Capa and Cornell Capa Archive, Promised Gift of Cornell Capa*]

Introduction

On September 9, 2016, the forty-fifth anniversary of the Attica prison rebellion, prison rebels across the United States went on strike "against slavery in America." By deploying work stoppages as the dominant tactic, actions in about two-dozen states resulted in the complete shutdown of several carceral facilities, lasting for days. State retaliation against prisoners was brutal and swift. The prison strikes-turned-riots were violently repressed and too many prison rebels were immediately put in solitary confinement for months. Despite the brutal response, just two years later, prisoners called for a barrage of actions to disrupt the reproduction of the institutions of their captivity, to take place between August 21 and September 9, 2018. Thus, following the most massive, extended prison strike in North American history, and amid what could become an even more extraordinary flashpoint of the prisoner resistance movement,[1] I ask: *what is the prison strike, the specter that haunts the racial capitalist state in an "age of riots"?*

In what follows, I begin to characterize the terrain of struggle of the extraordinary prisoner resistance movement today. In particular, I will attempt to think the current wave of prison strikes in relation to what Joshua Clover characterizes as "circulation struggles" in *Riot. Strike. Riot.* Despite the language and emphasis on the strike as the dominant tactic, I ask to what extent is prisoners' self-activity in resonance with the characterization of an "age of

[33] Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.* p. 25

[34] Ibid., p. 170

[35] Ibid., 155

[36] Ibid.,16-17

[37] Ibid., 129

[38] Ibid., 182

[39] Ibid., 27

[40] As Gilmore succinctly writes in *Golden Gulag*, "[r]acism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." (*Golden Gulag*, p. 28).

[41] See also Dan Berger's essay "Rattling the cages": "The prison is indeed a workplace, but it is not only that — and perhaps not even primarily that. Prisons function more like sites of worklessness than they do as factories. Deindustrialization and neoliberal restructuring have pushed millions of people out of the formal economy. A large percentage ends up in prison. Once there, more than half of them perform no productive work whatsoever. Of the 2.3 million-person prison population, an estimated 900,000 people work, mostly for the state. They earn pennies on the dollar, if they are paid at all. Forced labor remains particularly brutal in Southern prisons. But the fact remains that most prisoners do not labor, and many would prefer safe and fairly remunerated work to the structural boredom of prison life."

[42] See the Prison Policy Initiative's report on prison labor here: https://www.prisonpolicy.org/prisonindex/prisonlabor.html

[43]A huge burden of this cost falls on the loved ones of incarcerated people. See the report here, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/money.html

[44] Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, p. 144

[45] Another aspect—though less important aspect from our point of view— is the spatialization of struggle in riots. As Clover argues, riots are "'struggles to

[22]https://money.cnn.com/2009/06/05/news/economy/Michigan_closes_prisons/index.htm?postversion=2009060614

[23] https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/10/07/michigan-prisons-kinross-upper-peninsula/73458330/

[24] Several of the comrades inside Kinross we are in communication with confirm this. You can listen to their interviews here: https://michiganabolition.org/kinrossvoices/

[25] From a May 13, 2015 document by the Free Alabama Movement: "When you tie in imprisonment to slavery, as proscribed by the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution, then you can see how we have come full circle- and all of this is made possible by the police. This all stems from the 13th Amendment, and the exception clause found therein." https://freealabamamovement.wordpress.com/2015/05/13/modern-implications-of-the-13the-amendment-slavery-clause-exception/

[26] See also Colleen Hackett and Ben Turk's excellent essay "Shifting Carceral Landscapes: Decarceration and the Reconfiguration of White Supremacy." – https://abolitionjournal.org/shifting-carceral-landscapes

[27] http://www.socialjusticejournal.org/the-worrying-state-of-the-anti-prison-movement/

[28] https://www.vera.org/publications/price-of-prisons-2015-state-spending-trends

[29] We can easily track the location of actions in 2016 thanks to the Mask magazine's round-up: http://www.maskmagazine.com/the-prisoner-issue/struggle/live-updates-prisoner-strike

[30] https://www.thestate.com/opinion/op-ed/article209874514.html

[31] See Ruth Wilson Gilmore's recent lecture on "Organized Abandonment and Organized Violence," https://vimeo.com/146450686

[32] Repertoire is a generic term that indexes different tactics deployed by populations in their struggle for survival and emancipation.

riots"? That is, how do we think the relation between the rhythms of the Ferguson-Baltimore-Charlotte rebellions, and those of the prison strike? How do we account for the perpetual "state of emergency" that the "tradition of the oppressed" teaches us is the norm, rather than the exception?[2] At the risk of moving too quickly, it could be said that the crisis of mass incarceration is a crisis of racial capitalism.[3] What this means is that *the massive self-activity of prison rebels today points to the carceral state's failing attempt to provide a "spatial fix" to the crisis of racialized surplus populations.*[4] Thus, people struggle where they're at—but not necessarily in the spaces and conditions of their own choosing.[5] In the United States, where 2.3 million people (predominantly Black and Latino men) are locked up behind bars on any given day, the sites of *circulation struggles* (riots, and so on) are not just in squares, avenues, and strip malls but also prison yards.[6]

