

Coalition For Prisoners' Rights Newsletter

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IT'S HARD TO BE OPTIMISTIC

That is because the vast majority of our readers live at a nose-rubbing distance of the extreme and growing inequality that is the reality of life today in the U.S. What is "right" or "fair" or any approximation of those two ideas isn't at all on the table. No one in prison is even on the same page—or in the same book or the same library—for being able to cause harm to as many others as those who run our businesses and governments.

A recent and apparently on-going example of this is the millions of dollars spent recently by a couple of extremely rich white men to experience weightlessness in space. Apparently this is to be a continuing enterprise. How many people could be fed or housed, for how long, with that money? We haven't come across anyone even asking those questions publicly. The acted-on beliefs of those with power look exactly as if they believe that if you are poor, it is your fault, and you deserve whatever bad treatment you get. It sure does look like these are the consistently acted on beliefs, with their attendant rational, of those with power. Dressed up a bit to be pretty and more acceptable.

A current situation in which this is extremely relevant to our readers is what the post-pandemic (if that thought in itself is not overly optimistic) prison population and practices will be. We fervently hope that current declines in the size of the prison population will be maintained and continue to fall. But, it is hard to be optimistic.

Some background: At the beginning of the spread of the Covid-19, there was a call to reduce the prison population based on a number of highly rational reasons. It did not appear to be being responded to rationally, although there were some limited successes. And sure enough, the virus spread dramatically inside jails and prisons, affecting staff as well those those imprisoned. Much was done to increase those numbers. Death rates were substantially higher inside than outside. And appear to remain so. Nothing rational in the continuing, publicized response.

By May of 2021, some information began to trickle out, for example: Nearly one-third of federal correctional officer jobs in the U.S. were reported as vacant, "forcing prisons to use cooks, teachers, nurses and other workers to guard" those imprisoned. This, of course, has directly affected the well-being and safety of those imprisoned. One of many examples is from Illinois, at "one of the most understaffed prisons in the country" – thoughtfully left unnamed – where "five inmates have died in homicides or suicides since March 2020."

And, sure enough, there began to be more information about some declines in the numbers of those imprisoned. At the end of June 2021, "New Mexico's prison population has dipped significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic due to the combination of an executive order that led to the early release of 532 inmates since April 2020 and a slowdown in jury trials in courts around the state." In addition, one of the for-profit GEO prisons in New Mexico is expected to be turned over to the state by November. New Mexico is now at an historic low for the past 20 years, at a 74% prison occupancy rate.

Several prisons in California are reported to be closing: in Susanville, in Tracy, in Soledad and in Tehachapi, as well as for-profit prisons as a whole.

So that's the better news. But, what is likely to happen longer term? Those with the power make the decisions for those of us without it. And it damn sure ain't those with power who are locked up in this country, no matter what it is perfectly clear they might have done.

So, it's hard to be optimistic. What direction, especially if the pandemic has significantly declined—despite all the bad public health practices that have been widely employed during it—will the size of the imprisoned population be headed then? What excuses might be employed to grow it? What powerful people might believe it to be in their bottom-line interest to increase the numbers of those of us who are literally, as well as figuratively, locked up? Sometimes it would be the greatest pleasure of all to be wrong.

The “Caribbean Crisis”

Recent unrest in Cuba and a presidential assassination in Haiti—have a commonality: Both could be seen as the outgrowth of a distinct counter-revolutionary impulse in Washington.

Since virtually the onset of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, U.S. imperialism has imposed a suffocating blockade that not only seeks to topple the regime but seeks to impel the populace through their suffering to demand it. This has hampered the historic tie between the island and the mainland in terms of commerce and has forced Havana to devote a good deal of the national income to defense in order to forestall a possible invasion, which occurred approximately 60 years ago during the ill-fated “Bay of Pigs” escapade and has involved literally hundreds of plots to assassinate the top leadership.

The President of Mexico has suggested correctly—in common with a recent UN vote that brought opposition only from the U.S. and Israel—that the blockade should be ended forthwith. Unfortunately, the Biden administration has echoed the Trump regime in not seeking to ease the blockade, a direct outgrowth of the inability of the progressive movement to influence the contours of U.S. foreign policy. We must demand that our tax dollars be redirected from regime change fantasies and harebrained war planning and directed instead toward human needs.

And that brings us to Haiti, which too had a revolution—culminating in 1804—which too incurred the wrath of the slaveholding regime in North America. The U.S. was terrified and outraged by the specter of a successful revolt of the enslaved and, thus, worked overtime to subvert this new regime, up to and including sponsoring a breakaway regime in 1844, today’s Dominican Republic. Their ensuing defeat of slavery was a victory as bondage was a drag on wages and working conditions hemispherically including in the U.S. itself. Once slavery was defeated in 1865 here, the movement for unions generally accelerated.

The recent murder of the Haitian president with suspects having various levels of U.S. ties illustrates that Washington has not forgotten nor forgiven Port-au-Prince for having the gumption to overthrow an entire system, thereby jeopardizing lucrative profiteering.

However, if we are to establish sane domestic policies—addressing homelessness and hunger—we must promote sane global policies (jettisoning fever dreams of regime change and the like): therein lies the route to sanity and humanity.

El papel del bloqueo contra Cuba

El presidente de Estados Unidos, Joe Biden, calificó a Cuba como un “Estado fallido” y dijo que el comunismo es un sistema que ha fracasado en todo el mundo. Biden ofreció enviar vacunas a la isla solo si un organismo independiente al Gobierno cubano se encarga de administrarlas. Sin embargo, el manejo cubano de la pandemia ha provocado muchos menos casos y muertes que en Estados Unidos, en proporción a su población. Cuba también está desarrollando varias vacunas de fabricación propia. El presidente cubano Miguel Díaz-Canel ha dicho que la actual convulsión social y crisis económica del país se debe al bloqueo y a las sanciones impuestas por Estados Unidos, que mantenido consecuencias devastadoras para la isla.

THE LEAST READ PART OF THE NEWSLETTER

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Please continue to send us address changes, as soon as you can, including both your old and new address, to help us keep our mailing list up-to-date.

NONE OF US ARE LAWYERS OR LEGAL WORKERS. Letters sent to us marked “Legal Mail” are not going to a lawyer and could possibly result in our losing our access to the prisons they come from. Please don’t do it.

Many, many thanks to the Real Cost of Prisons project, which posts our Newsletter on-line monthly for free downloading and distribution. All issues since 2009 are at its great site: realcostofprisons.org

U.S. Prison at Guantanamo

“We should bring the individuals, 40 [now: 39] out of the original 780, are still being held. Only seven are facing a military trial. To drag the judicial process out to nearly 20 years is absurd. Release the rest. Guantanamo was to bypass the Constitution and the court system. It failed.”

— Omar Ashmawy in the *Washington Post*

The article in the left hand column of this page was written by the historian Gerald Horne. Among his many books are a number on Haiti and Cuba, including: *The Haitian Revolution, Freedom’s Mirror, Race to Revolution and The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism*.