

SHOWING UP FOR THE INCARCERATED. A Note on the Current National Prison Strike

-James Theophilos

On September 9th 2016, the United States had its first ever national prison labor strike. The strike, which started in Alabama, radiated to 24 different states with an estimation of 200,000 prisoners participating and over 40 solidarity actions all across the world. The launching date September 9th was chosen as a homage to the most iconic and famous prison uprising in modern US history that also happened on that same day; the rebellion of New York's Attica prison of 1971.

It's been almost a month since the prison strike began and people on the inside and outside have still been fervently taking action. This hunger strike is astonishing in that it shows disempowered individuals, like prisoners, leading powerful unifying rebellions both inside their own prisons and with facilities thousands of miles away from them as well. This strike could be seen as some form of a phenomenon; that folks behind walls could start something this large and widespread. Although despite its power, most of the American population has no idea this even is occurring.

Being in the midst of a presidential election, between two of the most unfavorable candidates the United States has ever seen, has gone in strong favor to our elite institutions. It has offered itself as a blanket to hide Dakota Access Pipeline, recent police shootings, and the prison strike. Three movements that are intrinsically linked to one another and undeniably historical. Instead of revealing the details of these nation wide actions, the media has focused on politicians telling us how prison jobs rehabilitate prisoners, that poverty to criminality will end with body cameras, and that constructing DAPL is helping the economy.

With the prison industrial complex being one of the most corrupt, oppressive, and violently classist and racist spaces in our country, prison strikes are important. They empower individuals whom, since entering incarceration, have been stripped away from their humanity and autonomy. It breaks down state sponsored racial and gang segregation, creating new sense of solidarity and mutual aid. It is both a literal and symbolic disruption in the major structure of the institutions at hand. And it is actively helping reform violent conditions by highlighting slave labor and abuse inside prisons.

Due to the lack of coverage and acknowledgement by the media, it is even more imperative for us to speak up for folks on the inside. As IgniteNC continues to help build grass root movements, it is imperative that we include the prison strike in our work and create visibility in showing how prison slave labor is in direct correlation with police brutality and the pipeline construction. Creating substantial change in a society with ineffectual democracy will not come from choice between Clinton or Trump, but it can grow out of the rebellions that are happening in Charlotte, North Dakota and in prisons.