But *why now?* How do we account for the extraordinary intensification of prisoner self-activity over the past few years? As has been well-documented, the carceral boom of the early 1970s tracks transformations in patterns of capital accumulation and state capacity—that is, mass incarceration tracks deindustrialization, the growth of racialized relative surplus populations and capital's shift toward profitability in "circulation" (i.e., in finance, information technology, logistics, etc.). [7] Therefore, the massive carceral state, which locks up millions of people today, is not a novelty in US carceral geographies. As such, carceral expansion does not solely explain the massive prison strikes today.[8] Similarly, we might argue that the Thirteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution, which famously contains the statement that slavery is to be abolished "except as a punishment for crime," cannot explain the specificities of the terrain of struggle in which the prisoner resistance movement moves today.[9] The carceral state and racial capitalism have changed tremendously since the late nineteenth century, even as we still inhabit a world grappling with the consequences of what W. E. B. Du Bois calls "the counter-revolution of property" and the failures of Reconstruction. *In what follows, this essay will argue that the 2008-10 crisis and subsequent state budget cuts provide some clues to understanding the terrain of struggle where self-activity of prison rebels unfurls today.* More specifically, I start with a broad overview of the 2016 prison strike and then focus on the details of the prison strike-turned-riot in Michigan's Kinross prison. This case study will help us trace

the general dynamics of the 2008-10 crisis as it unfolded in the Rust Belt, followed by a brief discussion of why this hypothesis can be generalized to other geographies.

The following characterization of the current situation, which focuses on the ever-recurring crises of racial capitalism, should not obscure the courageous and dedicated work of comrades inside and outside prison walls (which the author of this essay is also a part of). The aim of this essay is not to provide a "total picture" of the situation (as if that were possible). Life will always escape the apparatus of capture of any model. Our modest aim is to highlight some tendencies at work, hopefully bringing into clearer focus abolitionist strategies immanent in today's prisoner resistance movement.

The 2016 Prison Strike

Two prisoner-led organizations initiated the call for the 2016 nationwide prison strike: The Free Alabama Movement (FAM) and the Free Ohio Movement (FOM). Various other organizations also supported the call, such as the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee of the IWW (IWOC).[10] The date chosen for the strike was September 9, the 45-year anniversary of the Attica prison rebellion, which broke out in the New York prison just a few weeks after the murder of Black Panther George Jackson at San Quentin prison on August 21, 1971, and ended in the violent murder of 33 prisoners, placing the 2016 prison strike on a long continuum of prisoner-led struggles. Moreover, as an imprisoned comrade reminded me recently, September 9 also commemorates a 1739 slave rebellion in South Carolina, remembered today as the Stono Rebellion.[11] The words *slavery* and *strike* reverberate again and again in the writings and voices of the prisoner resistance struggle.

The shift toward the strike as a tactic to be deployed and generalized by prison rebels can be traced to the Free Alabama Movement's 2015 document "Let the Crops Rot in the Fields." Here, FAM outlines their three-part strategy: (1) shutdowns/strikes, (2) boycotts, and (3) consolidating resources "at the site of oppression: the prisons."[12] FAM contrasts their three-part strategy to what they call "the old way," also a three-part strategy, which consists of (1) hunger strikes, (2) protests at the capitol (i.e., rather than at prisons), and (3) letter-

[16]"The vast majority of the $888,320 bill was wages, overtime, meals and accommodations for about 100 emergency response team members who were sent to Kinross from around the state and stayed there about a week, Chris Gautz told the Free Press Tuesday." Source:

https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2017/01/04/kinross-prison-riot-michigan-inmates/96146186/

[17] "On December 1, 2013, Aramark Correctional Services, LLC (Aramark) was given the responsibility to feed roughly 44,000 inmates in Michigan's 32 correctional facilities.1 On July 13, 2015, the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) announced it was terminating the Aramark contract and would transition to another firm, Trinity Services Group by September 9, 2015.2 Aramark lasted less than two years."

[18] https://itsgoingdown.org/battle-continues-update-michigan-prison-strike-repression/

[19] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag,* pgs. 26-27.

[20] "The correspondence between regions suffering deep economic restructuring, high rates of unemployment and underemployment among men (cf. S. L. Myers 1992), and intensive surveillance of youth by the state's criminal justice apparatus present the relative surplus population as the problem for which prison became the state's solution (see also Males 1999)." Ibid., p. 113.

[21] "Source documents trace the initiative to a June 2008, audit by Michigan's Auditor General, Thomas H. McTavish. At the time, McTavish concedes that the MDOC's 'efforts to manage food services costs were moderately effective,' but nonetheless proposes privatization. Citing the per prisoner food costs in two states with privatized food services, Florida and Kansas, McTavish estimated that Michigan could save $10.2 to $38.0 million annually by outsourcing food, or approximately 0.5 to 1.9 percent of the MDOC budget." See the following report: http://irlee.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/PrivatizationOfPrisonFood.pdf

underwent a four-decade increase. The first prisons were built to deal with unruly workers; they expanded to remove allegedly superfluous workers altogether." https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/prison-strike-slavery-attica-racism-incarceration/

[10] We note that members of the Free Ohio Movement, such as Siddique Abdul Hassan, were part of the 1993 Lucasville uprising in Ohio. We emphasize this to demonstrate the continuity between the different cycles of prisoner self-activity. A similar argument can be made about several dedicated organizers with IWOC and other abolitionist formations. Tracing the continuities in the waves and rhythms of struggles—in particular,l the production of militants in those moments of intense activity—seems crucial to us, though it is not the focus of this text.

