



American prison. Source: Robyn Beck/AFP via Getty Images.

On September 9, 2016, the 45th anniversary of the Attica prison uprising, prisoners from at least twenty-one states (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/09/national-prison-strike-inmates>) began striking (<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2016/09/27/a-primer-on-the-nationwide-prisoners-strike#.kb6Trhv4X>) against what they called “modern-day slavery.” The strike stands as one of the largest (<https://theintercept.com/2016/09/16/the-largest-prison-strike-in-u-s-history-enters-its-second-week/>) in U.S. history (figures are difficult to verify and the California prison hunger strike (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/08/50-days-california-prisons-hunger-strike-explainer>) in 2013 involved at least 30,000 people) and several (https://www.buzzfeed.com/coralewis/two-inmates-have-died-amid-national-prison-strike?utm_term=.eie1KVEBjB#.xbmaAeyOWO) prisoners (https://www.buzzfeed.com/coralewis/two-inmates-have-died-amid-national-prison-strike?utm_term=.eie1KVEBjB#.xbmaAeyOWO) have lost their lives in this struggle. Prison strikers’ language is not hyperbolic. As Ava DuVernay’s new documentary (http://www.aaihs.org/mass-incarceration-and-its-mystification-a-review-of-the-13th/?utm_content=buffera518d) on the 13th Amendment highlights, the very amendment that abolished slavery and guaranteed the legal emancipation of nearly four million enslaved people also carved out space for the continuation of slavery “as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.”

In 2015, President Obama became the first sitting president to visit (<http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/07/16/423612441/obama-visits-federal-prison-a-first-for-a-sitting-president>) a U.S. prison. Since then, he banned the use of solitary (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-bans-solitary-confinement-for-juveniles-in-federal-prisons/2016/01/25/056e14b2-c3a2-11e5-9693-933a4d31bcc8_story.html) confinement in federal juvenile prisons and the Bureau of Prisons recommended (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/us/us-to-phase-out-use-of-private-prisons-for-federal-inmates.html>) ending its contracts with private prisons. Obama has also commuted (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2016/11/04/president-obama-issues-2nd-round-commutations-88-day-period-bringing-total-944>) the sentences of hundreds of nonviolent drug offenders. Yet these changes only affect a small number of people housed in the federal prison system, which itself accounts for less than 10% (<http://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2016.html>) of the total incarcerated population in the U.S. And while the war on drugs has ruined countless lives, most people in prison are not incarcerated for drug offenses. So Obama’s commutations do not address the main reasons people have been incarcerated; further, commutations shorten their sentence while leaving

intact a host of restrictions—including disenfranchisement—faced by people with felony convictions. In a recent presidential election decided by fewer than one million votes, there were over six million voters (<http://www.sentencingproject.org/issues/felony-disenfranchisement/>) disenfranchised for felony convictions.

Other aspects of the mass incarceration are not withering so much as transforming. Private prison corporations, which have been visible but small players in the system of mass incarceration, have already moved toward (<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2016/08/18/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-private-prison-phase-out#.NT8TZlNDW>) immigration detention, reentry, and electronic monitoring as new sources of carceral revenue. Within hours of the election of Donald Trump, stocks of Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and the GEO Group skyrocketed (<http://www.nbcnews.com/business/markets/corrections-corp-geo-group-prison-stocks-surge-trump-win-n681661>), signaling another ratcheting up of private prisons and their relationship with the federal government. The excitement for bipartisan prison reform inside the beltway has dissipated (<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2016/02/12/justice-reform-rip#.p5DQsqkbe>) amidst a modest reform agenda whose biggest focus has been on reducing government spending rather than ameliorating human suffering. These neoliberal cost-benefit analyses (<https://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/marie-gottschalk-neoliberal-prison-reform-caught>) have placed more burdens (<http://ellabakercenter.org/who-pays-the-true-cost-of-incarceration-on-families>) on the backs of prisoners and their loved ones while leaving untouched the basic outlines of mass incarceration. The failures of contemporary prison reform serve as a reminder of the massive human and environmental (<http://www.citylab.com/crime/2015/07/how-mass-incarceration-takes-a-toll-on-the-environment/399950/>) costs of prisons.

The current prison strike's struggle to achieve visibility (organizers have alleged (<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-national-strike-against-prison-slavery>) a “mainstream-media blackout”) has been a central obstacle since the origins of prison organizing. In light of the dangerous implications of neoliberal prison reform and the marginalization of the current prison strike from the public political sphere, the Prison Abolition Syllabus (modeled after #FergusonSyllabus (<https://college.georgetown.edu/collegenews/the-ferguson-syllabus.html>), #Charlestonsyllabus (<http://www.aaihs.org/resources/charlestonsyllabus/>), #WelfareReformSyllabus (<http://www.aaihs.org/welfare-reform-syllabus/>) and Trump Syllabus 2.0 (<http://www.aaihs.org/an-introduction-to-trump-syllabus-2-0/>)) seeks to contextualize and highlight prison organizing and prison abolitionist efforts from the 13th Amendment's rearticulation of slavery to current resistance to mass incarceration, solitary confinement, and prison labor exploitation.

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