

## Joining Forces: Prisons and Environmental Justice in Recent California Organizing

*Rose Braz and Craig Gilmore*

A couple of years ago at the Central California Environmental Justice Network annual conference, youth from California's San Joaquin Valley met apart from the adult activists to identify the three most pressing environmental threats to their communities. The young Latinos had a lot of threats to choose from: air quality, one of the worst rated in the country; undrinkable local water supplies; regular pesticide poisoning; downwind drift from incinerators and power plants; and mega-dairies with their toxic emissions.<sup>1</sup> The approximately twenty youth spent about an hour discussing specific environmental problems they found in their communities.

The Valley, as it is known locally, ranks as some of the most productive agricultural land in the world; two Valley counties rank first and second in national agricultural production. Across the decades, the exploitation of generations of impoverished and largely immigrant labor fueled profit maximization for Valley agribusiness. Growers have fought to maintain a workforce forced to accept low wages. When the workers contest their own poisoning through pesticide drift or the contamination of drinking water with agricultural chemicals they face severe repression.

The Valley's farmworker communities have also drawn interest from nonlocal polluters. In 1984, the California Waste Management Board hired Cerrill Associates to help find locations for waste incinerators. According to Luke W. Cole and

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Sheila R. Foster, “the Cerrill Report suggests that companies target small, rural communities whose residents are low income, older people, or people with a high school education or less; communities with a high proportion of Catholic residents; and communities whose residents are engaged in resource extractive industries such as agriculture, mining and forestry.”<sup>2</sup> Companies looking for incinerator, dump, and power plant sites thus flocked to the Valley. Company officials perceived the area’s competitive advantage to include community residents seemingly unable and unwilling to fight back.

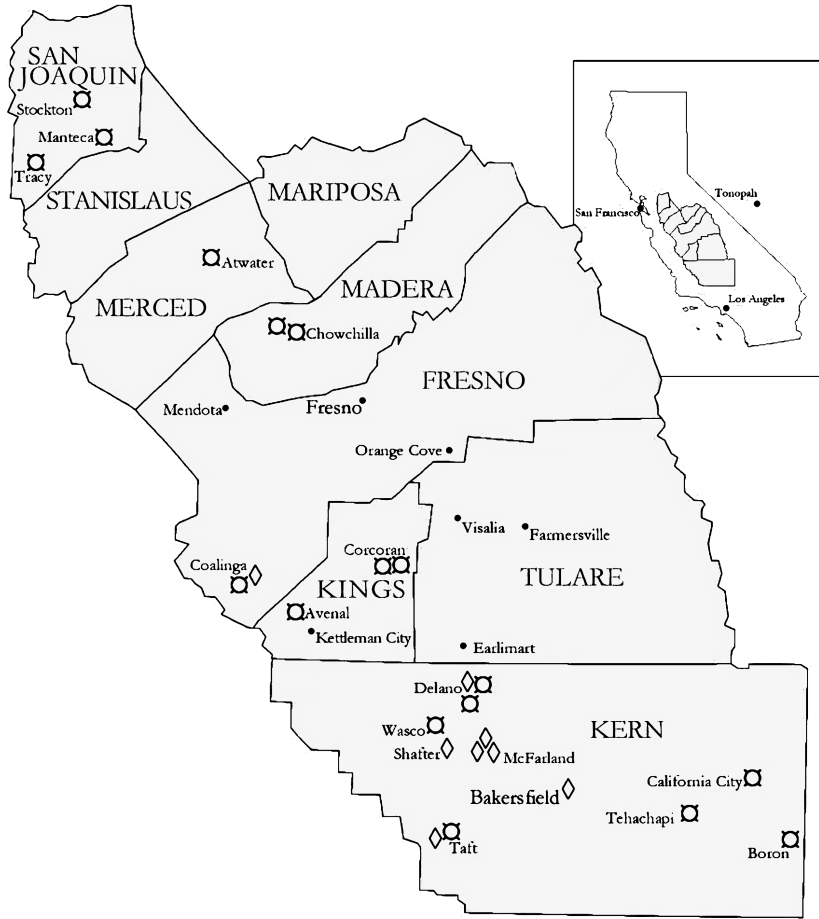
In the face of the toxic load across the Valley, it came as a surprise to some of the adult environmental justice activists that the youth reported as the biggest threats in their communities the “three Ps”: police, pollution, and prisons. The environmental justice movement has struggled with mainstream environmentalists over the bounds of the term *environment*. Highlighting the racial and class disparities in the enforcement of environmental law and the selective choices for toxic sites, the environmental justice movement has shifted the focus of activism from an environment “out there” in the wilderness to “right here”—where we work, live, study, and play. But the youth pushed traditional definitions of environmental threats even further, beyond toxins produced by chemical pesticides or diesel emissions to threats from police and imprisonment. Alongside the toxic threats from chemical sources, the San Joaquin Valley is full of toxins of a different sort. Over half the state’s new megaprisons have been built in the Valley; its counties rank among the highest in the state in incarceration rates. And Valley towns are subject to frequent and often brutal raids and dragnets by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other law enforcement agencies targeting the sizable immigrant populations.