[11] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stono_Rebellion

[12] https://libcom.org/library/let-crops-rot-fields

[13] This is a point made again and again by the comrades of the "The Fire Inside" collective. Read their analysis here: https://incarceratedworkers.org/sites/default/files/resource_file/fireinside.pdf

[14] The FAM document marks a significant shift in strategy. One problem with this strategy is its generalizability. While the "prison industry" might reap significant profits in Alabama, most imprisoned people in the United States do not work.[14] Which is to say, contemporary prisons are *not slave labor camps*. Rather, prisons are *warehouses* for containing an idled surplus population that cannot be absorbed either by capital or by the state's dwindling capacity to pay a social wage. When prisoners do work, the kind of work they do is reproductive labor (either waged or unwaged). We will return to point shortly and its importance to debates surrounding "circulation struggles" today. See also FAM's more recent "Campaign to Redistribute the Pain 2018."

[15] From "The Fire Inside" zine by the Fire Inside Collective (pg. 1). For a comprehensive list of the 2016 Prison Strike actions, see http://www.maskmagazine.com/the-prisoner-issue/struggle/live-updates-prisoner-strike

writing campaigns (or petitions). FAM traces a strong line of demarcation, stating that while the 2013 hunger strike that spread throughout the California prison system showed "leadership and unity," the hunger strike as a general tactic is now exhausted. They write,

> We have to strategize with the understanding that we are dealing with modern day slave profiteers. These businessmen will gladly let us die from starvation so long as their assembly lines keep moving.

Similarly, about "protest[ing] at the capitol", FAM writes,

> Sure, the traditional marches bring attention to issues and they bring people together, but they simply don't bring about much results. If we must march, then let's March at the prisons where mass incarceration and prison slavery are taking place at... when the people protest against police brutality in Ferguson, Memphis, and California, they are doing it at the police stations.

FAM's mention of the riots in Ferguson is not minor. Struggles inside and outside prison walls inspire one another, generating a kind of feedback loop, and being attuned to these rhythms is also part of the broader abolitionist strategy today. [13] FAM is clear: the work strike becomes the key tactic to shut down prisons, hitting the slave owners (and their "assembly lines") where it hurts: their wallets.[14] Importantly, FAM's 2015 manifesto indexes a fundamental shift in strategy for the prisoner resistance movement, toward the centrality of prison labor ("slave labor") that, for FAM, is enshrined by the Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution. The way to shut prisons down is for workers to *go on strike and let the crops rot in the fields*. This is partially what happened on September 9, 2016.

Though it is hard to pin down the exact number of imprisoned workers who did not show up to work on September 9, it is estimated that more than 50,000 workers in about two dozen different states either refused to work or staged some kind of action in solidarity with the nationwide call.[15] Prison wardens and their staff had to scramble to coordinate the reproductive labor of the prison: washing, cleaning, and perhaps most importantly, cooking. To this end, *the 2016 strike was highly successful, in that it made the cost of managing and containing prisoners harder for the state, even if only temporarily.*

In Michigan, for example, the state spent almost $1 million to quell a strike-turned-riot on September 9 and 10.[16] Like in other facilities, prisoners at Kinross had been struggling against uninhabitable conditions for at least a year.[17] In the lead-up to the September strike, prisoners at Kinross staged a protest that mostly focused on rejecting the maggot-infested food. Beyond food quality and what Jake, a prison rebel at Kinross, called "slave wages," the unlivable conditions that have been described to us by Kinross prisoners are as follows: reprehensible visitation room procedures, high phone rates (costs are twenty cents a minute though many folks only make twenty cents an hour), a sub-par ventilation system (there are reports of dozens of prisoners with breathing problems), and overpopulation (units built to house four prisoners were housing eight—it was "like tight packing in the slave ships," Baba "X" Guy, a Kinross prisoner would later tell us.) Due to these and other unlivable conditions, Kinross kitchen workers decided to not show up to work on September 9, leading to a complete shutdown of the facility. On the day after the strike, the food conditions only worsened. According to Fred, a poet and abolitionist comrade imprisoned at Kinross at the time, with no workers to prepare food, the prison's warden and his staff were spotted in the kitchen making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for prisoners. On the same day, and with the food situation being even more dire than before, tensions were high and prisoners came out of the "chow hall" (i.e., the dining hall) to gather in the small but central Kinross prison yard. Fred, who witnessed the events that day, told us in an interview with Rustbelt Abolition Radio,

> Guys decided they weren't going to go into their housing, leaving from breakfast, leaving from the chow hall that morning. They decided they were going to stand out and protest. Protest the food, protest health services, protest the ventilation, protest the living conditions overall. So these few guys stood outside, walking in circles protesting, chanting, equal work, equal pay, chanting, and they were also calling for other guys inside the housing units to come stand with them in solidarity.

Others reported that prisoners were also chanting "Black lives matter" and "prisoner lives matter." Slowly but surely the crowd grew larger and larger, to include almost all of the 1,200 prisoners at Kinross whose units faced the central yard. The refusal of labor by kitchen workers was perhaps the spark of a more generalized insurrection of the dispossessed, of what I will later discuss

interests of the entire proletariat." By proletariat, in our moment, we must mean in the expanded sense proposed, for example, by Gilles Dauvé: "The proletariat is the negation of this society. It is not the collection of the poor, but of those who are 'without reserves,' who are nothing, have nothing to lose but their chains, and cannot liberate themselves without destroying the whole social order" (cited in Clover, *Riot.Strike.Riot.* pg. 160).

[6] This number is from 2018 and it accounts for those locked up in "1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 1,852 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 80 Indian Country jails, as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories." See the Prison Policy Initiative's report here: https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2018.html. As the report points out, incarceration rates for women have grown "even faster than for men."

