

Towards the Abolition of Prisons

An Interview with Angela Davis

INTERVIEW BY SCOTT WINN

Angela Davis is one of the most outspoken prison abolitionists and a leading expert on female incarceration. In 1970, she was involved in a campaign to free three black men from Soledad prison. Through her involvement in the campaign she was accused of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy and was forced underground after becoming the FBI's most wanted criminal. She was eventually captured and spent almost two years in jail awaiting trial. A worldwide movement to "Free Angela Davis" and all political prisoners was born. With her fist defiantly raised, she became a symbol of the Black Power Movement of the 1970s. Eventually, a jury found insufficient evidence for conviction, and she was freed.

Reporter Scott Winn spoke with Angela Davis on the phone from her home in Oakland, California, where she is busy preparing for Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex. The national conference will bring together activists, academics, advocates, artists, and former and current prisoners (through teleconferencing and phone-ins) to challenge the dramatically increasing prison population.

RC: Why should people working on ending poverty and homelessness be concerned with prison issues?

DAVIS: There is very clearly a connection between the rising number of the homeless people and the rising number of the people in prison. This has to do with the criminalization of particularly people of color and poor people. The state of the economy not only is not providing jobs for people, but is not providing education or health care.

When we consider the vast amount of money that is being used to build prisons and the extent to which corporations rely on the expansion of the prison system for profits, it is clear that all of these issues are very much connected.

RC: How has racism fueled the fear of crime and the expanding prison industry?

DAVIS: The way in which the criminal is imagined in popular political discourse is as a young Black man. As a matter of fact, much of the discussion about crime that takes place these days is really a discussion about young Black people, and young Latinos. When one looks at the people who are actually in prisons and jails the majority of them are people of color, African Americans,

Latinos, and an increasing number of young Asians/Asian Americans. So at a time when affirmative action is under attack and when people of color no longer have access to higher education, particularly in states like California, there is this perverse affirmative action program in place that leads people into prison.

RC: What impact has the government's war on drugs had on the expanding prison population?

DAVIS: The majority of women who are in prison are in on charges related to drugs. Racialized sentencing laws send people to prison for far longer periods of time if they are convicted of the possession of crack cocaine than of the possession of powder cocaine. This is another example of the way the war on drugs fuels racism, which fuels the expansion of the prison system. People who take powdered cocaine are usually wealthier, more affluent people, and they aren't the ones who are in prison.

I think it is important to point out that in a sense this is a society that



"Instead of sending people who do drugs to prison, those people should have access to jobs, to health care, to housing, to education and to drug treatment centers."

relies on drugs. Drugs are represented as the answer to everything. However, there are licit or legal drugs and then there are illegal drugs. People who don't have the money to get prescriptions from psychiatrists end up taking illicit drugs, and those are the ones who end up going to prison. The war on drugs is really a war on poor people, and it is a war on people of color.

RC: How could the decriminalization of drugs be a solution?

DAVIS: First of all, if drug use is decriminalized the money that is being used to build more and more prisons to incarcerate those who are convicted on drug charges could be used for the kind of institutions and facilities that would assist people who want to deal with their drug problems. The approach that we are taking in organizing this conference is to look at developing alternatives and at the same time, at abolishing as much of the prison system as we are able to do. So we are talking about abolitionist alternatives. Instead of sending people who do drugs to prison, those people should have access to jobs, to health care, to housing, to education, and to drug treatment centers.

RC: My next question was what are the goals of the prison abolitionist movement, is there anything else you want to say about that?

DAVIS: I think it is important to encourage people to talk about prison abolitionism. Prisons don't solve the problems they presume to solve. They simply make the problems worse. More prisons always lead to even more prisons. Today the imprisoned population is expanding as the crime rate is dropping. There is no relationship between the actual existence of crime and the numbers of people who are in prison.

It is, I think, important to look at the economy again, particularly the global capitalist economy. The fact that corporations have moved their operations to countries where the labor movement is not organized, where they can get very cheap labor costs. At the same time people who would rely on those jobs here in this country are left with no alternatives at all. So in talking about prison abolitionism I think we need to try to develop a radical consciousness of what will be required in this country to bring about social and economic justice.

RC: The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that supposedly freed the slaves allows for slavery for people who are in prisons. To what extent is prison labor being used in the United States?

DAVIS: You would be amazed at the extent to which corporations that provide us with the products that we use in our daily lives rely on prison labor. It is not only the privatization of prisons and the profit that comes out of private prisons. It is the fact that companies like IBM, Motorola, and companies that produce graduation gowns and jeans are using prison labor. Of course, that's labor that is rarely paid for at even a minimum wage. In a sense, yes, we can call prison labor the new slave labor in this country.

RC: You were in Cuba last summer interviewing women in prison, and I am curious what you learned about the Cuban criminal justice system, particularly in comparison to the United States?

DAVIS: Well, I was extremely impressed by the extent to which the rights of people who are in prison in Cuba are respected. I was impressed with the level of health care and by the fact that when prisoners worked they received the same wages as workers who do the same jobs on the outside. Prisoners are able to continue their vocational and educational careers when they are in prison. The women there did not have a sense of being alienated from society. There is a system that allows people after a certain period of time to go back into their communities for weekends at first and then for longer periods of time. Mothers are not separated from their children.

I could do an entire interview about the differences with respect to human rights in prisons in Cuba and the United States. That experience made me recognize how utterly brutal the prison system is in the United States.

RC: Obviously, this is overwhelming information. How can we best organize to resist the expansion of the prison industry and how does Critical Resistance fit into that?

DAVIS: This will have to be a vast movement that will have to involve people who in the past have not seen themselves or their work as related to prison issues. We need to make these issues popular. We need a

massive media and educational campaign. One of the primary tasks is to try to change the language people use in talking about crime and punishment. We have to try to urge people to think about the fact that crime and punishment are two separate things. People are not punished primarily because they commit crimes. People are punished, even though they may have committed crimes, because they are poor, because they are black, because they are socially marginalized.

Crime is rampant in this society, but there are many crimes that go utterly unpunished, such as the crimes of the corporations and the government. We have to encourage people to think about how women are affected by this expanding prison system, especially through the relationship between the abolition of the welfare system and the increasing numbers of women behind bars, particularly women of color.

RC: My last question concerns my favorite quote by you about how the activist needs to respond to the needs of today while still shining a light on the future. How do you balance trying to get health care in prisons while trying to abolish prisons at the same time?

DAVIS: Well, first you have to recognize that people are suffering in this vast system. Look at the super-maximum prisons that are proliferating all over the country where people spend 23 1/2 hours a day in their cell with no human contact. So it is very important that we think about the institutions that need to be abolished, but at the same we think about the people who are there now who have real needs. So it is a kind of a balancing act.

What we are arguing is that the reforms for which we need to fight should not be reforms that further strengthen the prison system. They should be reforms that push us in a radical direction. We need a vast alliance that brings people together across the divides that usually separate us to begin the ambitious effort to crack the stronghold of the prison-industrial complex. ☐

See the calendar on p. 30 for information on "Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex: A National Conference and Strategy Session."