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Mobilization Strategy Analysis of Party for Socialism and Liberation in Prison Abolition Movement

The death of George Floyd in May 2020 has brought waves of civil rights movements worldwide. Among many other organizations, the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL) organized protests across the United States, calling for ending police brutality. The party had been maintaining its position on prison abolition, a movement aiming at dismantling the entire imprisonment system and seeking better alternatives for the rehabilitation of humans. Different from many organizations that address police brutality or racism specifically, the Party for Socialism and Liberation stands against the root of the prison-industrial complex - capitalism. To reach its revolutionary goal of socialist transformation, the party adopts both long-term strategies through engagement in mutual aid projects as well as short-term approaches like supporting prison reform under the current capitalist society. This paper argues that the adoption of such a broad political vision accompanied by the combination of strategies in both the short-run and the long-run effectively mobilized a larger group of citizens to participate in the prison abolition movement.

The Broad Political Vision

The anti-capitalist view maintained by the Party of Socialism and Liberation is the most effective model for prison abolition, as the root of the racist policing and imprisonment system is racial capitalism. William Calathes, a professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at New

Jersey City University, argues that punishment is a “social control weapon” for domination, which reveals the “inherently exploitative paradigm of racial capitalism” (442). Therefore, dismantling the capitalist social structure can eradicate such domination along with the prison-industrial complex. Eleanor Ommani, a retired high school teacher in New York City and a supporter of the Party for Socialism and Liberation, also stressed the capitalist nature of the prison system during an interview. She said, “under capitalism, the role of the police is to defend capital and its institutions ... I don't believe you can abolish the prisons under capitalism unless you shake the whole system.”

Since capitalism is the root of the problem, any struggle against capitalism can contribute to achieving the goal of a world without prisons. Therefore, besides solving the problem of prisons from its root, the anti-capitalist model also helps engage a more diverse group of people. In fact, a limited political view would undermine the mobilization power of a prison abolishing organization. Angela Davis, a professor emerita at the University of California, Santa Cruz, had been involved in the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA), a periodical conference on prison abolition where activists and scholars from different continents gather. However, she noted that their discourse focuses only on the conceptual framework of abolition, without the incorporation of racism into the discussion, and the conference itself is highly racially homogeneous. As a result, the conference failed to engage a larger audience. In fact, several black student activists felt alienated at an ICOPA conference (Davis & Rodriguez 214). In contrast, as an anti-capitalist party, the Party for Socialism and Liberation is involved in a variety of struggles ranging from affordable housing, racist police brutality, minimum wage, union rights to imperialist war and environmental destruction (“Apply to Join PSL”). Although some of them does not seem to fit the discourse community of prison abolition directly, they are

all products of capitalism, where the commodification and exploitation of human are core characteristics. The Party for Socialism and Liberation effectively unites all these people who are fighting against different aspects of capitalism together. Such a coalition adds much more power to the prison abolition movement at the same time.