[7] On both of these points, see the excellent introduction to Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag* and references therein, pgs. 11-29.

[8] In fact, a 2013 article argues that prison riots have *declined* even as "prison populations explode." The author attempts to explain this tendency by pointing to the emergence of super-max security prisons and tactical riot-suppression teams or "Emergency Response Teams." Clearly, this is no longer the case today, leading us to ask the question we have been asking: Why now? https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/12/have-a-safe-riot/354671/

[9] See Dan Berger's key intervention in relation to the discursive mobilization of "prison slavery." In the midst of the massive 2016 prisoner strike, he writes, "The organizers have described the actions as protesting 'prison slavery.' The comparison here is apt. For it is captivity, not labor, that defines prisons and slavery. Both institutions confine people physically and monitor or prohibit their movement, communication, and political activity. But slavery was ultimately a labor regime that could not function without its captives. As W. E. B. Du Bois noted, the general strike of slaves won the Civil War for the North. The same cannot be said of prisons. The state uses mass incarceration to incapacitate people unable to participate in the economy. Although some institutions do force prisoners to work, free labor doesn't explain why the prison population

for the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm." Far from treating it as a "norm," *Blood in My Eye*, finished shortly before George Jackson was murdered, seeks to think the relation between fascism (which is in its "most advanced form" in Amerika) and capitalist crises. Jackson argues that, "[f]ascism must be seen as an episodically logical stage in the socio-economic development of capitalism in a state of crisis" (*Blood in My Eye*, 137). However, "pure fascism, absolute totalitarianism, is not possible" given that "we are not defeated" (*Blood in My Eye,* 130). In an extraordinary 1971 interview with the slain Black Panther by Karen Wald, Jackson argues that "the prison liberation movement" is central to destroying the "function of the prison as an institution serving the needs of the totalitarian state," therefore, we "have to destroy its effectiveness, and that's what the prison movement is all about" (quoted in *The New Abolitionists*, 230). Fascism is materialized in the infrastructures of social death we call prisons. That is, in those nodes that are part of and reproduce the more extensive social relations that make up our society: racial capitalism.

[3] By using the term "racial capitalism," I am evoking Cedric Robinson's formulation in his seminal book *Black Marxism*. Beyond just focusing on what Robinson calls the "non-objective character of capitalism," capital's process of expanded reproduction, the process of capital accumulation, is both racial and racializing. To use one of Ruth Wilson Gilmore's well-known expressions: "capitalism requires inequality and *racism enshrines* it."

[4] That is, the "spatial fix," or the "prison fix" – as the essay will later develop with the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore—works by geographically displacing and containing those racialized bodies rendered "surplus" to the needs of productive capital.

[5] This approach thereby allows us to partially relate the self-activity of racialized surplus populations—both inside and outside prison walls—and thus to combat the reifying tendency of characterizing the prisoner resistance struggle as separate from the social relations it is necessarily a part of. In that sense, we affirm the communist tendency to "bring to the front the common

as the "surplus rebellion." The crowd of chanting prisoners disregarded prison staff's attempts to dissuade them from continuing the protest. Instead of obeying commands, the prisoners stormed the control center. *The strike had turned into a riot.* Then the repression began. Four or five hours after the prisoners had taken over the Kinross prison yard, the Michigan Department of Corrections' (MDOC) "Emergency Response Team" (ERT) came in. The prison staff sounded the emergency horn, ordering all prisoners to go back to their bunks. At this point, Fred tells us,

> When you hear this emergency count horn, it means enter the building. *And everyone ignored it.* I told you, all rules and policies went out the door like all consequences for breaking any rules or policies were not adhered to. And I noticed that once the ERT was about to come through the door of the control center to enter the compound, the prison population who were out there protesting, they strategically closed off the entrance so that the ERT couldn't enter into the facility to disperse the crowd. And then I noticed that once the administration noticed what the prisoners were doing, they rerouted the ERT to the side entrance, and once the prisoners noticed that, they blocked the side entrance. So they had the front entrance and the side entrance blocked. *It's like a game of chess ... you move, we move, you move, we move.*

After hours of "playing chess" with the ERT team, perhaps out of desperation, or frustration, prisoners finally went back to their bunks and locked down to be counted. As with any similar concessions by prison rebels before, at Attica in 1971, at Lucasville in 1993, and now at Kinross in 2016, *it was a trick.* As soon as the guys began to go back to their cells to be counted, the prison guards throughout Kinross abandoned their posts. Fred tells us,

> At that point, no one knew what was gonna happen, so everyone just started running crazy. Some people were already intoxicated because you know they had been drinking and smoking that day, because, like I said, all rules and policies went out the door. Like guys were walking around brandishing weapons, you know, in preparation to defend themselves against ERT. Man. Once there were no officers in the housing units, guys just

> ran rampant. With breaking into the counseling office, stealing files, setting things on fire, throwing washing machines and dryers out the window, snatching sinks and toilets from the wall and breaking cameras and breaking windows. Yeah, it was mayhem....

The ERT brutally came in with rubber bullets, tear gas, as well as (reportedly) live ammunition, and managed to remove about two hundred prisoners from their bunks, zip-tied them, threw them in the prison yard, and left them out in the cold rain of a Michigan fall storm for hours. These comrades were charged with inciting to riot or strike, a level one offense, and put in solitary confinement. By doing call-ins (or "phone zaps") and pressuring wardens at the various facilities where the prisoners were now being held, Michigan Abolition and Prisoner Solidarity (MAPS) and their accomplices were able to get some guys out of solitary by May 1, 2017, earlier than the State had planned.[18] When prisoners defy the conditions of their captivity, retaliation is both swift and brutal. As such, we should remember the extraordinary sacrifice made by those inside and support them in their continued struggle against captivity. It was due to their courageous action that the strike-riot on September 10 was successful in wearing down the state's carceral capacities.