Valley residents remain on the front lines of an unprecedented prison-building boom. The state has built twenty-two new prisons since 1983 (including Delano II), after building twelve over more than a century, from 1856 to 1983. Between 1980 and 2005, California’s prison population has grown 556 percent, from 25,000 to 164,000 prisoners.<sup>3</sup>

Today, there is a growing awareness among antiprison activists of the similarities between our activism and environmental justice activism. The environmental justice movement fights racial and class discrimination in environmental policy making, the selective enforcement of environmental laws, and the targeting of communities of color and poor communities for environmentally disastrous land uses, such as toxic waste disposal sites. Communities of color and poor communities bear an unequal and unfair number of environmentally destructive land uses, land uses that take from the community but do not give back to it. The environmental justice movement seeks to end environmental and economic injustices by eliminating the location of environmentally toxic facilities anywhere.

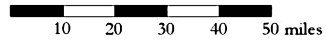
California’s so-called prison alley has been the site of numerous environmental justice battles. The United Farm Workers fought a long battle against pesticides

# SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY PRISONS



© Craig Gilmore

- Prison (13 state operated, 4 Federal, average population: 5,000 prisoners)
- ◇ Community Correction Facility (state prisoners, run by corporations or municipalities, average population: 500 prisoners)
- City



NOTE: Map does not include state camps, juvenile facilities, or municipal jails.

Map of San Joaquin Valley prisons. Source: Craig Gilmore

that were sickening and, in some cases, killing their members. Site fights in Buttonwillow (a toxic waste dump) and Kettleman City (the location of a toxic waste incinerator) gained international attention.<sup>4</sup> The proximity of vigorous environmental justice activism to California's prison alley has helped activists from both movements see the similarities in our fights. Foremost among them has been the state-sanctioned imposition of toxic threats on the poor, people of color, and immigrants.<sup>5</sup> This essay will review how antiprison activists borrowed from and networked with environmental justice activists during a fight to stop construction of another new prison. We will also suggest ways that work done during that campaign has laid the foundation for further work, both among organizers and researchers, which would strengthen both the environmental justice and antiprison movements.

### **Madres del Este de Los Angeles**

In February 2001, two antiprison organizations joined with leading environmental justice groups to organize a conference called "Joining Forces: Environmental Justice and the Fight against Prison Expansion."<sup>6</sup> That conference was, we believe, the first statewide gathering designed to explore the place of prisons in the environmental justice movement and the ways that antiprison activists can learn from environmental justice examples.

