

Reflections on Critical Resistance

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Full Text:

Four members of the Critical Resistance (CR) conference organizing committee reflect on the conference and its aftermath.

CR: When you initially became involved with the CR organizing committee, what were you envisioning for the three-day event?

Andrea Smith (AS): I thought this event could be very successful in assisting the building of a mass movement against the prison system. This vision was very compelling to me because I believe that the repressiveness of the state is growing tremendously under the guise of protecting "law and order." Even political progressives sometimes do not question the need to "stop crime" and therefore support measures that strengthen the criminal justice system. In particular, I felt this conference could help to challenge the anti-violence against women movement's reliance on the criminal justice system as the primary avenue for addressing sexual/domestic violence. That is, the anti-sexual/domestic violence movement has become increasingly depoliticized and professionalized. It emphasizes providing social services and legal advocacy to survivors instead of developing a grass-roots political movement against violence. Domestic/sexual violence service agencies now depend primarily on the state for their primary funding sources. Consequently, they emphasize cooperation with the state rather than mobilization against state violence. I thought Critical Resistance could provide a starting point for injecting a critical analysis regarding state violence into the sexual/domestic violence movement. At the same time, I believe prison activists have neglected to seriously address the safety concerns of survivors of domestic/sexual violence in their work and hoped that this conference could provide a point of dialogue between these two movements.

In addition, Native communities are often in the vanguard of developing alternatives to the incarceration system, and I thought this conference might bring greater visibility of these models to non-Indian communities. Restorative justice models are largely inspired by indigenous models of justice (although non-Native proponents of restorative justice largely forget this fact). Indigenous forms of justice are often evoked by non-Natives in the restorative justice movement in the absence of Native peoples. I was hoping Critical Resistance could bring greater visibility to the Native peoples who are actually doing this work.

Julia Sudhury (JS): I was invited to join the committee at a time when I was fairly new in the area and in the country. I did not know a great deal about prison issues in the U.S. and thought that this would be a way for me to learn more and incorporate that new knowledge into my research and activism. I did not have a clear idea of what the conference would be like, but felt it was a lot of money for a onetime event. In my previous work in community development, the funds being proposed would have funded a small advocacy group for a few years! I therefore hoped that the conference would lead to ongoing networking and activism greater than the event itself.

Terry Kupers (TK): I saw the conference as an opportunity to give a voice, as well as a collective audience, to activists and ex-prisoners who had been silenced for far too long. As the gap between rich and poor widens, and the people at the bottom of the economic ladder are deemed dispensable and "disappearable," the prisons become warehouses for a growing number of forgotten people. Cruelty inside grows in proportion to society's forgetting. A lack of media coverage for their efforts, gag rules for prisoners, very restricted visitation, and increasing repression against those who care about prisoners begin to wear down prison activists until they begin to feel disappeared themselves, alone in their courageous organizing efforts. I saw the conference as an opportunity to bring activists and ex-

prisoners together to share our ideas and experiences and recognize the strength of our collective movement. Meanwhile, the event could serve to educate the public about the plight of prisoners and the folly of the prison-industrial complex, links could be forged between activists on the inside and the outside, and out of the conference would come renewed resolve to do what needs doing and an improved network and strategy for waging the struggle.

Bo Brown (BB): I didn't really have a clue. I never worked on a big conference. I thought it was good that this wide assortment of people was doing something around prisons and thought that anything they did would be good. It was a very intellectual circle, but basically I felt: "Yea, about fucking time! Let me check this out!"

CR: How did your view of what CR would be change and how did your original and changed visions keep you motivated?

BB: It got bigger and bigger and bigger. It became a monster. But I thought it was way overdue and needed to happen. The main people that I knew about who were doing prison work were the ones who were doing it since the 1970s and had carried it on in the 1980s and 1990s. We focused mostly on political prisoners. We wanted to do more and tried to do more, but we didn't have enough people. And now there were more; it was a good thing.

JS: I don't think the vision of CR was clear to me during the organizing prior to the conference. By this I mean I felt I was constantly fighting against time to hold down three jobs and do an immense amount of organizing, rather than having time to reflect on what CR was about. I think my understanding of CR's vision emerged more out of the "where to next" sessions after the conference. The reason I stayed involved was more from having made a commitment than from seeing CR as having a compelling vision.