Why Now? The 2008-10 "financial" crisis and the carceral "spatial fix"

How do we make sense of this particular deployment of collective action? Clearly, the living conditions at Kinross were not optimal. What might seem like otherwise unrelated, uninhabitable conditions in fact have a common material trace: the 2008-10 crisis and its repercussions on the state's capacity to provide a "spatial fix" to the crisis of racialized surplus populations produced through deindustrialization and capitalist automation. As abolitionist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes in *Golden Gulag,* a fundamental materialist analysis of the carceral boom in California and beyond,

> ... prisons are partial geographical solutions to political economic crises, organized by the state, which is itself in crisis. Crisis means instability that can be fixed only through radical measures, which include developing new relationships and new or renovated institutions out of what already exists. The instability that characterized the end of the golden age of American capitalism provides a key.[19]

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Endnotes:

[1] As of the time of writing, hundreds of prisoners at the Tacoma Northwest Detention Center are on hunger strike as part of the 2018 strike. The facility is infamous for its treatment of detained immigrants. The strike *intercommunalized* itself as prison rebels in Nova Scotia, Canada, joined and prisoners in both Palestine and Germany released statements in solidarity. Strike-related activity has led to the lockdown of prisons North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Noise demonstrations, occupations, banner drops and other actions held outside jails, prisons, and detention centers have spread like wildfire to dozens of cities in the United States. For an up-to-date rundown of what's going down in relation to the prison strike, check out https://itsgoingdown.org/prisonstrike/

[2] Illuminations, Walter Benjamin, p. 257: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception

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In the contemporary prisoner resistance struggle, the "partial geographical solution" or what Gilmore calls the "prison fix" evoking David Harvey's notion of the "spatial fix", seems itself to be in crisis.[20] In other words, the state seems to be less and less able to effectively contain the millions of people it holds captive.

Like in other states, the latest of the ever-recurring crises of racial capitalism pushed Michigan legislators and prison officials to cut the Department of Corrections budget. In an attempt to reduce operational costs, the state of Michigan began privatizing its food services in the midst of the crisis in June 2008.[21] This process took so long that only in 2013 did Aramark Corporation finally take on that function, only to be replaced by Trinity Corporation in 2015. Earlier this year—very likely because of the actions taken by prisoners at the Kinross facility and beyond—the process to revert food services back to the state began. Let us be clear here: the problem is *not* that food services are "private" and should be made "public." The food crisis at Kinross, and throughout Michigan prisons more generally, can be traced to the state's budget crisis during the 2008-10 financial and automotive industry crisis, both of which hit Michigan, home of Motor City, particularly hard.

Both the overpopulation and ventilation system problems at Kinross can also be traced to the forces at work in the wake of the 2008-10 crisis. As a CNN headline on June 5, 2010 clearly states, "Michigan shuts 8 prison facilities to save $120M,"[22] the state's plan was to shut down some prisons and sell off food services to private contractors to try to reduce the whopping $1.4 billion state deficit. One prison that shut down in 2010 was the Hiawatha Correctional Facility, which was "renovated" and reopened in 2015, in order to close down a more expensive facility. When Hiawatha reopened, it was renamed "Kinross."[23] The prison facility had been "renovated" so well that, when it reopened in 2015, dozens of prisoners were sent to the hospital with upper respiratory problems within the first week.[24] These instances demonstrate that patterns of capital accumulation and state capacity cannot maintain "livable" conditions in prisons, much less pay workers a "fair" wage. This is not "because of" the Thirteenth Amendment but, rather, because of the material exigencies imposed on the state by the recurring crises of capital. Therefore, I am not convinced that the calls for abolishing the Thirteenth Amendment can necessarily address the state's own incapacity to pay its captive labor force.

[25] Clearly, the state cannot maintain livable conditions for those it holds captive (e.g., food, health services, etc.). If we look at what is at stake, in terms of both the unlivable conditions prisoners' experience, as well as their struggle over wages, *what connects these two is the state's incapacity to manage the prison population.*

As Ruth Wilson Gilmore warns us in her 2015 essay "The Worrying State of the Anti-Prison Movement," a broad-based "bipartisan" coalition aims to reduce prison costs by attempting to provide technocratic solutions to a broader structural problem.[26] This coalition coalesced in the wake of the 2008-10 crisis and it seems to have made the problem worse. Cutting prison costs while nominally decreasing the prison population has intensified the already uninhabitable conditions inside prisons and thus opened up the possibility for both the strikes we see today (sparked by those imprisoned people who work) and riots (by the massive idled prisoners who do not work),[27] tendencies which are not exclusive to the state of Michigan.

