

Rally for Prisoners!

July 31, 2020, Peter Bohmer
At the State Capitol, Olympia, WA

Slightly Edited version of my talk!

I want to thank those attending and the organizations who have organized this important rally, including but not limited to “The Truth is Inside Out” and the “Circle of Life Hub”

Black Lives Matter, Black Lives Matter, Prisoners Lives Matter!

How do we explain the ongoing police violence, mass incarceration, the economic depression we are experiencing, the Coronavirus pandemic that has killed 680,000 people globally and almost 160,000 in the U.S.? There is a massive outbreak in the prisons and immigrant detention centers. At San Quentin, 60% are infected with the Coronavirus and 19 have died from it.

Two words answer my question –**racial capitalism!**

Since 1619, the U.S economic and social system has been based on the dispossession of native people from the land like land we are currently standing on, and slavery of Africans and ongoing racial oppression.

The cause of these multiple forms of oppression and exploitation is a capitalist system, based on production for profit, that exploits human labor around the world. In the U.S. it continues to mean wealth for a few, the Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates of the world, and poverty and low wage jobs or no jobs or unfulfilling jobs for the majority—where racial capitalism causes African-Americans and Latinos to be poorer, have less wealth, poorer health and housing than whites, the list could go on, although the system also does not work for most white people. Women are paid less than men and often have two jobs, in the paid workplace and then non-paid labor in one’s home.

Racial capitalism also means the role of the police and prisons are to protect the property and power of the wealthy and to arrest, and often brutalize and imprison those who do not accept this oppressive system. The purpose of the police and prisons are to repress those who rebel against racial capitalism although often in ways that are not productive, that don’t further economic and racial justice.

In this racist capitalist system, health care is a commodity sold for a profit, not to meet human needs. Opening the economy does not mean providing for people’s needs but rather business as usual, no matter what the human cost and especially if they are Black and Brown and indigenous bodies.

It is no coincidence as income and wealth inequality has become far more unequal over the last 40 years, that the prison population has soared, over six times from 1980 to the

present. As anti-poverty programs, public housing, job training, education for prisoners, public health programs have been cut back, the solution by those in power, has been lock them up and throw away the key and a possible death sentence because of the spread of the Coronavirus.

We are living in a scary period, an environmental crisis, a health crisis, an economic depression, danger of nuclear war, continued police brutality and murder and racism, locking up immigrants and their kids in cages.

We have a President who has downplayed the Covid-19 pandemic causing the deaths of tens of thousands, a racist and narcissist President who is threatening to postpone the elections as his support plummets. Trump encourages and supports right-wing armed militias who strongly support him. Many of these armed groups are openly white supremacist although they call themselves white nationalists or just armed protectors of property. In Portland, Trump and his authoritarian Attorney General, Richard Barr, called out federal paramilitary forces, usually Homeland Security to grab protesters supporting racial justice off the streets into unmarked vans and use chemical weapons on them. Fortunately, this police state tactic backfired as the protests grew and these federal stormtroopers are withdrawing.

We are also living in a period of possibility. There is a growing understanding of the need for quality and affordable health care for all including prisoners and all immigrants. We need to organize to make this happen. Similarly, there is support that everyone should receive a basic income whether they have a job or not, often called a universal basic income; that good jobs can be created by a green new deal, ending the use of fossil fuels, and for free childcare financed by the wealthy. There is growing understanding that the U.S. shouldn't intervene in other countries, and that the Trump administration is a danger to humanity and the planet.

Thanks to the Black Lives led Movement, in current polls such as the one conducted for ABC News in mid-July of this year, two thirds of respondents said they both support Black Lives Matter, and also that Blacks and other minorities are denied equal justice in the criminal justice system. Fifty-five percent answered they see "the recent killings of unarmed Black people by police as 'a sign of broader problems' in police treatment of Blacks, rather than as isolated incidents." All of these percentages are significant increases from a few years ago. This is important and very positive but what is also necessary are social movements, and ongoing organizations and campaigns to connect this growing understanding of institutionalized racism to demands such as disarming and defunding the police.

There is also increased support for reducing the prison population because of the growing understanding of the injustice of mass incarceration, the growing consciousness of the population of the connection between U.S. racism and imprisonment, the tireless efforts of people and organizations like the organizers and speakers of this rally who are to exposing what is going on inside the walls and advocating for prisoners, and of course, the Coronavirus pandemic which requires

social distancing which cannot happen in prisons and the reality of case spreading like has happened first in Coyote Ridge and Monroe, and now in Stafford Creek, Walla Walla and other prisons and jails and detention centers.

Governor Inslee has released a small number of inmates. This is totally inadequate. Let us demand in the short run that the prison population be reduced by ½ and there be commutation of sentences and early release of those who have long sentences and are not a threat to others. One way to achieve a 50% reduction could be to release everyone with two years or less remaining time, everyone over 60 and those who have served long sentences and who have shown by their behavior in prison, they are very unlikely to commit violent crime if released.

Let us demand transparency to what is going on inside WA prisons rather than the constant cover up by the Department of Correction (DOC) about the true situation inside with regards to Coronavirus and other inhuman treatment of inmates.

Let us demand that guards treat prisoners with respect, follow best health practices and not use Covid-19 regulations as a new way to discipline and punish inmates by for example, sending prisoners to solitary for not following arbitrary commands.

Let us demand quality health care and better living conditions for prisoners and the entire population. Let us also demand access to families and activities, such as education, to those locked up, of course using necessary safety and health precautions.

How will we make this happen? We need to build organizations and movements that connect the issues, e.g., defund the police and reduce the prison population to longer run goals of abolition of police and prisons. We need to center the voices of prisoners and ex-prisoners in this movement, to amplify the voices and wisdom of those inside.

When we organize for health care for all or free higher education, let us always include the needs and voices of prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families. We need to build power through direct action, a diversity of tactics, educating the public and developing ongoing campaigns for these important reforms. Voting and lobbying is not enough.

Let us build a multi-racial movement against racial capitalism, and to transform our society!

Dare to struggle, Dare to Win

Let us connect even more than we have, Black Lives Matter to Prisoner Lives Matter.

Black Lives Matter, Prisoner Lives Matter!

Power to the People!