After the conference, I realized the huge amount of energy that CR had generated. My students' excitement about the issues also affected me as I realized that we really were changing opinions and opening up minds. I found that CR's vision was important to me in a number of ways, which I did not find in my previous organizing:

- * CR makes explicit the link between corporate profit and the prison system and gave a practical angle from which to challenge the global capitalist economy.
- * CR has a feminist approach, which highlights the experiences of women prisoners, unlike most black community approaches to criminal justice, which focus on men.
- * CR points toward alternative ways of thinking about crime, punishment, and community safety that go beyond the logic of incarceration.
- * CR challenges feminists and anti-racists to deal with domestic violence and racial hate crimes without fuelling the prison-industrial complex.
- * CR has the potential to unite communities of color against the prison-industrial complex globally.

CR: What positives and negatives do you now see in the initial organizing and the conference itself?

TK: Essentially, we accomplished what I'd envisioned and more. The excitement at the conference was palpable. A lot of people reported that they could not get over the fact that there are so many others who believe as they do and are committed to the struggle. A reunion of 11 survivors of the Attica rebellion happened, almost as a mini-conference within the CR conference, adding inspiration for the rest of us. We need to remember that no single event will accomplish the goal of tearing down the prison-industrial complex. An ongoing struggle is needed, and it needs to be linked with other progressive struggles. The conference provided an important step in that direction.

BB: The positive thing is that in spite of the initial organizing, CR was allowed to grow and become itself. No one could control it and that was okay. That it was a nonhierarchical organization was a positive. After all, 3,500 people attended a free conference on prisons and many ex-prisoners got transportation grants.

Another thing that was excellent was the cultural work: the films and other art that was incorporated into the CR construct. The participation by so many young people was extremely important, and I was very happy to see their presence all over the place. I really enjoyed the puppets on the last day's march. We need to give special credit to the young people; they are the future.

AS: Organizing the conference was a tremendous feat. However, in celebrating the conference, I believe it is important not to overlook the serious flaws within the organizing process. One of the reasons it was so successful was that some very prominent and influential people were involved in the conference, either as speakers or as organizers. The result was that many people would attend the conference regardless of how well it was organized. This "star power" enabled the conference to be successful despite the major flaws in the organizing process. Many people on the organizing committee believe that the conference's success indicates that the organizing committee did a good job organizing the conference. This belief has prevented us from looking at the flaws in our organizing structure and process as much as we need. Now, we are suffering the consequences of these organizational problems. [Andrea's critique is elaborated on below.]

JS: I felt the group was a bit more disorganized than I had expected. I was surprised when members took on tasks and then did not complete them for weeks, without comment. I was not used to this type of very consensual organizing and worried about accountability. I felt that if we had employed a coordinator earlier on, and set up some systems, the organizing prior to the conference would not have been so fraught. I felt exhausted and overwhelmed in the weeks before the conference and was hugely burned out afterward. On the positive side, I felt the group made opportunities for everyone to get involved and learn new skills. For example, I learned a lot about films in the process of organizing the film festival. I was also hugely impressed with the Web cast, Web site, video, and prisoner phone-in; they were great. Also, our integration of culture and politics, including the film festival, was groundbreaking and has created a sort of cultural/political renaissance in the Bay Area.

TK: Of course there's room for self-criticism. While we attempted to avoid a "star system" and to provide air time for as many of the great people in attendance as possible, not everyone had an opportunity to share their work and ideas in a public setting, and the "big names" did get to address the larger audiences. In addition, because so much energy was put into arranging the conference and bringing people together (one of the great decisions of the organizing committee was to put most of the money raised into bringing ex-prisoners and activists of color to the conference), we did not do sufficient planning of the kind of networking and campaigning that would evolve after the conference closed. That's where a lot of ongoing work is needed.

AS: In terms of the long-term viability of CR, I think the major problem with the conference is that we did not go into the conference with a long-range plan to make it a viable organization and campaign. I think it is always a mistake to go to a conference hoping that a movement will just materialize without putting some structures in place to maintain and build momentum after the conference. Sadly, I have noticed that CR has provided a negative example of doing organizing work. In many events I have been involved in since, a common phrase I often hear is, "Let us make sure we do not do what Critical Resistance did." The major critique I hear is that Critical Resistance did not carefully think through the follow-up work after the conference and hence lost much of its momentum.