The conference began with remarks from Juana Gutiérrez, the cofounder and president of the Madres del Este de Los Angeles, or Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA). Gutiérrez recounted how she and a few friends heard in the early 1980s that California Governor George Deukmejian planned to build a prison in their neighborhood. She believed that "Deukmejian tiene en su mente que todos los criminales que existen en California eran en East L.A." [Deukmejian thinks that all the criminals in California came from East L.A.].<sup>7</sup> The small group—four women and two men—invited Deukmejian to come to East L.A. to see for himself the socioeconomic reality beyond the political rhetoric. He declined the invitation and pressed forward with the plans for the prison's construction.

The MELA went door to door, talking woman to woman, mother to mother. They called on churches and clubs. They held rallies every Monday for nine years to fight against the planned East L.A. prison. During the prison fight, they learned of plans to build a hazardous-waste incinerator in their neighborhood and began mobilizing to stop the incinerator. They fought an oil pipeline, its proposed route detoured dozens of miles inland through Latino East L.A. as it went from Santa Barbara to Long Beach, to protect the valuable California coast and its wealthier and whiter seaside communities. The mothers have been fighting now for two decades to protect their kids—from police, pollution, and prisons.

Environmental justice and antiprison activists have been slow to understand the connections that the MELA made between new prisons and toxic waste incinerators, joined because each posed threats to their families' welfare. In California

**JOINING FORCES: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE  
AND THE FIGHT AGAINST PRISON EXPANSION  
SATURDAY FEBRUARY 10, 2001  
FRESNO STATE UNIVERSITY**

**10 A.M. - 6:30 P.M. FRESNO STATE STUDENT UNION  
CONFERENCE ROOMS 312-314**

Sponsored by Critical Resistance, the California Prison Moratorium Project, the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, Fresno State MEChA and the West County Toxics Coalition.



Together, we will explore how prisons constitute environmental racism and injustice, how we might use strategies from the environmental and economic justice movements to stop new prisons, and what are real economic development alternatives to prisons for rural communities where most new prisons are sited and urban communities from which most prisoners are taken.

To register or for more information contact  
Critical Resistance  
1212 Broadway, Suite 1400  
Oakland, CA 94612  
510-444-0484 or [critresist@aol.com](mailto:critresist@aol.com)

<http://www.criticalresistance.org>  
Space is limited. Please register early.

Flyer: "Joining Forces: Environmental Justice and the Fight against Prison Expansion."

Source: Critical Resistance

we increasingly see antiprison activists borrow from the environmental justice activist toolbox as they reach out to include environmental justice groups as allies in the struggle.

### **Delano: A Case Study in Unlikely Allies and New Strategies**

June 1, 2005, marked an auspicious day in the history of what one California official labeled “the largest prison building project in the history of the world.”<sup>8</sup> After the building of twenty-three new prisons in just twenty years, the June 2005 date marked the first time in two decades that California did *not* have a prison in planning or construction. This historic moment was, at least partially, the result of a tenacious and multifaceted campaign against the construction of California’s thirty-fourth—and purportedly last—state prison: Delano II.

The Delano II story begins in 1998, when Californians elected the Democrat Gray Davis as governor over the state’s Republican attorney general Dan Lungren, a law-and-order advocate who built his career on the nation’s harshest three-strikes law. Somewhat surprisingly, the powerful state prison guards union, the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA), backed Davis. Consistently the number one contributor to state legislative races, the CCPOA donated over \$1 million to Davis. And, once elected, Davis did not forget his backers.

In his first budget, Davis surprised everyone, including his own party’s leadership, by resurrecting plans to construct a state prison in the rural San Joaquin Valley town of Delano, a plan that had been shelved since the early 1990s but that had a 1999 budget estimate of \$335 million. Over one hot weekend in May 1999, Davis pushed the project through the legislature with little opposition. The only protests came from a group of advocates, former prisoners, academics, and community members who went immediately to the capitol late on a Friday afternoon. Though they failed, this group’s opposition did not stop with the bill’s passage into law.

