

Organizing To End Prison Slavery

with Bennu Hannibal Ra
Sun



The Final Straw Radio

A conversation with Bennu Hannibal Ra-Sun, cofounder of the Free Alabama Movement and the National Freedom Movement, which is helping coordinate prisoner-led organizing across the so called US.

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This week Bursts spoke with Bennu Hannibal Ra-Sun, co-founder of the Free Alabama Movement and the National Freedom Movement, which is helping coordinate prisoner-led organizing across the so called US. Bennu just finished a five year period in segregated housing for his organizing efforts. For the hour they talk about the national network coordination, the continuation of slavery from chattel slavery in which black and brown bodies were private property to the modern slavery of mass incarceration, the importance of platforming prisoners and their struggles, the January boycott FAM is conducting against prison industries, reform efforts, and more.

You can learn more and get in touch with Free Alabama movement by visiting their websites at <http://FreeAlabamaMovement.Org> and <https://FreeAlabamaMovement.wordpress.com/>, email them at FreeAlabamaMovement@gmail.com and find them on Twitter (@FREEALAMOVEMENT) and Facebook (@FreeAlabamaMovement). You can check out some of their radio shows at AbolitionToday.org You can reach the National Freedom Movement: 1NationalFreedomMovement@gmail.com. or on Twitter via @NationalFreedo5

Inspirational revolutionaries we wanted to remember at the end of this chat:

- Bennu describes [Richard Mafundi Lake](#) as an “Ancestor, political prisoner and Panther for Life”
- Bursts mentioned [Karen Smith](#) and [Rebecca Hensley](#), who both had memorials written up in the December 2020 SF Bay View Newspaper by comrades.

TFSR:

For the audience. Would you mind introducing yourself

Bennu:

My name is Bennu Hannibal Ra Sun, I'm the founder of the Free Alabama Movement. I'm also the founder of a organization we're putting together now called the National Freedom Movement, where we're building a coalition of inside-led, inside-based organizations bringing all of those together. And also orchestrated the 2018 Campaign to Redistribute the Pain nationwide, and also laid the groundwork for the 2016 National Freedom Strike, which was the largest strike in US history. And I'm incarcerated in the Alabama Department of Corrections. I've been incarcerated for 22 years now and I'm an activist, I'm an organizer, I'm a freedom fighter, abolitionist, whatever is necessary in this fight behind these walls and cages.

TFSR:

And could you tell the audience a bit about the Free Alabama Movement, like how it came to be formed, your philosophy, and the methods that you use to struggle—and who participates in it?

Bennu:

As I said, Free Alabama Movement was founded inside St. Clair Corrections Facility. I ran across an article in 2012 that I did some research on and it inspired me to come up with solutions to some of these issues we were facing here in the state of Alabama. From that we came with Free Alabama Movement. And it's a human rights movement. Started out we were civil human rights, we're moving more so away from the civil rights aspect and head on with the human rights aspect. We acknowledge that these prisons are slave plantations and that they—their roots trace back over 400 years to the institution of slavery. We are aware that ownership and control of these plantations occurred as a result of the 13th amendment. So the ownership was transferred from private property owners to the state government. And what we know of and called prisons and

mass incarceration today are nothing but cover-up for what's actually going on and it's a humanitarian crisis. And it is slavery.

Also you asked about our methods and so the methods that we use—because this is an economic enterprise, people call it the prison slavery industrialized complex. So many different names, but at the core it's an economic system. And so we use economically-based tactics no different from what other laborers use in society. We organize labor, we organize work strikes, we also understand that there are a lot of contractors that are involved such as phone companies, JPay, Access Secure Deposits, incentive package programs, and whatnot. And so we organize boycotts of these companies. Also, there are a lot of industries—private industries—who are getting products and services from this out of prisons. So we organize work strikes in those areas. And so, basically, everything that we're doing is addressing the economic aspect of it. Because even with private prisons, you see these companies listed on the stock exchange, people are investing in this stuff, people are buying and selling human bodies, human trafficking, and the only way to drive those people away from the table is to dry—is to attack them head-on, point blank, at what brought them to the table. And it's the profit. And the profit is all centered on the labor and the funding that we spend from the inside. And so that's how we organize, we organize around that.

We also use protests to build awareness, to show support. We protest at the prisons. A lot of organizations of people like to march in the state capitals and whatnot. But we like to conduct our protests directly at the headquarters of these facilities. For example, the Department of Corrections. We like to protest there. The parole board, we like to protest there. But most importantly, we like to protest at the prison because that's where the people are. That's where the suffering is. That's where the crisis is. That's where the COVID-19 is killing people. That's where the drugs, the overdoses are occurring at, this is where the suicides are occurring at, this is where the murders and the police brutality is occurring it. And so this is where the presence has to be. This is where the inside presence is and this is where

the outside presence has to show up at to let us know that they support us. And we lead with our own ideas, we lead with our own initiative, and we ask people to support. So that's how we structure our movement and that's what the National Freedom Movement that I mentioned earlier is all about. It's about being inside-led about being inside-based, and it's about people who are interested in this stuff coming to the table and not so much bringing their own plans and their own agendas, but to bring their resources and skills and apply them to the things that we're requesting because we don't have access to a lot of the things that people have in society as far as technology goes. We don't have the resources simply because of our conditions. And so we actually need to come in to, like, maybe make flyers for us or make posters for us or set of phones or setup—uh, one of the things that we're asking for from our outside support people is to identify yourself in your state as a certified outside support organization. And what that means is that you set up a phone call, set up a phone line, to accept phone calls, and activities on the inside will share that information all around the state prisons so that when activists are hijack, we don't have to try to figure out who they want to call, who they want to contact. That designated outside support organization will be right there, the information will be inside the prison, and people will know contact them, call them, and provide whatever resources that we can get staff attorneys and we can get paralegals, people to assist with, you know, the administrative process.