BB: One problem that I ran into early on with CR was that I didn't have a computer. So I got kicked out of the communication loop; people mostly discussed things over e-mail. Much human conflict is about race or class. As a white working-class lesbian, most conflict comes to me as homophobia or as straight-up class differences. Here's an example: After my work schedule changed, I tried to stay in touch by telephone so people could let me know what was going on and include me in the process.

But they didn't return calls and I felt ignored. Intellectuals talk a lot about class, but they often aren't very good about being aware of how they exercise their class privilege. Finally, I was put in touch with Naneen, and she downloaded about 200 pages of the discussion that had been going on over e-mail and sent it to me. I read all of this and then I went to a meeting. People said to me, "Oh, we didn't know where you were." I was so angry, I was ready to quit right then. But some good sisters took me aside (over to a corner) and chilled me out and convinced me to stay. Of course, there was similar class stuff throughout, but that is the nature of class conflict. Because I was convinced that CR was important in the world, I was determined to stick it out.

Eddie Hatcher, a Native man and former political prisoner, was brought to the conference by CR, but he wasn't utilized at all -- he wasn't used as a panelist or speaker. It's too bad, because his story is extremely important. He had to ask himself, "Why the fuck am I here?" Eddie also doesn't have any money, he's a gay man, he's HIV positive, and he just doesn't have that pushy arrogance that he would've needed to interject himself into the workshops as an afterthought or whatever. I don't think a middle-class man would have been treated the same way; even if he had, he would've fared better at CR.

CR: What is your most severe critique of the CR conference, both in terms of the organizing process and the event itself?

JS: I think the most serious criticism is that burnout affected our ability to organize an effective follow-up, which has negatively affected CR. For example, our Web site still has not been updated, giving the impression that it was all over after the conference. Second, despite discussions about diversity, CR failed to bring meaningful Latino and American Indian participation into the planning process. This was revealed in a conflict in the closing plenary. Again, this affected our vision and our effectiveness.

AS: The most significant problem to me was the marginalization of Native peoples (as well as other communities of color) in the conference. For instance, in the conference organizing, I seemed to be valued only to the extent that I could bring other Native people to the conference. When I tried to make other contributions to the conference, I was completely dismissed and, in fact, was often actively excluded from participating. Other people were treated similarly: they were valued only to the extent that they could bring in people from their particular racial/ethnic group. In addition, I often felt that I was seen as the only person responsible for recruiting Native peoples to attend the conference. For instance, when I pointed out that there was a dearth of Native peoples listed as speakers, I was informed that this absence was not a problem because Ward Churchill would be speaking. So, I secured a grant specifically to fund Native peoples to attend the conference, at which point I was informed that the money should only go to defray existing conference costs, rather than to increase the attendance of Native peoples. Similarly, the conference has been critiqued for the absence of Latinos in the speaker line-up. The response by many is that the reason is that there were no Latinos on the organizing committee. This response indicates that we are not taking collective responsibility for ensuring equitable representation in our organizing strategies. If there were too few Latinos represented in the conference, then I need to hold myself personally responsible rather than simply believe we need to have a Latino on the committee "to take care of the problem." I also think CR needs to be more critical of its own racism, classism, etc. For instance, I noticed that many of the white people in CR tended to do a lot of finger pointing at other white people's racism as if they were immune to racism themselves. Some white people were ejected from CR for being "too racist," as if the white people within CR were not displaying racism themselves. Quite frankly, working with CR has been very frustrating for me; there have been few organizing efforts I have been involved in where I have been treated so condescendingly and disrespectfully. I sense that many people of color have become alienated from CR since the conference for the same reasons. At the same time, however, I do not want to just blame other people in CR for being oppressive, without holding myself accountable for similar behavior. Many times I failed to intervene in a situation where I should have or where I displayed insensitivity or thoughtlessness. There needs to be a structure or space for CR to discuss its own oppressive dynamics more honestly since no one is immune to being part of such dynamics.