As a May 2017 Vera Institute report clearly states, "nearly half of states have cut their spending on prisons between 2010 and 2015," in the wake of the 2008-10 crisis.[28] Out of these twenty states, thirteen have reduced their prison budgets *and* reduced their prison population. This is widely seen as a "victory" by many of those in the aforementioned coalition. The states that have managed to reduce both their prison budgets and imprisoned populations, the so-called great examples to be followed, include Michigan, Alabama, Ohio, Texas, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and New York. Interestingly, *prisons located in all of these states were key battlegrounds during the 2016 prison strike.*[29] States that managed to reduce their prison budgets but *increased* their imprisoned population were also sites of strike activity in 2016 (e.g., Indiana and Washington). As such, *the flashpoints of the 2016 prison strike occurred in states where prison expenditures have decreased in the wake of the 2008-10 crisis.*

The intensifying rhythms of prisoner self-activity demonstrate the state's failed attempt to contain the crisis of surplus populations since the carceral boom of the 1970s. If we couple this analysis with *recent* shifts in state capacity—particularly with respect to the multi-state political coalition focused on cutting prison costs without significantly reducing their imprisoned population—we rebels as they struggle to take the containment apparatus of the racial capitalist state to its breaking point. To free prisoners is not only an emancipatory ethical imperative against slavery in America. *It is the only way the state cannot not contain us—that is, the crisis—from intensifying.*

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Acknowledgements:

The author would like to acknowledge the support and critical feedback provided by his comrades of Rustbelt Abolition Radio (RAR) and Michigan Abolition and Prisoner Solidarity (MAPS). Lastly, none of this would have been possible without the extraordinary courage of prison rebels in Michigan and beyond.

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> emancipation. It is likely to be inaugurated, like many struggles in the first era of riots, by those for whom the question of reproduction beyond the wage has long been posed—those who have been socially forged as the bearers of that crisis.[49]

For Clover, therefore, the commune, as a "form of life" and as a "tactic of social reproduction," exists as a virtual potentiality of the riot.[50] George Jackson also theorized the importance of the *Black commune* as a tactic of social reproduction. As part of the broader survival programs of the Black Panther Party, Jackson writes that "[t]otal repression and genocide are not possible if we organize ourselves for survival first—if we first construct *the commune*, a sense of community, a common interest of class."[51] As such, the crisis also bears within itself the possibility of another way of being in the world. For Jackson, building the Black commune,

> ... will involve building a political, social and economic infrastructure, capable of filling the vacuum that has been left by the establishment ruling class and pushing the occupying forces of the enemy culture from our midst.[52]

For Jackson, such occupying forces include the fascist elements of society, such as the police. Emphasizing the importance of struggling in urban centers —that is, building the commune in the ghettos and the sites of what Clover calls the *surplus rebellion*—Jackson argues that,

> ... we cannot withdraw from the cities. In order to complete the revolutionary syllogism, the fascists must be forced to withdraw. *And under cover of the guns which force their withdrawal, we will build the new black communes.* [53]

The prison, as a counter-revolutionary, fascist force, contains the surplus rebellion on the outside from further generalizing itself by displacing it to the inside. This dynamic therefore acts as a countervailing tendency to the possibility of the proliferation of the commune as a tactic. In that sense, *abolition is not a utopianism; rather, it is an instance in the real movement to communize the present state of things.* Our task is therefore to support prison have a partial explanation of the unlivable conditions prisoners are faced with today. Budget cuts are reflected in immediate living conditions, yielding less (lower quality) food, staff shortages, poor medical care, higher living expenses, higher exploitation rates, and so on. Similarly, the 2018 prison strike was called by prison rebels from Jailhouse Lawyers Speak (JLS) in the wake of the brutal Lee Correctional Facility riot in South Carolina in April 2018, where seven prisoners were left to bleed to death. State officials claim that the riot broke out largely due to "staff shortages."[30] Note that my argument is *not* that prison systems should be given more money, but rather, that an abolitionist strategy of disruption can take prison systems already under pressure to their breaking point. I will return to this point in the final section of this essay.

If the self-activity of imprisoned rebels set off the powder keg in 2016, all I have been attempting to sketch out here are the short-term and long-term conditions that made such a powder keg possible. This characterization of the situation also takes us closer to how we might understand this cycle of prisoner struggles in relation to Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charlotte, and what some have termed "circulation struggles."

The Prison Strike-Riot and Circulation Struggles

Mike Brown. Freddie Grey. Keith Lamont Scott. Ferguson 2014. Baltimore 2015. Charlotte 2016. Three Black men murdered by the state. Three cities that exploded and whose fires of rebellion revealed, once again, the everyday "organized abandonment" and "organized violence" of the state and capital. [31] At all three flashpoints, a *state of emergency* was declared, and the National Guard was deployed to suppress the riots and restore the racial capitalist order. Some have sought to think these struggles as part of broader "circulation struggles," as a part of a particular instance in the history of capitalism. This framework can be useful for thinking the relation between Ferguson and the 2018 prison strike.

Joshua Clover's *Riot. Strike. Riot* attempts to provide a broad characterization of how shifting patterns of capital accumulation in the world-system (although he specifically focuses on "the early industrializing and now deindustrializing nations of the west") correspond to what Charles Tilly calls different