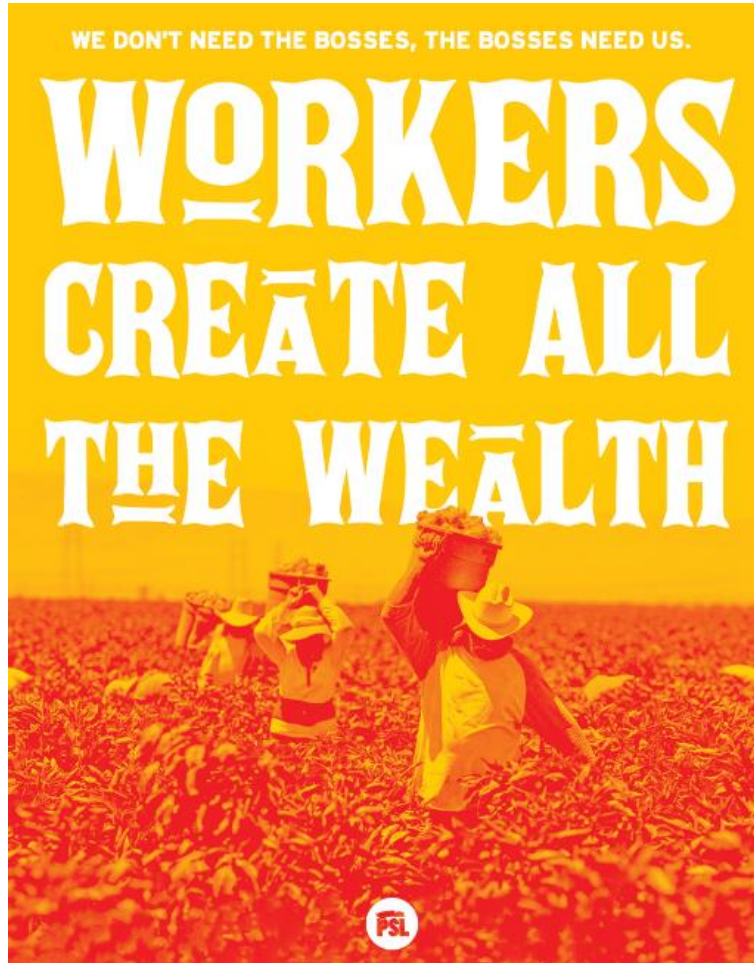


Fig. 1. Workers Create All Wealth.
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To reach and engage such a diverse group of audience to fight against capitalism together, the Party for Socialism and Liberation creates many posters for propaganda. “Workers Create All Wealth” is among many of them on their website and social media (see fig. 1). The main objects depicted on the poster are three farmers carrying baskets full of produce. It conveys

how diligent the farmers are and how onerous the work is. The three farmers are representatives of a large group of exploited people of low socioeconomic status who are working hard in various sectors, producing daily necessities, as well as other goods and services, for everyone in the society. The agriculture products inside those baskets are also metaphors for wealth. Without these physical products produced by workers, the wealth of the people of high socioeconomic status is vacuous, if possible. Besides the foreground elements, then glaring yellow and red background colors represents the sunlight under which the farmers are working, which not only indicates that the farmers are working under an extremely hot and dry environment but also implies that the working conditions for all kinds of workers are harsh in general. The small text “we don’t need the bosses, the bosses need us” at the top of the poster conveys the idea that the ordinary working people have more power than they think because they are indeed those carrying the “wealth” instead of the privileged who oppress and punish them through policing and imprisonment. In this sentence, the antithesis gives the sentence a strong sense of rhythm, while the first-person pronouns “we” and “us” create a sense of community and solidarity among workers. The connotations embedded in the graphical elements, combined with the inspiring text, made the poster effective in mobilizing all workers to participate in the political movement against the oppressive capitalist system by being a member of the party.

Mutual Aid Projects – The Long Journey

Accompanied by the anti-capitalist vision and propaganda, participation in mutual aid projects by the Party for Socialism and Liberation is a long-term bottom-up strategy that brings substantial changes towards the goal of prison abolition. In the article “Solidarity Not Charity”, Dean Spade, an Associate Professor at Seattle University School of Law, describes mutual aid