BB: I think there was a lack of real communication. Take the mission statement: I never saw it until four days after the conference. I found out later that it was written up two nights before the conference began. So, I didn't see it before the conference, let alone participate in deciding what it would say. I did, however, stuff 1,000 of them into the registration packets that were handed to people. That was another class thing: there was a lot of shit work, and I didn't see too many people doing it. I made sure I did some of it, but I didn't see many of those lawyers or professor-types stuffing envelopes. Is my time worth less than theirs? I have another critical question: who decided which workshops should be videotaped? On the last day of the conference, Sunday, former Puerto Rican political prisoner Rafael Cancel Miranda (aged 65), Attica brother Big Black (60), my comrade from the George Jackson Brigade, Ed Mead (55), and I, Bo (50) spoke on our experience with revolutionary organizing in prison. The four of us had never been in the same place at the same time before. Two hundred and fifty people, or more, came to that workshop. I can't tell you how many people have asked me for a copy of it, but it was not videotaped. This was an important political discussion. How did that get ignored? Another issue for me was lesbian invisibility. Many, many lesbians worked on CR, but in all our publications, nothing was ever mentioned about lesbians. Some sister actually thought that raising the question of lesbian invisibility would somehow be the same as participating in identity politics. I don't think so. This confusion keeps lesbians quietly in the closets of left politics, never getting credit for our contributions. And, it has been used as a divisive tactic to cloud discussions of homophobia, sexism, etc. For me, it's always better to be out there as a strong lesbian who is doing strong work for all people. A lot of people came to the lesbian/gay/queer workshop. Lesbians have been working in every movement for the last 20 years, and we never give ourselves any recognition or credit. Who knows, maybe the movements wouldn't have survived as well without us.

The areas overseen by the logistics committee were sometimes very weak; a lot of things got lost. Like childcare and onsite medical support. There were no provisions for blind people, and the panel on disabilities in prison was held in an inaccessible room.

Sometimes I think people do the fun work first and leave the shit work for last. It's good for people to enjoy themselves, but it takes a fair amount of real hard work to build a strong foundation, and that foundation has to hold up the rest of the structure.

CR: What effects (good and bad) have CR had on the political work of movements, organizations, and individuals with which you are involved? How do you see the influence of CR as having enabled and/or transformed your work?

AS: I think the conference has been very important in mobilizing support against the prison system and radicalizing people's analyses of prisons. It now seems less "out there" to advocate prison abolition, for instance. CR has given people a vocabulary to talk about radical alternatives to the prison system. CR has been very important in my work, which centers on challenging the depoliticization of the anti-sexual/domestic violence movements and their overreliance on the state. The conference and organization I am organizing builds upon the work CR has done and the analyses it has put forth. After CR, I coordinated a national conference, "The Color of Violence: Violence Against Women of Color," in April 2000. Many people from CR assisted with the conference and helped put together one of the workshops on law enforcement. Two of the speakers, Angela Davis and Beth Richie, were very central in critiquing the anti-violence movement's reliance upon the state, based on CR's analysis, which helped frame the entire conference. From this conference, we are building a national organization of women of color against violence that will attempt to accomplish this task. Within Native organizing, the work of CR is also becoming important. For instance, one tribe is proposing to build a prison on their lands as a business enterprise. I was contacted by opponents of this plan for information that could be used to educate other members of the tribe about the problems with prisons. CR's materials were used to open negotiations with the tribal council in order to reconsider the proposal. Another contribution CR has made is providing a role model for bringing together academics and activists to work collaboratively. The "Color of Violence" borrowed this model, and I am seeing how powerful it can be. Academics are held accountable by activists to make their work accessible to the general public.

Activists can be informed by critical analyses that can inform their organizing strategies. Usually, when activists and academics are brought together, they talk past each other. But CR's strategy of assuring that academics were not allowed to read academic papers helped prevent some of these problems. Critical Resistance's name alone indicates the need to resist both depoliticized academic work and anti-intellectual activism, as well as to encourage the development of scholar/activists both inside and outside academic circles.

JS: There are too many to mention them all:

- * Faith Nolan and I set up Empowerment Through Music, a collaboration between students, musicians, and faculty at Mills College to bring "music circles" to San Francisco County Jail and the federal prison for women at Dublin, California (FCI Dublin).

- * The "Go to Prison Week" concert at FCI Dublin was a powerful event that countered isolation for political prisoners following the new warden's crackdown on them.

- * About 20% of my students have done some project or research on prisons, race, and gender.

- * Many Mills College students are now involved in youth organizing for "Schools Not Jails," especially against Proposition 21.

- * The conference inspired the formation of Critical Resistance Youth Task Force (YTF), a powerful coalition of youth groups located in Northern California.

- * Millions for Mumia used same format for its conference at University of California, Berkeley.

- * CR increased the use of music/culture/hip-hop for social change and as a part of the anti-prison-industrial complex community in the Bay Area.