"repertoires of collective action."[32] As the name of Clover's book implies, he attempts to trace the broad contours of the dominant tactics in the repertoire of collective action, which tendentially—we might even say on average—cycle through riots, strikes, and back to the riot (but with a surplus, which he names Riot' or "riot prime," evoking Marx's theory of the circuit of money capital: M-C-M'). These cycles, in turn, correspond to instances in which the flows of capital have tended more toward circulation, production, and then back to circulation (again, with a surplus, which Clover calls "circulation prime"). This last cycle corresponds roughly to the period beginning in the 1960s until today, in which, as Clover argues, "capital's center of gravity shifts toward circulation, borne by the troika of Toyotaization, information technology and finance."[33] As has been argued again and again, this moment corresponds to deindustrialization and the growth of surplus populations—that is, those who have been rendered useless to the needs of "productive capital." As such, for Clover, the "riot is the modality through which surplus is lived."[34] In contrast to the strike, the riot sets the price of goods rather than the price of labor-power. The key element of the *surplus rebellions* of riot prime is the "subject" of the riots—the *relative surplus population*, or the *dispossessed*, more generally—in stark contrast to the figure of the worker in the case of the strike.[35] Therefore, contemporary cycles of struggles (e.g., Ferguson, Baltimore, etc.) seem to occupy different spaces, not just at the factories or "at the site of production," but at the strip malls, plazas, and squares. Furthermore, following E. P. Thompson's argument on riots, Clover contends that the riot, as a form of collective struggle, names "struggles to set the price of market goods." But what characterizes circulation struggles in what Clover calls the contemporary "riot prime" cycle is that these struggles "cannot be understood adequately within the framework of price-setting" but, at the same time, they cannot "be understood without it."[36] That is, Clover distinguishes between the emphasis on "price-setting" of the first cycle of riot and the surplus rebellions of riot prime, which are "distinct, if related, forms."[37] Beyond price-setting, what Clover's surplus rebellions seem to be concerned with is the disruption of circulation as such. Surplus rebellions have an "unquenchable desire to *make it all stop*."[38] Lastly, but most importantly, Clover argues that the surplus rebellion is also "both marked by and marks out race."[39] Following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Clover argues that the racialized surplus population across the "west" is that which is not absorbed by productive capital (and therefore exposed to both super fluidity and wage

Fred also makes a similar point in a reflection we recorded with him a year after the 2016 strike,

> Sometimes I think about the fact that I heard that more facilities within the state were supposed to protest in the same way, at the same time, so I imagine, in theory, had that occurred, ... it's hard to imagine how the state could have responded you know with having to employ so much manpower and resources to this one facility at that time. Can you imagine 10, 12, 15 facilities on fire, with prisoners jumping out of windows and refusing to lock down and refusing to be counted and looting.... you know because there was a point where guys were looting the guard from what I understand they were really close breaking in and looting the chow hall and at a point at this facility during the protest, you can clearly see that the prisoners had taken control, that emergency count and the threats they were yelling over the bullhorn to go lock down, didn't work. Guys did not go in and lock down. At one point, where they were denying ERT entrance — even entrance into the facility– the administration didn't have control at that point. You know, I don't' know man, but it would be interesting, you know I think the federal government would have to come in or something.

As such, from a tactical standpoint, even though most prisoners do not work, those that do might have a relatively privileged position inside prisons today. A handful of striking workers—particularly kitchen workers, as the case Kinross illustrates—can function as the spark to shut down an entire facility. *In that sense, the strength of the prison strike* (broadly conceived) *is not that it will necessarily force the state to increase wages but that it disrupts the reproduction of prison itself.* These disruptions decrease the state's capacity and intensify the state's inability to continue to hold prisoners captive. Prolonging such a disruption, through whatever means necessary, is at the core of abolitionist strategy today.

To conclude, if the riot is the "other" of incarceration, as Clover claims, we might conjecture that, today, prisons operate as a countervailing tendency to the riot's potential to communize, to becoming commune. Clover argues,

> The commune, then, has a continuity with the riot. It presupposes the impossibility of wage-setting as a means to secure any manner of

less convinced that the history of the mass picket presented by Armstrong, who emphasizes its heterogeneous character, "confounds the coordinates of the riot and strike," what is left unaddressed is the *question of strategy*. While characterizing dominant tactics in relation to dominant tendencies of shifting patterns of capital accumulation and profitability is of vital importance for characterizing the average state of the situation, the question remains of what is to be done in relation to this analysis. What would it entail to affirm a so-called diversity of tactics as part of a broader strategy?

In an excellent interview with *Shadowproof*'s Jared Ware, titled "I'm for disruption" and published on the eve of the 2018 prison strike, prison rebels from Jailhouse Lawyers Speak (JLS) grapple with the question of the centrality of the strike as a tactic. JLS confirms what I briefly mentioned before, writing, "a lot of prisoners don't have jobs, so there is no working for them, so there's no way they can participate or feel a part of something that's moving forward."[46] Therefore, in an attempt to generalize the prison rebellions, the call put forth by JLS to "strike" from August 21 to September 9, 2018 calls on prisoners to strike, which is broadly conceived as work strikes, sit-ins, boycotts, and hunger strikes.[47] Furthermore, the choice to lengthen the duration of the strike actions seeks to further reduce state capacities in both the short-term and the long-term. As the comrades of The Fire Inside collective write in their latest Prison Strike 2018 zine,

> Nineteen days of facility or state-wide work refusal, sit-downs, or lockdown will cost the system dearly, in terms of both money and legitimacy. Replacing 19 days of prisoner labor can cost millions, not to mention the cost of breaking occupations and repairing damaged facilities. This action can bankrupt not only prison systems, but entire state budgets. Exposing retaliation and drawing attention to horrendous conditions and routines also corrodes the prisons' public legitimacy. By the end of this protest period, any impacted government is likely to grant substantive concessions to prisoner demands, and to open their minds to harm-reducing reforms, alternatives, and policy changes. This is how direct action on the inside rapidly advances every aspect of the multi-pronged struggle against mass incarceration or for abolition everywhere.[48]

differentials) and bears the brunt of both "state-sanctioned" and "extralegal" violence or "premature death."[40] Although racism—and more specifically, anti-Blackness—cannot be reduced to this political economic dimension, it can also not be thought without it. We might say that this is an instance of the relative autonomy of racism.