We're trying to set a structure up that is that is structured from the very beginning around what it takes to assist organizers on the inside. And the reason why that's important because a lot of people bring stuff to the table that they think is helpful. And a lot of this stuff is not helpful, or is paternalistic. They come and they want to tell us what to do. Well, we're tired of being told what to do. We're adults, we're thinkers, we're planners, we're strategists, tacticians, and all of that, too. We just don't have the resources. And so this is this is our response to that. This is how we're going to put our structure together on the inside. So if you have an inside organization, and they want

to be a part of this and come on and get on board with the National Freedom Movement.

TFSR:

Can you say how widespread the National Freedom Movement is? Like, I know that in—the first time that you and I had a conversation years ago, there was representation in the chat also from Mississippi. I know that folks like Imam Hassan in Ohio was a part of the Ohio movement, I've heard about it in Illinois. Where is representation right now or—I don't know how much you can talk about with that for safety's sake.

Bennu:

Okay. Yes, I can talk about it. We want to talk about, we want people to know. As you know, when we started out in 2014, we were just stateside our organization. But the support that we received, the attention we received, was from around the world. The majority of it was in the United States. And so when we received all that support, we started building relationships with people. This is what allowed us to lay the groundwork for even creating the thought about a national structure of bringing people together. So in 2015 I developed something called the six step—the Free Alabama Movement Six Step Plan of Action. And it laid out what organizers could do in their state to do the same thing that we're doing. Still didn't know that it was going to turn into what it turned into, but it evolved, it got better, more people got involved. And the next thing you know, we had—we were connected with prisons all around the country. And that allowed us to have the historic 45th anniversary of September 9 Attica rebellion national prison strike.

And the thing about that was, even though we had that network and connections, it was not built as an organization. We just had very loose networks of people and we had asked our organizers—they brought their networks and their organizations, but they didn't help us build our own. And so when they left and things broke down, they took everything that they had with them. And they even took resources with them. They took, you know, our sacrifices, you know what I'm saying. They capitalize

off of it. And so what I started doing in 2017 when I started writing out the Campaign to Redistribute the Pain which was a national bi-monthly boycott campaign throughout the entire year 2018. In a November 30 article that I wrote that was published by San Francisco Bay View, I started laying out what the framework of a national structure needed to be, what it should look like. And I put that in that article and guys from the inside, my brother Kwame Shakur, he reached out, a few more people reached out, few more organizations reached out and, you know, they liked the idea of us doing that.

And so I ended up getting sent to the SHU in Alabama. So that kind of disrupted my ability to continue to do that, because I was limited in what I could do, but I was able to do the Campaign to Redistribute the Pain. I was able to get the message out, I just will not be able to organize it the way I needed to. So now that I finally gotten out of seg after a little over five years, get my feet back on the ground, started by talking to people, now we're putting the actual infrastructure in place.

We're in contact with Conrad Lee down in California, we're in contact with the United Black Family Scholarship Foundation, Ivan Kilgore, we're in contact with other activists and organizers on the inside from as far away as California. We're in the Midwest, we have organizations up in Ohio, Indiana, activists in Michigan. We basically have the south of South Carolina—we have South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. And these are all confirmed. People who have been consistently coming our meetings. We're having people showing up from Pennsylvania now, we're getting calls out of New York. We have our conference calls every week. And people are just, they're coming on board, you know what I'm saying. But the main thing is that when we bring people on board, we're emphasizing to them that this is going to be an inside-based and inside-led organization. And we have a specific way that we want to structure. We have specific issues that we want to address.

And the reason why we're doing it like that is because some states have different issues. Every state doesn't have the same issue. But there are certain core issues that every state has. And the national structure will be responsible for directing the movement on these core issues that we all share in common. But the thing that—the glue that brings it all together, is that message. If you have a parole issue, if you have a post condition issue, if you have a sanity issue, or visual affinity issue, mandatory minimum issue, we don't care what your issue is. Only thing we want to do is we want to bring all of the organizations together at the same time. Like, you may see a protest in California, a couple of weeks later you'll see one in Kansas, a couple of weeks later, you'll see one in Texas. Well we want all of those protests will be going on at one time to elevate the issues nationwide.

That's how we elevate the issues nationwide, we have to coordinate the actions nationwide. And we have four core principles and methods that we use. We use work strikes, boycotts, protests, and like I said, social media campaigns. We use social media. We have YouTube channels, we have Twitter, we have Instagram, Facebook, TikTok. We're building across all of these platforms because this is how people communicate. And so the National Freedom Movement, we use these four methods to address whatever issues that our coalition members come to the table with. We have some issues that will be on a national scale, other issues that will be on the local scale, For example, this coming up April the 3rd, there was a call out of Georgia by an organizer. He's on Facebook by the name of Peace Justice—1 Million Men and Women Parole Rally. Well, when I saw that, I know that we have parole issues in Alabama too. There's parole issues in Ohio, which is one of our main organizers. They're Ensuring Parole for Incarcerated Citizens—the EPIC organization—they've been working on doing that. And so parole is an issue around the country. It's different, but the fundamental issue is that the parole boards have discretion around the nation, and that they're using their discretion to keep these prisons full for economic interest.