- * The "Schools Not Jails" benefit concert for CR, No on 21, and Barrios Unidos in Santa Cruz in March were organized by CR activists and included such hip-hop giants as Black Star.

- * "Project Rescue," set up in Hawaii, counters prison construction on the Big Island and holds consultation forums on every island in Hawaii.

- * National black projects in the U.K. -- National Black Caucus and the Association of Black Probation Officers -- are committed to networking with CR and hosting a conference in the future.

- * I have given presentations on the prison-industrial complex in Canada, making the link between education and social service cuts and the construction of five new "superjails" in Ontario. Networking there continues.

CR also totally transformed my research. I was working on transracial adoption, and now I am writing a book on women of color in the global prison-industrial complex (PIC)! It transformed my analysis of global capital and gave me new insight into how communities of color in Canada, the U.K., and the U.S. are linked through the PIC. CR also transformed my teaching. Nearly all my classes --- from Theories of Race and Ethnicity to African American Women's History -- deal with the PIC in some way. Students are writing research papers on the PIC and youth resistance. It transformed my life. I can't go anywhere nowadays without trying to get inside a prison!

TK: CR has raised consciousness in all progressive organizations and movements about the importance of the struggle to tear down the PIC. I've been re-inspired in my prison activism. Prior to my experience on the conference organizing committee, I felt that I just happened to have opportunities, for example, as a plaintiffs expert in class action lawsuits, to enter the secret world of prisons and come out to report the horrors I had witnessed. I thought that this was important work, that the imprisonment binge and all the related injustices and cruelties were reflections of the deep structural

evils of our society, but not necessarily the central act in our current social tragedy. Collaborating closely with other prison activists led me to increasingly place the PIC more at the core of my analysis of what's wrong with this society and what we have to do to change things.

BB: CR's effect has been overwhelmingly positive for prisoners. It raises hope to realize that this many people give a shit. If you are in prison and you hear that 3,500 people -- including a lot of young people -- came to a conference to brainstorm about how to confront the prison-industrial complex, that is really meaningful. Prisoners were able to call in from all over the country (Ohio, Georgia, etc.) and speak with the people attending the panels. The women political prisoners had their own call-in workshop. It is very important that prisoners got to participate on a real level. The follow through has been a bit slow, but we are working on that. A lot of new organizations have sprung up in the wake of CR, which shows that people were encouraged to go out and take initiative. CR obviously happened at an opportune time, when people were becoming more aware of the cost of the prison-industrial complex and thinking about how to confront it. There are a lot more prison groups now than before the conference, and that's not all due to us. A movement is flowering. It is significant to note that the Prison Activist Resource Center's Web site is getting 10,000 hits a day. CR was able to add some fertilizer and other nutrients to the mix. I've seen this flowering all around me. Out of Control's main support work is for the women and lesbian political prisoners, and we produce a newsletter called Out of Time. There seems to be more interest these days. More people write to the women political prisoners and more people are visiting them. Again, what I notice especially is more interest from young people. I think more folks are just questioning: "What is this prison-industrial complex and what are the alternatives?"

In terms of how it transformed my work, we are very out lesbians, doing prison work; CR broadened our acceptability. We've already been around for 15 years and already have built some respect. More people seem to be doing more work around women in prison. More networking is going on and fewer people are forgetting that we do exist. A lot more young lesbian college students have contacted us for information about lesbian and other political prisoners. There used to be one or two requests a year. Now there are six to eight requests.

CR: What is your evaluation of developments within CR (the organizing committee, steering committee, etc.) since September 27, 1998? How has it changed as an organizational entity, and what has it become? What significant organizations, campaigns, or other committees have emerged in connection with CR? Offer an analysis of the good, the bad, and the ugly, if you can.

JS: CR has changed from a committee organizing a conference to an organization in abeyance after the conference. In 1999, it became an organization that swings from being an umbrella/resource at the national level to being a grass-roots mobilizing group around issues like the prison slated to be built in Delano, California, and Prop. 21 (juvenile incarceration). There has been a dropping off of people of color at the meetings I have attended. But the Youth Task Force has burst onto the scene as a multiracial group led by youth of color. This is problematic if the CR organizing committee is seen as being white-led. We need to get back into working class, American Indian, black, Chicano, and Latino communities. There are organizations that have emerged since the conference: Project Rescue (Hawaii), Empowerment Through Music, YTF, and CR-New York. CR-U.K. emerged, but now seems to have disappeared as an organized group.