Suspending the emphasis on the strike as the leading tactic in the prison strike, as argued by our FAM comrades, and thinking with Clover and Gilmore's characterizations of our situation, we might ask: what were the dominant effects and the material consequences of prisoners' self-activity in the 2016 prison strike? As previously mentioned, most prisoners do not work. While precise numbers of how many people are forced to labor inside prisons (both waged and unwaged) are hard to access, Dan Berger states in his essay, "Rattling the Cages," that of "the 2.3 million-person prison population, an estimated 900,000 people work, mostly for the state." [41] Also emphasizing the relative unimportance of waged, productive labor in prison (i.e., commodity production), James Kilgore argues in his 2013 essay, "Confronting Prison Slave Labor and Other Myths":

> Virtually all private-sector prison labor is regulated under the Prison Industries Enhancement Certification Program (PIECP). Any prison that publicly markets goods worth more than $10,000 must register with PIECP. PIECP's first quarter report for 2012 showed 4,675 incarcerated people employed in prison or jail PIECP programs. This represents about 0.25 percent of the 2.3 million people behind bars.

Furthermore, Kilgore argues that "[t]here is an economic logic to why so few corporations use prison labor, despite the low wages and apparent rigid control over the workforce." This economic logic needs a quick turnaround in production, but in prisons, "[a] security situation may lock down a prison for days, weeks, or even months." As a 2017 Prison Policy initiative report shows, the far most common job type in prisons are "regular prison jobs" or "institutional support jobs," that we can broadly call reproductive labor: "custodial, maintenance, laundry, grounds keeping, food service, and many other types of work." As such, as Kilgore shows, most prisons are not labor camps; they are warehouses for containing the idled relative surplus population that cannot be absorbed by capital or by the state's dwindling capacity to pay a social wage.

In comparison, an estimated US$2 billion in commodities is produced by prison labor per year.[42] According to the Prison Policy Initiative's extraordinary 2017 report, "Following the Money of Mass Incarceration," the cost of commissary and telephone calls amount to $2.9 billion dollars per year.[43] Annual food costs are also around $2 billion. Prison employees comprise by far the biggest cost—a whopping $38.4 billion expense per year. What all of this means is that prison labor is only a minimal fraction of the overall cost of maintaining and reproducing the carceral state. Despite the main emphasis placed on the strike as a tactic, striking workers only make up a minor part of the total cost/output of the carceral state. However, this is *not* to say that staging work stoppages are not strategic within a broader abolitionist strategy, a point I will return to in the final section of this essay.

Given this clarification of the relative importance of prison labor in the overall carceral infrastructure, as well as Clover's model, I ask: what is the relation between the proliferation of the prisoner strike and circulation struggles today? To what extent can we characterize the self-activity of prison rebels as a circulation struggle? There are at least three ways in which this might be done.

Firstly, given the recurring crises of racial capitalism, *prison rebellions are surplus rebellions*, given that prisons function in our society as a "spatial fix" to the crisis of the growing racialized relative surplus population. That is, *prison strike-riots can be read as spatially displaced surplus rebellions.* As Clover argues, "People will struggle where they are. Our argument is that people are somewhere else."[44] Depending on state capacity, and the correlation of forces at a given conjuncture, surplus populations might be more or less "contained" by the carceral apparatus. Again, people struggle where they are, in squares, avenues, strip malls and prison yards.

Secondly, most imprisoned people do not work. Therefore, if prison strikes are to at all generalize the crisis of containment, they must interpellate non-working prisoners. This clearly happened in Michigan. The prison strike turned into a prison riot. The effect of such actions was that of both price-setting (e.g., food services, commissary, telephones, and so on) and "shutting shit down." That is, disrupting the reproductive process of the prison as such.

Thirdly, a dynamic similar to the outside can be seen on the inside: most prison jobs are not productive labor—that is, jobs that produce commodities either for the state or capital. Rather, most prison jobs exist within the sphere of circulation and tend to be of the reproductive kind (e.g., cooking, cleaning, etc.).

In these three regards, prisoner self-activity today can effectively be characterized as a circulation struggle in the age of riot prime.[45] This should come as no surprise. If we recall FAM's "Let the Crops Rot in the Fields," comrades' strategic decisions are clearly inspired by Ferguson. In that sense, reading prison rebels' self-activity as part of circulation struggles (broadly conceived) was already part of the struggle's theoretical practice. However, we cannot obviate for too long the *strategic* question of the strike.

Communist strategy: Abolition

In our characterization of the prison strike as a circulation struggle, we encountered the heterogeneous character of contemporary prison struggles that escape any given model. However, a key strategic question surrounding the centrality of the strike as a tactic is of crucial importance to understanding abolitionist strategy today. In both the pages of *Riot.Strike.Riot*, as well as in various engagements with his generous interlocutors, Clover seems to be convinced that any strategy that centers "the productive sphere" (e.g., on workers or the strike) is tendentially doomed to fail. I am less convinced than Clover that characterizing the dominant tactic in the collective repertoire of action necessarily tells us what is to be done or what might be the most strategic course of action at a given conjuncture. As Amanda Armstrong argues:

> Clover seems to argue, a revolutionary strategy premised upon labor strikes in warehouses, on ports, along roads, at rail crossings, and across other nodes and spans of distribution is logically incoherent and without historical precedent.

Clover's response reads Armstrong's intervention as an attempt to think "hybrid forms" of collective action (such as the mass picket). While Clover is