And so it is in our interest to support that, but not just recorded in words, but to support an action. And so this gave me the opportunity to actually bring this National Freedom Movement structure together around an issue, because you don't want to just be calling people together telling them, "Hey, we're trying to put a National Freedom Movement coalition together." We need thousands of people to show up, because there's no responsibility being placed on anyone. There's no duty, there is no obligation, everybody likes to show up and talk. But when you have this issue sitting on the table, this parole issue, and I put it to the members, out it to the people we have the networking with, Like I said, the response has been great. People have been coming in, and we're letting them know that we're here—we're here to build an organization, a coalition, not just to address the role, but to address all of our issues. It's just that this parole action right now gives us the opportunity to organize around, to bring people to the table, to address that component of this system right now as we continue to build a coalition to address a few more wide-ranging issues.

I know on my last call we had to have at least, you know, twelve, fifteen states on. I don't want to over-exaggerate, but it's recorded. People can go on and look for themselves. We have multiple organizers inside and outside of California, multiple organizers outside in the state of Texas, multiple organized inside and out Mississippi, Alabama, our Florida representatives is an outside representative. We're trying to build up his support base on the inside. South Carolina with representatived, they probably had the most people on the last call—the most from the inside. And now. We also have Ohio organizers on the call.

So just so many people were involved, and more people are getting involved. People come in that, you know, cuz it's a open session. We're not trying to be exclusive. We don't have anything to hide, we're very transparent. We're building a media list yo get this information out. We're trying to build a contact list to build awareness. And we're just trying to build this thing. But the thing is, we want it to be live from the inside and we have particular duties or responsibilities that we need outside

organizations to carry out and we orientate them to that, and we allow them the opportunity to answer, "Do they want to do that?" And a lot of them answered the call. And they're here.

TFSR:

Because I was looking to ask about some specific Alabama questions, but since you're talking about the national framework and involvement inside and outside, I'll just ask this last question first. How do people in their various states, whether they're behind bars or on the outside of bars, whatever that means, like how do folks get in contact with the National Freedom Movement, or with Free Alabama Movement, or figure out if they're already people doing stuff in their state or how they can get involved? And how do they become a part of those conversations?

Bennu:

Okay, the number one, 1nationalfreedommovement@gmail.com, that is our email address. We're in the process of getting our website put together, that additional resource will be there. It'll be available—I think it may already be available, it's just not all of our information. But that is a freelabamamovement.org, www.freealamabamovement.org. The contact information for Free Alabama Movement right now is freealamamovement@gmail.com. What people have to understand is that we have very limited access to that technology. And with limited access to technology, we have limited knowledge about technology and what all we can use. And so right now we have a limited means for people to contact us. They can contact Free Alabama Movement on basically any platform. But as far as the National Freedom Movement, it's something we're just putting together, we're getting people to come to the table, we're having a Zoom call every Saturday. We have organization We Pray for Justice, they've come and volunteered to sponsor our Zoom call so they come on, they conduct our Zoom calls, they share our documents, they put our organizing agenda on there, our plans.

Like I said, we've got a couple of a Google Sheets put together, we're building all of that. We're just now in the early phases of actually building this infrastructure but we had a lot of people to come and we're receiving a lot of support. And we're more than pleased with where we are and what we've been able to accomplish thus far but we need more people.

But, like I said, when you come, you need to understand what you're coming for. This is not for you to come and tell people what to do. This is not for me to come and you think it should be this, this, this, and this. This is for you to come to offer suggestions, ideas, but the final decision on whatever is going to be done in your state is going to be made by someone on the inside, as far as the National Freedom Movement goes. And whether or not your organization can be recognized as an official outside support organization will be determined by people on the inside. you know. And so that's the thing that's new, I think, that people are going to have to get used to and prepare themselves for because a lot of people, whether they know it or not consciously or subconsciously, they don't give people on the inside credit for our ability to think either. You know, when they come to the table they think, you know, well we will do this, this is what ya'll need to do, or this—but the outside ideas have not advanced the call, it has been the inside ideas, it has been the inside work strike, the inside boycott, the inside protesting demonstrations, it has been the inside filming from phones and taking risks and absorbing the punishment that comes with it that has pushed this movement forward. And we feel like that there can be no legitimate movement that does not include people on the inside. And that means in all areas.

We have to be at the table in all areas. And we have issues with that or we have problems—no problem, we'll create our own table. And we're going to drive this movement. We're going to be a part of—this concept of people talking about, "We are their voices," or "We're the voice for the voiceless." All of that is very disrespectful. We have a voice. We have a voice. What we don't have is people like you, Bursts, and others who are willing to extend their platforms to our voice. Instead, they want to go in

there and do the talking for us: call, ask a few questions, and then come and put their spin or their narrative on it. Well, we're not going for that. We're going to build our own network, we're going to build our own media, we're going to be aligning ourselves with people like Bursts and others who understand the importance and value of our voices being heard and that's how we're going to build our network.

We don't care that the mainstream media doesn't need this that and the other—no problem. We can create a—we can be just as powerful as the mainstream media if we organize. And that's what we're doing, we're organizing that also as a component of this National Freedom Movement structure. So we're not dependent on anyone doing it for us. We got YouTube channels, we can publish, we have Zoom, we can do all of that. The live yard, we can do the stream yard. Whatever it is, we just need people to bring those resources to us, let us know what's available. We'll let you know what we want to use and we'll let you know how we want to get it out there, and then we just expand that to us. And that's how we want to build this National Freedom Movement.

TFSR:

Can you talk about the current protests and boycott that Free Alabama Movement is conducting?

Bennu:

Right, the boycott is a continuation of the Campaign to Redistribute the Pain and what we've been doing overall as a whole, as an organization, since 2017. Anyone who wants to learn about the Campaign to Redistribute the Pain, go on the San Francisco Bayview website put in my name the Bennu Hannibal Ra-Sun for the Campaign to Redistribute the Pain and you'll see all those articles.