I think the new developments are positive, especially YTF. However, I think CR risks losing its identity into the Freedom Winter coalition (a group organized by CR members to fight Prop. 21). Also, CR's relationship with the Youth Task Force is fragmented, with poor communication at times.

AS: Since September 27, 1998, it seems as though the flaws in the organizational structure have become increasingly apparent. It seems as though fewer people of color are involved in CR. Many Native people I know, who were initially interested in CR, have become alienated from it. CR seems to be very issue-specific and is having difficulty coming up with a more comprehensive strategic plan for the organization. We did good work on the juvenile justice campaign, but we did not seem to link this

campaign to a larger strategy (something I might add that the Right is very good at doing, and hence is more successful than we are). I think one of the major problems inherent in CR is our inability to look honestly at who holds the power in the organization. We tell ourselves that we have a loose, democratic structure in which we make decisions collectively. What we actually have is a situation in which a few people hold much of the informal organizing power and are constantly able to undermine collective decisions.

In addition, because of CR's loose structure, no one has been designated with the responsibility of assuring that nothing falls through the cracks. Such a person can make sure things run smoothly without necessarily being given decision making power. Plus, we did in fact have people who were in charge during the conference, but were able to escape accountability for their decisions by hiding behind the fact that they did not have a formal position within the organization. Another result of this situation was that avenues for action became blocked by certain individuals, which prevented many people (myself for one) from making more significant contributions to the organization. I should stress, however, that I do not think the problem lies with a few people because each of us can end up in an organizing venture where s/he wields a disproportionate amount of informal power. Rather, the problem is structural. How can an organization develop a structure that is democratic in practice, not simply in theory? I should note that I think things have improved tremendously since we hired a coordinator. This person is doing an excellent job, I believe, of making sure all the necessary tasks get done while ensuring that everyone has a say in determining CR's direction.

BB: CR's mass has dwindled. There has been a lot of burnout. The organization expanded and swelled for the conference and then deflated afterwards. That's probably a common cycle. We had to get beyond our trend to own it or patent it. Now it's sort of settled into a more modest but sustainable size. There is a smaller core of truly committed people who understand that to change the world you have to start with your own self and your own organization and do a lot of hard work. CR is a construct, a new way of thinking and seeing, and not just another gimmick for the opportunists. In terms of significant organizations or campaigns that came out in connection with CR, "Go to Prison Week" was a good idea, but a last-minute idea, and therefore a bit of a weak idea. We needed to have a beginning, middle, and an end. We should have had people start by building local prison groups, with their first activity being to go to a prison. It's about building a movement; it's not about building a moment. The work around Prop . 21 was excellent. And now, the Delano lawsuit to stop construction of yet another California prison is great.

TK: I think there was some confusion and difference among the organizers about what would happen after the conference. Many of the organizers had taken leave of most of their responsibilities in other prison organizations to dedicate themselves to putting on the conference. That dedication was needed--people worked extremely creatively and hard, and without that dedication and work, the conference could not have been the extraordinary success it was. After the conference, some of the organizers returned to their other organizations and withdrew a significant proportion of their energies from CR. There is nothing wrong with their doing so. But to the extent that we want CR to become an ongoing campaign, we need dedicated organizers who will be there well into the future.

The problem in the organizing committee, in my opinion, was that we never faced this reality head-on. We should have polled the membership of the organizing committee and the Youth Task Force to see what they'd be down to do on an ongoing basis, and then without any hard feelings, replenish the membership of the organizing committee with new people who would be willing to put in endless hours into the future. In fact, that's what the CR campaign is in the process of doing right now, and with the impressive leadership and energy of our new director, Rose Braz, much will be accomplished.

Meanwhile, we have not done badly since the conference. I am referring to the regional actions and organizing that has been going on around the country in the name of CR, organized by people whose energies were renewed by the CR conference.

CR: What is your ideal vision of the immediate future of CR as an organization? What do you think its purpose, goals, and strategies should be? What kind of infrastructure (if any) do you think it should embody? Are there alternate forms of organization building that you can imagine for CR?