projects as one of the most effective approaches towards prison abolition, in which people “take responsibility for caring one another” and build an alternative system for meeting people’s need (136). Steven Powers, a member of the Party for Socialism and Liberation, also underscored the importance of such an approach in a similar way. He said, “[Mutual aid] has to be part of a long-term strategy. It has to be part of building a base, building power, building class consciousness, building towards a revolution” (PSL Philly). In fact, after Hurricane Michael stroke Florida in 2018, volunteers affiliated with Party for Socialism and Liberation, coalesced with other left-wing organizations including Socialist Rifle Association and Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, participated in a mutual aid operation. As Faye Ecklar described in his article, these people - “socialists, anarchists, and ordinary concerned citizens” - delivered supplies “including water, food, sanitary items, and tools” to low-income communities hit by the disaster. In contrast, “the police ... [were] threatening looters looking for food in a devastated city” and “[the] National Guardsmen [were] fortifying and defending banks”. Such a centralized policing system failed to offer support to those in need but enforced more violence in the wake of the crisis. Since the vulnerable can receive care and material relief from a decentralized mutual aid network to help them survive a crisis, they are neither likely to develop anti-social personality nor having incentives to commit crimes. Additionally, as Dean Spade suggests in his article, mutual aid projects breed reciprocity, as helping people manage their needs daily brings in more people to take care of the community at large (131). Psychological research also reconciles the effectiveness of such a “norm of reciprocity”. Todd Rogers, Noah J. Goldstein, and Craig R. Fox review several psychological studies on social mobilization and summarize that “providing people with unconditional favors, gifts, or other-benefiting sacrifices can make people feel obliged to repay these gestures through participation in social mobilization activities” (360). This

aligns with the participation in mutual aid projects by the Party for Socialism and Liberation in helping build a mutual care network. As it grows gradually, our community is becoming safer without the need for police and prisons.

However, it is admitted that mutual aid projects might not be the focus of the party that is involved in a variety of struggles at this time. Only one branch of the party based in Philadelphia is actively participating and organizing such projects (PSL Philly). If other branches of the party across the United States could also involve in mutual aid projects, the decentralized mutual aid system would be much more powerful.

Calling for Prison Reform – The Short-term Compromise

While the participation in mutual aid projects is part of the long-term strategy towards prison abolition, supporting prison reform under the existing capitalist society serves as a short-term strategy employed by the Party for Socialism and Liberation to bring in more people who are currently suffering from the prison-industrial complex. In fact, embracing prison reform is controversial among prison abolitionists as prison reformists try to improve the current imprisonment system instead of eliminating it. Among some prison abolitionists, Angela Davis argues that supporting prison reform may undermine the prison abolition process, as the emphasis of the political discourse will be “given away to proposals for prison reform”, marginalizing the debate on abolition (20). However, the concept of prison is such an ingrained part of the public’s common sense that changing this ideology of the general population is a long haul. More importantly, propaganda that only focuses on stripping such ideology through educating the public can hardly bring immediate benefits to the people currently suffering from systematic torture. As a result, people currently in crisis are less likely to engage with an

organization that only adopts a long-term revolutionary approach. The Party for Socialism and Liberation, though aware of and supportive of prison abolition, does also rely on reform strategies in the short term, including supporting “the end of qualified immunity for officers”, “repeal of federal programs that send military equipment to local police”, and “any reform that alleviates the suffering of prisoners”. Although it is admitted that prison reforms will not bring substantial changes to the structure of the prison-industrial complex, reforms do “put up roadblocks” on the capitalist state’s way of repression, thus easing the survival the vulnerable population practically (“How Will the Police Be Abolished? A Marxist Perspective”). Through such a strategy, people under oppression are more willing to join the organization, requesting reforms and later the abolition of police and imprisonment.

Conclusion

Prison abolition is a cultural process that requires a huge amount of social mobilization. The Party for Socialism and Liberation is actively making its own contribution to the abolitionist community. The party takes a broad political vision to dismantle the prison-industrial complex by shaking the root of it through a variety of anti-capitalist struggles, in which a more diverse group of people are engaged. Creating inspiring posters strategically aids its propaganda on social media to reach such a diverse audience. Besides the wide political view and effective propaganda, the Party for Socialism and Liberation took both long-term and short-term strategies simultaneously to maximize its mobilization power. Through participating in mutual aid projects, the party is gradually building a decentralized system for satisfying people’s needs without government agencies, thus keeping the community safe without using punishment. In the meanwhile, the short-term strategy of standing along with prison reformists brings in more

people who need immediate relief from the systematic torture of policing and imprisonment. If the Party for Socialism and Liberation could adopt mutual aid strategy at a national scale, it will inject more power to the prison abolition movement, and a world without prisons will no longer be considered a utopian ideal but a future.

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