And like I said, there are two—there are two sides to this economics. The the first foremost is the labor. And after the labor is these contractors, these phone companies, these incentive packages, these people that sell all of the stuff that the

canteen goods and stuff. So all—both of these together is where these operating budgets come from, this is where the profits come from. And so this campaign right now, this 30 day economic boycott that was called for by Kinetic Justice Amon, that's what's going on now. But more so than that people need to understand: this is a call to action. It is not to say that everything—that everyone has to be involved on the first day. You may join as you learn about it, as you get more information, you may want to join some point later on during these 30 days. You may want to do something different, but you have to attack this stuff at the core, and that's how we're different. These are the only actions that we feel like that can make an impact for those of us on the inside. And so when you see us make a call like this, remember, you can contact our family members, they can contact legislator, they can go and get bills passed, they can go and get phones. But while—we can be a part of that. But what can we do in addition on the inside? Because the issue boils down to, "Are you doing everything that you can to get free?" And the answer to that question includes, "Are you working for free? Are you providing free slave labor? Are you providing resources to the state to pay for your incarceration?" And if you're not addressing all of those things, the answer to that question of are you doing everything? The question is no, because you may be filing all your petitioners stuff, and that's great. But that's not the only thing that we can do.

And so we've broken this thing down and figured out what can we do on the inside so that when are people go and to talk to legislators, they go and negotiate from a strength of power, and not from a strength or weakness. And the power that we have to empower our people with this is labor because the Prison Legal News did an article, I think was in 2016, and it shows the institutional investors in these power prisons. The top—the top ten institutional investors includes an employee's retirement system mutual fund here in the state of Alabama. And that system is made up of the judges retirement system, the state employees retirement system, and the teachers retirement system. So these are people who all have an economic interest in this system. These people live to finance their retirement

systems off of these prisons. We've also got a list of the contractors around the state, state agencies that are going in, contracting out, convict leasing, hiring slaves out from the prison system to come and do a lot of labor, and they're getting paid market value for, but the people performing the labor are getting either nothing or \$2 a day or whatever it is that they're putting out. And so the only way that we can attack all of that is we got to stop that labor, we got to stop that money stream that money flow coming in. And this is what our role is in this movement. This is our role: is not writing articles and op-eds. That's part of our role, but everything that we do has to be centered around the economics because when you remove the economic from this system, you destroy about 80% of it.

People talk about wrongful convictions, over sentencing, the mandatory minimum drug laws, and enhancers, all of that is—those are monetary. Those are like rules or laws for people to make sure that their business and profits are more long-term and not short-term. And so when you attack the labor, what makes those laws profitable, then you start clearing out the system, because they cannot afford to keep these system running if they're not making money off of them. So that's what we're doing. We're trying to cut—we're trying to set off a money. We're trying to defund from the inside through direct action until the legislators and others and the administrators figure out that they're not going to be making money off of this stuff forever. We goin' stop that. And this is how we do that.

And when we do that, our people go and talk to people, whoever they need to talk to, they sit down at the table with them and they're not sitting there just begging. It's not a one-sided conversation. The person is sitting across from them, that state employee, their retirement is in control—is being controlled by that person, our family members that sitting on the other side of that table. So everyone has an interest in those conversations. And this is how we're trying to empower pour people to increase their standing when they're sitting at the table, negotiating.

TFSR:

I guess to bring it back, like—and not to say that the federal government does right, but sometimes it investigates—it's forced to investigate in situations where it is pressured to. The ADOC, the Alabama Department of Corrections, as well as like Louisiana and a bunch of other states, have been under pressure from the federal government for a number of years due to findings of overcrowding, due to terrible sanitation issues, brutality within the prisons, not being releg—like regulated or, you know just for all of these issues. The fact that they're failing, they're failing in the "corrections" element of what they're proposing that they're providing.

And so because of this the ADOC was supposed to be releasing—they decided to release thousands of prisoners starting in October of this year. And yet the Southern Poverty Law Center reported in July of this year that hundreds of people were being denied parole amongst the, like while the pandemic is going on. And that in this, white prisoners were at least twice as likely to be paroled as Black prisoners. In September, Governor Kay Ivey and the ADOC announced that they were going to be building three more prisons, partnering with private prison industries, including Core Civic and a conglomerate called Alabama Prison Transformation Partners. Where do you see Alabama on the promise to decrease the prison population and their motivations?

Bennu:

Right. Well, first thing, first thing we have to remember is that the state of Alabama has been a slaveholder state since it has been in existence. And so even though they're using the words "new prisons," they know they're building new plantations. As far as the federal government, the federal government, has been involved with Alabama prisons since 1865 when the 13th amendment was ratified, and it said that neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except as punishment for crimes shall exist. With that, that made the criminal justice system the place where you're convicted for crime and the slave and involuntary

servitude aspect was carried out in the institutions that were created by the 13th Amendment, which were the prisons.

Now, when you talk about the conditions and whatnot, then you're talking about the actual practice of slavery. In order for the institution of slavery to go on, you can't house people in five star hotels and split level mansions and stuff. You have the most deplorable and inhumane conditions because this is the least amount of investment. So everything that we're seeing here is consistent with the historical practice of the institution of slavery.