JS: I think CR should have a clear national identity as an umbrella group that gives good information, analysis, leads campaigns, and provides advice for organizing, for example, our role in supporting CR-New York and organizing in Hawaii. This would involve updating the Web site, putting together resource packets on the PIC, getting national groups together to endorse a focused campaign, etc. We need to win back the national agenda and focus. I think there should be a national CR as well as regionals, e.g., Hawaii, New York, Northern California, etc. Perhaps we need to separate the Northern California and national groups so that we do not get swallowed up in regional crises. I also think CR should take its international commitment seriously, and we should brainstorm about how we can support activism in Canada and the U.K., for example, where analysis of the PIC is still emergent. Finally, we should have a regional responsibility for projects such as Delano and Prop. 21, but this should not detract from the national and international actions. Also, we should prioritize working with communities of color, building alliances and recognizing barriers to participation. CR needs a staff to get the work done. This is not to say that we cannot work on a voluntary basis, but realistically, we need some good fulltime people on the job. This should be based on a collective structure and include folks of color. CR needs funding for this. I think we can continue to take funds from progressive funders who do not attempt to water down our message.

BB: CR should be a monster anti-prison network, like a giant computer with a way of connecting people doing the work in their communities with others doing similar stuff. There should be space for broad concepts and discussions; people could share their local information and see what other folks are doing. People could get local facts by demanding them from their local department of prisons and then post that information for all to see. Then, of course, hard copies of everything have to be made available to the prisoners and others who do not have computer privileges.

Beyond the work of facilitating the networking between prison activists nationally, we need to do more work on a local, grass-roots level in every community. We haven't done enough work to have a strong enough foundation to be a national organization. We realistically are more of an umbrella.

AS: I think there would be a dual structure to CR. There should be a national office that is cohesive and very politically clear. However, CR should also incorporate a number of local, state, and regional organizations that are more loosely affiliated and that do not have to specifically answer to a national office. That way, we can have a broad-based movement that can attract people of varying political persuasions, but we can also have a tight and cohesive national organization that can offer political clarity. Regarding fundraising, we need to emphasize grass-roots fundraising strategies, such as "membership" development, canvassing, etc. Such approaches are time consuming, but ultimately are necessary if we are going to build a broad base of support and not become a foundation-driven organization.

TK: I am pleased with recent decisions to open an office, hire a director, apply for grants, and evolve as a broad-based, alliance-building prisoner advocacy organization.

CR: What relation should CR have to the nonprofit sector, liberal-to-progressive foundations, and the state (meaning its array of affiliated institutions, as well as its formal governmental structure)?

BR: CR should be fiercely independent for as long as possible to protect its center. CR needs to be strong enough, and conscious enough, not to get sucked up or bought out or absorbed into any of those well-established institutions. Assimilation is always a danger when radical ideas become popular trends.

JS: We should keep an arm's length relationship with the state, i.e., no state funding, although we can work with progressive individuals, e.g., probation officers, on an individual basis. The issue of

coalitions with agencies that are not progressive in some ways, such as in the recent debate about working with environmental agencies that are anti-immigrant, shows that we need to think carefully before we "get into bed" with so-called allies. This type of alliance could cost us our base in immigrant communities.

CR: Are there alternate forms of organization building that you can imagine for CR?

BR: I'd like to see CR share the lessons it has learned with new prison groups. I'd like to see us do a "How to Start Your Own Prison Group" pamphlet, possibly in conjunction with other Bay Area prison groups such as the Prison Activist Resource Center, the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, or California Prison Focus. This pamphlet could include information that a prison activist group should have about the prisons near it, a bibliography of films and books, and ideas on nonhierarchical organizational structure.

CR: How has CR made an impact on the political agendas of groups that have traditionally not devoted their primary attention to prison or prisoner work?

AS: I think CR did much to increase interest in prison organizing. However, this impact may be short-lived as CR has not been successful in sustaining its momentum due to its organizational flaws. I hope that does not happen.

TK: I believe that most of the people involved in organizing and attending the CR conference came to the realization that prison activism is more central to a progressive agenda than we previously thought. Groups that organize around labor, immigration, civil rights, welfare, the homeless, or the WTO now see recent trends in the criminal justice system, especially the disappearing of huge numbers of people of color behind bars, as a critical part of the structure that maintains the inequities and injustices their groups are campaigning to end. In that sense, the conference helped to bring the struggle to tear down the PIC into the Left's core agenda.

BB: We helped make links with education groups and local community groups by drawing attention to the fact that the resources that have gone toward community development are now being used to build the prison-industrial complex. We helped others see this and ask more questions: Were these effects expected or unanticipated? These things were slowly coming -- CR sped up the process, and that's our job!

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