Also on the federal government side, the federal government—the Constitution of the United States, is the Federal Constitution. So the federal government has been involved with Alabama prisons since their existence and not once have they stopped the institution of slavery or the slave practices that go on. They always found these prisons to be in violation of the 8th Amendment. In the 1870s they found it as such. The solution, they made Alabama build more prisons. In the 1920s and 30s they found these prisons to be below a human standard. They made Alabama build new prisons. In the 1970s the federal government found these slave-like conditions—plantation slave-like conditions—in federal court. They took the took the prison system over, put it in receivership, made Alabama build new prisons. Every time the federal government gets involved, even a result from that aspect is the same: Alabama ends up building new prisons, everything's hunky dory, problem solved.

Now, these most recent reports have gone to more simply because of the era and the time that we live in and the magnitude of the microscope that's on the Alabama prison system. The reason why people are familiar with the Alabama prison system is because of the sacrifices we made with Free Alabama Movement beginning in 2014. Prior to that we very rarely heard anything about the Alabama prison system. Since that time, the Alabama prison system has been the most talked about, has been in the news more than any other prison system

in the country. And that's because we exposed the conditions, the lies, the everything, through our through our methods.

And so, being a Black person in America, the federal government left during reconstruction. The federal government left us during the civil rights era. The federal government has been responsible for the assassinations of our leaders through the COINTELPRO, the Black Power movement, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Fred Hampton Jr., and just recently, the federal government is declining to prosecute these slave catchers, these police officers. They're not—they just recently announced that they're not going to do anything about the Tamir Rice assassination. So the federal government has never shown itself to be a friend of the African American people, the brown people, the poor class of white piece of. The federal government is not a friend in this situation. The federal government is part of working hand-in-hand with the state government to create a solution that will become acceptable to the people, but it's not going to be to solve the problem.

So we don't see anything. I mean, you think about it. In 2014, the federal government came out with a report to say that the women of Tutwiler were being sexually abused for over 20 years. They didn't arrest anyone. No one lost their jobs. No one was held accountable. You know what I'm saying? We just saw another report in another state prison system. The federal government has come out with another one of those reports. They've come out with two or three reports in the state of Alabama. Murders, cover ups, abusive process, violating oaths, no one is being arrested and held accountable. So there's nothing about the federal government that we stand here and say, "Our savior has arrived."

That's the reason why we continued on with our organize. We got to save ourselves. If you a Black person and you don't know about COINTELPRO, you don't know about the things that the federal government has done, you don't know about the experiments, the genocidal of the federal government has done, if you don't know about reconstruction and how the federal

government left us to be assassinated and slaughtered by the KKK, if you don't know how J. Edgar Hoover use the federal government tax dollars to carry out a domestic war against Black people rising up from this oppression and you need to do yourself a favor and do research. But you don't have to go back to the 70s.

You can look at the actions of the federal government, of these police murders, and look at the federal government, their prison system, these laws that Joe Biden and them, these are federal law. These are federal laws. So the federal government is doing the same thing. You know what I'm saying? So these are not, these are not—they're not here to say today. Unfortunately, they're here to save America, and the perception of America that's being put out there as a result of the actions that we're taken on the inside.

TFSR:

I'm wondering, what kind of response do you and—well I know you can't necessarily speak for other people and I don't know if FAM has put out like a statement or the national movement—but what sort of response do you have to the proposal by Democrats in the House of, like, a sort of abolition amendment to the constitution that was proposed in early December by Senator Jeff Merkley and Representative William Lacy Clay of Missouri to—that would basically take the loophole—take the punishment clause out of the 13th amendment's language and fully abolish slavery. Do you think that there's—do you have, are you kind of hopeful about that? Do you think there's a possibility?

Bennu:

It's a great start. It's a great conversation piece. It's an important piece but remember, they're only talking about changing the language. But as I pointed out a few minutes ago, when the 13th amendment was ratified, it wasn't just language that was added on to the books. When the language was added, institutions were built, Department of Corrections came into existence as a result of this language. And then there are

practices that were put in place, the Convict Leasing system of the of the 19th and early 20th century came into existence because of this law. The stuff that we see with these district attorneys and the judges and the “Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act”, Prison Litigation format, Mandatory Minimums... All of these laws were put in place because of what they were doing as a result of the 13th amendment. So simply changing the language of the 13th amendment is one thing. What about the institutions that were built because of it? They're not talking about taking these institutions down which are the prisons and the practices.

Okay. The fact that the language is removed, how does that translate immediately? We saw the language change in Colorado, we saw a change in Utah, we saw a change in Nebraska. But what has changed about the practice, and what has been the change as far as the institutions? We haven't saw many. We see the guys in Colorado who have filed lawsuits now, which is great, we have to get behind that. But it's more than just changing language because the language had a practical effect on this country. It caused the prison system that we know today to be built and it caused a certain type of practice where the labor was being exploited and these people created a monopoly over every dime that we get, they control it at 100%. And so all of that has to change with it. And that's the thing that we emphasizing in the movement. It's great to see the language but the language is only a start. Is not the end game and we're not going to be fooled or deceived.

TFSR:

So switching gears slightly, let's talk about the looming pandemic that all of us are experiencing. How have you experienced the pandemic in the Alabama prison system, at your facility in particular. Did the ADOC release prisoners with upcoming release dates or health concerns such as old age or pre-existing conditions who might be especially endangered by the pandemic? I know that was a claim and a—not only the, like, elements of the federal government brought lawsuits against BOP facilities for that, but I know, state by state, certain states

made the claim that they would do this thing in order to respect the dignity and the possibility of human life of people that they were putting in cages.

Bennu:

Well, you don't go from a slave owner to a humanitarian and lover of human beings overnight. This pandemic in and of itself, it gave them an opportunity to be confronted with the issues that they had created as a result of what we call, you know, mass concentrating, over incarcerating, and all of that stuff. And they did not address that. The fact that they may've released a few people is good PR. But it's not, it's not good for human life. So whatever their claim, how many people that claim, we haven't saw any of it yet.

Like I said, the slaves—the southern state did not free their slaves. They went to war and when the war was over with the only thing they agreed to was to transfer ownership of it over to the government or to nationalize is, as we say. But today, these promises about releasing people, and—it has not been a reality.

You know, if you go back and look at that conversation about the early release, there was a law on the books in Alabama that called for mandatory parole release of people who were sentenced since 2016. They had not been complying. There was no paperwork explaining it, no one knew how it was implemented, you just had a bunch of people talking about it. And so we started talking about it, because I met a guy named 'Frog' at Limestone, he brought it to my attention. And when I got to visit this institution, I started researching it. And I found out that this is a law that entitles people go free and the state of Alabama is not complying with. And so we started talking about it and I started doing a blog on it, started doing radio show talking about it. And then when the pandemic hit, we did a press statement and we mentioned that again. And that was the first time that we received a response from the state. And then they say it's supposed to be done to Central Records with a process for. So that wasn't a result of the pandemic, that was a result of activism from us on the inside.

To our knowledge they had not taken any action will save any lives on the inside. And we're seeing people in their sixties, seventies, and eighties die every day inside these prisons who shouldn't be shouldn't be home.

TFSR:

Now, I don't want this question to make it sound like I have any love for guards. But it seems like, state by state, at least with folks that I've talked to in Ohio in particular, more recently, that—and I know that this has been the case in the past in Alabama where there's been, like, just broiling conflict between the workers in these facilities and the administration's that are wanting to cut back on staffing, cut back on, you know, health concerns, cut back on things that would increase the safety for guards when they're in there doing whatever job they're doing. And I would imagine that it's been a similar situation for the staff of the prisons during this pandemic, that they've also been thrown under the bus by the administration because it's still about money. And they're just cogs in the machine. Is that an okay way of looking at it? And has that grabbed any traction?

Bennu:

Yeah, I mean, these people, they're human beings. They got jobs, they got families, they're not trying to take COVID home to kill anybody in their family. But the fact of the matter is, in order for them to make a living and to afford the lifestyle that they've been able to afford with the skills that they have—you know, they don't recruit correctional officers from Harvard, or Yale, or Moorehouse. They recruit these people out of margins of society with, you know, limited education.

These people come here and they're told that, you know, you want your debt—credit paid up, you want to get afford to get hair done, you want to get you a house and a car. This job will provide a middle class lifestyle for you with a GED, that's the only thing that's required is a GED. So they take the job, benefits, paid holiday, off time and everything. And then when they get inside, they don't really have to do a lot of work. So

from their perspective this is a good financial offer for them. And so we understand what brings them here.

And then for the Black officers, you know, there's only a limited amount of jobs already available to Black people, and it's very few of them that is going to allow them to have the lifestyle that they have with the education and socio economic background that they come from. So we not oblivious to all of it.

Be that as it may, when they come inside these places, they know what's wrong, they see what's wrong. And they're not sophisticated enough to even understand the danger to themselves. No one will be walking on. Anyone reasonable, sensible person will not be coming up in here. Like, you know, but it is what it is.

I mean, we're here, they're here we're all in this shit together to a degree. You know, we're not on the same side of the fence. But hell, if COVID comes they bringing the shit in and we're getting it and the state ain't checking us or checking them, then we just transferring it back and forth to each other. So I mean, it's just, it's overwhelming. It really is. It's overwhelming to see that... people!

You know—and we have to have that conversation. We have to educate and enlighten. But all of us are stuck in the damn fishbowl and the people who are making the shots, calling the shots and making the decisions, they're in downtown Montgomery, they're in the state capitals or they're in Washington, DC. They're insulated and far removed from this shit. And they have enough money to saved up, they wealthy enough that they can take the time off, they can secure themselves.

And so, you know, this pandemic, the way that is being managed, the lack of investment, the lack of legitimate resources, PPE and whatnot, the lack of bleach, the lack of cleaning supplies, the overcrowding, the inability to social distance, is just—it's a slaughter, you know. It's a human

slaughter, it's a humanitarian crisis. It's very underreported, it's under appreciated. People don't really understand what we're up against here, how many people are dying, how many people to sick. I'm pretty sure I had contracted COVID seen it in real time.

And people talking about the pandemic, like, before the COVID-19 pandemic there was already several epidemics. Alabama prisons became the most violent prisons in the nation. The murder rate leads the nation, the suicide rate is one of the leading in the nation, the drug overdose rate, one of the leading in the nation. You know, the malnutrition over a long period of time, with the body causing people to die early, you know what I'm saying? Our mortality rate is like seven or eight years younger than the average person in society just from being in prison. Some people die a lot sooner because of the inadequate health care. We see mental health people who don't even have the faculty to protect themselves and COVID or anyone else.

And the drugs. See, people are overlooking the drugs in this epidemic. When you have a drug addiction with these drugs that they have today—this Flaka, this Ice, these mind-altering drugs—when you have that, and you have people when they wake up in the morning and they done sold everything they got, they done sold they bodies, they're prostituting themselves out, they're doing it—they're willing to do anything for a high. These people don't have masks. If they get a brand new mask they gone sell it because they gone sell it to get high. And so now you have this going on in the midst of a pandemic, that's going to continue to keep the pandemic in circulation. And the drugs? The drugs in and of themselves is already killing people. So we have a drug pandemic going on, we have a violence issue pandemic going on, we have suicide issue epidemic going on, and then you gonna add a pandemic on top of that with a virus that for what we got going on inside the prisons, the way that we're forced to live, the culture that we're forced to live in—I mean, there's nothing else that could—you either gonna—only two things can be done. You can release us and take us out of this hell, or you could stand back and watch us die and they chose the last version. They standing back and watching us die.

TFSR:

On the day after Christmas, there was an uprising at McCormick CI in South Carolina that led to some attempted escapes and the taking and eventual release of unharmed guards by the prisoners. It's a different state. You did mention that South Carolina folks are organizing in this and I was wondering if you had any comments about what you heard about the circumstances of people incarcerated at McCormick, the deprivation caused by the prison cracks. Like, that's a facility that I know, like, in the lead up to 2018 there had been a situation where the windows had been bolted over with steel plates denying sunlight to people on the inside. People were in a lockback situation. I believe South Carolina like a lot of other states, particularly around the US South, the former slave-holding states—although not limited to that—have to like experience gladiator fights that are coordinated by the guards that are standing over them who bet money on who's going to survive them. I wonder if you can talk about what you've heard about McCormick?

Bennu:

Well, we haven't really got a lot as far as the detail go. We know that those guys are being subject to relentless cell searches, security searches, they're trying to get their phones out because they don't want those guys to get the story out. That's the emphasis that the state has. But when you see something like that, you know, you're witnessing human survival. These guys are doing what they have to do to survive. You can call it an escape all you want to, but the fact is, if you're in an environment where you're threatened with death and the people who have responsibility to protect you are the ones who are also threatened, then you gotta do something to get out, you know what I'm saying? And the fact that they chose that route means that they didn't see any other way to survive. Because, you know, how we frame it to talk about it, our survival is this thing, and we're not going to survive the COVID-19 unless something groundbreaking and monumental occurs and people gonna have to be released from these.

A lot of these prisons are gonna have to be closed down. If that doesn't happen, a lot of people on a die. And whatever anyone does to escape that death, you know, I'm all for, you know what I'm saying? I understand it, I know it when I see it. And those guys are trying to escape death, you know what I'm saying, they're not trying to escape prison, they're trying to escape death. And that was what they did, you know, allegedly. And so if that be the case, you know what I'm saying, we can't blame them and we support them, you know what I'm saying? We don't blame them, we don't criticize them, we don't have anything negative to say about what they've done. We support them because everyone has the right to live and the state is taking that away inside these prisons. They're saying that we don't even have a right to live, they can create an environment where we can be—our lives can be in jeopardy and it's okay. You know what I'm saying? They've got to release—they've got to, they've got to alleviate the crowding in these prisons, and if they don't want to do it for us, then we have to take action to do it for ourselves.

TFSR:

I'd be interested in your experience of the uprisings that this year in response to the ongoing killing of Black, brown, and poor people by police, sparked by the broadcast of the murder of George Floyd and by the Minneapolis police, and the resulting swell in calls for defunding and abolition of policing, as well as of prisons. The abolitionist movement in the US recognizes—most of it recognizes police and prisons as an anti-Black settler state—like, in that situation—as being two arms of the same beast.

Bennu:

It's very important, like, I wrote about that in my book and what that means to people because we always want people to understand that these people who are being murdered by the police, over 95, 98% of them, the police are there to bring them to a prison. Breonna Taylor, they was trying to take somebody.

Bennu:

George Floyd, they was trying to take him to prison. Sandra Bland, they're trying to take her to prison. Mike Brown, they were trying to take him to prison. And if you survived the bullet in the streets, then you get inside these prisons and you ain't surviving that, you know what I'm saying? But all of it is interconnected, it's all part of the same system. That's the reason the police are involved. Everyone in prison, the police were involved. So people have to remember, there's a lot of people in prison who survived those gunshots.

And they survived them at a time and in the climate where you couldn't get the charges dropped like Breonna Taylor's boyfriend. A lot of these guys had to carry those charges on through. Think about the charges that Mike Brown would have been facing had he survived: resisting arrest, assault on officer, aggravated assault, whatever the store clerk would have been caller. He would have all those charges. He would've had an outrageous bond, so there's the bail bonding issue. He would've ended up having to plead guilty, there's the plea issue again. And then he would have been sentenced as a violent offender, there's the violent label again. He wouldn't have been made parole, there's that issue again. All of it's interconnected. All of it's interconnected. And some of it—some people's end came on the street, some people's end are want to be inside of a prison as a result of the rest of the dragnet that they got set up. So it's all connected now.

Seeing people rise up like that, you know, we see so many things on the news. We here so many things. We don't really know what's going on. I can't—I can speak for myself, I'm not gonna try to—I don't know what it was going on. I saw all the people out there. I saw them worldwide. I saw them demanding stuff, but the type of changes that I want to see, I didn't hear them. I didn't hear the call for Reparations, I hear people saying like, you know, a lot of white people integrated into it, there's a lot of anarchists... You know, I don't know what all this stuff looks like, I just hear these names and see all these faces for probation and parole officers get burned up, so. I don't know who these people are. I don't know what inspires them to do

this. So I really don't know what I'm seeing, because we hear so many different things like they say that people will come in these situations occur and be behind the scenes hijacking, you know, and all we got into World News and the internet, you know. We don't really know what all of that was all about, what caused all of that. What we do know is that the manner that George Floyd was killed was gut-wrenching that these people can sit there, in hindsight, and understand just how brutal and barbaric that was.

And I think that that's one of the things—I don't know if that's the main thing, you know, human psychology, the way that we all connected, I don't know. But I imagine that just sitting there watching this man having the life snuffed out of him live by a callous, unconcerned police officer who's doing everything by the book, you know, everything that they were doing was by the book. And this tells you what the book looks like, you know, and that same training from the book that they got is the same training that these officers got in these prisons. And so I mean, it's just, we connected on a lot of levels but like I said, we connected with the experience that George Floyd went through. I can't speak for other guys' experience, I don't know what they were involved in. I was not conscious, before I got incarcerated, so I was not out in—hadn't been to no protest. I was locked up when the Million Man Movement occurred and so I have not been a part of any of this stuff. So I'm still an observer and I'm still learning, you know, but I can just speak to my experiences as a Black person and identify with what happened to George Floyd on that day. And I know that there are numerous times where they could have killed me, you know? So. But it was good to see that people cared about that all around the world, that people were paying attention to that all around the world. I don't know what their narratives were or none of that stuff. But just the fact that that many people paid attention to the murder of another black man, that was good.

But on the flip side, on the inside, you know, these are moments that we are constantly allowing ourselves to be left out of. That's why I'm talking about building this national coalition led from the inside so we can be connected so when things like

this happen, we can we can get involved, you know what I'm saying? We can get involved in a lot of this stuff. When people go out into the street marching, protesting, we can get connected and build a proper coalition.

The second part of your question about defunding police and all of that and all of this stuff as being connected, the abolitionist movement, you know, again, you know, this is stuff that we are getting snippets, snippets of. We want to defund prisons, we want to defund the parole board, we want to defund all of this stuff. But we got some stuff we want to defund too, you know. So I mean, but the thing is, everybody needs to be working together. Everyone who sees and understands that all of these systems are interconnected, we all need to be working together. The hunger strikers—I saw a report that one of the hunger strikers in Alabama was retaliated against, was jumped on by police. And, you know, there's still. There's something going on in Alabama, but the things that he just suffered that they beat him for, are going on all around the United States.

So why aren't we all on conference calls? Or why don't we all in some type of regional calls talking about this and the other things that are going on? Ice detention facility in New Jersey, the fires being said throughout the Texas prison system. You know, why aren't we on the phone talking about these things and trying to figure out what is it that we all need to be doing collectively, instead of state by state, you know what I'm saying? Sporadic by sporadic. We got to turn up a whole lot more in order for our problems to go away. So that's the focus me man. To defund things are great, you know, if the people are talking about in society, but I'm more concerned with what guys on the inside of talking about. We need to make sure that our voices are being heard, the issues that we have. We're vocalizing those, and that we have a plan of action with methods and tactics, strategies that we can use from the inside. And that's what's up with us.

TFSR:

Bennu, was there anything that I didn't ask you about that you wanted to address on this episode?

Bennu:

I can't think of anything. Just wondered—I know we have personal conversations and then we have these conversations, just make sure that the personal conversations are separated out from this.

TFSR: Absolutely.

Bennu:

And I guess you can delete them or whatever you do. I just want to make sure that there's nothing like that. And other than that, no, I don't. What about you? What—is there anything else you want to ask? Are there other things going on that you think I might be—need to know about?

TFSR:

Nobody ever asked me questions when I'm the microphone talking to them. This is an awkward position to be in. Oh, hold on one second, will you?

Bennu:

Okay. [chuckling]

TFSR:

So I haven't I haven't asked anyone about this specifically, and we haven't said a thing on our show about it. But anti-prison activists, activists for liberation, abolitionists—on the inside, especially—are always in danger of dying or do die. And they don't necessarily get a lot of recognition from the outside. I want to, like, go into this question recognizing that. But there were a couple of activists in Florida recently who passed. Karen Smith and Rebecca Hensley. There were outside activists who had a lot of connections to a lot of folks behind bars and we're known in their communities for not just advocating but also, like, amplifying the voices of folks on the inside. And I wonder if you want to say anything about either of them, if you had a

relationship with them, or since a year did pass, if you want to name anyone?

Bennu:

Okay, well always, you know, we like to uplift Richard Mafundi Lake, he's joined the ancestors also. And he's the one that's helped most of us. Taught us conscious. Taught us, you know, taught us struggle, he taught us revolution, you know? He revolutionized our mind. He broke us away from the stuff that was destroying the community and taught us how to be it.

I knew of Karen, I didn't—I don't think I've had a personal relationship with her. You know, so many mail, I don't know if I've ever recieved mail or anything from her. But Rebecca, I do know Rebecca. We talked several times. She sent me the book, Albert Woodfox's book. I got it right here with me now. So we talked and communicated with some of—she told me a lot about what she was doing in Louisiana with the guys in the Louisiana prison system and stuff.

And so yeah, I mean, but we got to replace them, you know. This is a long-term struggle. This is a long-term struggle. And these are great people that came in and did great things. And now some other people have to step up and replace those people. And, you know what I'm saying, learn from the examples that they led by, learn from their writings, learn from the relationships that they built, and then apply that and keep moving, keep pushing the movement forward. You know, so other people have to step up, now's an opportunity for others to step up and fill these gaps that have been left by these people who are passed on. But that's part of the struggle, too, you know. We have to be resilient. We have to be resourceful. We have to listen to what our elders taught us and pay attention to history. And then we have to apply that to our next move. Like they say in the game, you want your next move your best move. Well when you rely on the experiences of people like that, and what they left behind. In addition to what's going on today, man, you put yourself in that position, though. We salute to them and appreciate everything they've done. Like I say, I didn't know

Karen well but I did know Rebecca and I know that she was beloved in the community.

TFSR:

Awesome. Well, thank you so much Bennu for this conversation. And I'll make sure to plug in all the information so folks can get in touch with you and I hope this helps the struggle and helps to build that network. Stay healthy.

Bennu:

Okay, I appreciate it.

The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

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