After that May weekend, the advocates regrouped to map a coordinated strategy of litigation, coalition building, media reports aimed at shifting public opinion and public policy, and grassroots organizing based largely in Delano. In June 2000, we filed an environmental lawsuit, *Critical Resistance et al. v. the California Department of Corrections* (hereafter *CR v. CDC*) and launched a campaign with national significance for antiprison organizing. The details of the litigation challenged a variety of defects in the state’s environmental analysis. But at the core of the legal case and the political organizing lay a pair of claims: first, that the effects of prisons (environmental and otherwise) are overwhelmingly negative; and second, that the state did not need any more prisons.

### **The Negative Impact, the Potential Allies**

One of the creeds of the California Prison Moratorium Project is that if prisons benefit almost no one, then almost anyone is a potential ally in the fight against more

prisons. The legal and grassroots political work of *CR v. CDC* showed the power of that belief.

The array of negative effects that attach to a prison provide an avenue to approach any organization or group with a perceived stake in the construction's associated consequences. For example, organizers showed that the CDC's "Environmental Impact Report" (EIR) was faulty in underestimating the negative effects of the proposed prison on Delano's poor and crowded schools; the Delano Joint Unified School District filed comments critical of the mitigation monies offered by the state. The negative impact of the proposed prison on traffic and the region's air quality (Bakersfield, the county seat, has the second most polluted air in the country, according to the Environmental Protection Agency) brought criticism from the State Department of Transportation. Similarly, the negative impact on the aquifer and the economic stability of the region's water district, a life-and-death issue in the state's irrigation-dependent agricultural economy, brought in the Southern San Joaquin Municipal Utility District as an ally.

The litigation provided a vehicle for building a unique and disparate coalition of civil rights, environmental, and antiprison groups who joined together to file an amicus (friend of the court) brief and worked with their very different constituencies to raise political pressure to stop the prison. Building on the claims opposing the prison, activists employed a strategy for coalition building that reached far beyond the usual activists against prison building and working on criminal justice issues.

A diverse group of organizations, some of which had never worked together before, signed onto the amicus brief: among others, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapters from Fresno, Los Angeles, and Santa Cruz; the Center on Race, Poverty, and the Environment; the Rainforest Action Network; the Ecology Center; and the California chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. The National Lawyers Guild Prison Law Project and the Friends of the Kangaroo Rat joined Critical Resistance as plaintiffs.

The wide range of negative effects of prisons, easily documented due to the prison-building boom of the past two decades, provided multiple points of entry for allies. The work was to translate the specific negative effects for potential allies, so that each member group could understand and express how building another prison would hurt their members and how fighting the prison had to be part of their mission.

In total, more than one thousand individuals, organizations, and state agencies filed comments on the CDC's revised environmental analysis — all but one raising serious concerns about the impact of the proposed prison on everything from destroying farmland of statewide importance and habitat for endangered species like the Tipton kangaroo rat and the San Joaquin Valley kit fox to requests to the CDC to translate the EIR and hold public meetings in Spanish for Delano's overwhelmingly Chicano/Mexicano population.

In a push to force a full examination of the impact of the prison industrial complex, comments were also filed demanding that the CDC's analysis extend beyond the impact of the proposed prison on the host community to include an analysis of the effects of imprisoning another 5,160 men, thus removing them from their families and communities.<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect of the campaign took advantage of California's impending budget crisis and an unprecedented drop in the state's prison population, questioning state spending priorities that failed to deliver safe communities and arguing that the state had no need for more prison beds. Those facing severe budget cuts—teachers, nurses, and health and welfare advocates—witnessed the rising prison budget and questioned the state's priorities. The semi-annual CDC population report and projections were released the Friday before the lawsuit was filed. Catching up to a decade-long drop in crime, that report showed the first decline in the state's prison population in two decades. Organizers quickly incorporated that fact into press releases.

Thereafter, the state's prison population continued to fall (by over one thousand per month in the last six months of 2001 alone), and the mainstream press took up the question of whether the proposed prison was really necessary. For the first time in at least twenty years, the state was being asked to justify the need for, and efficacy of, another prison.

### **The Prison Prosperity Myth**

The Delano effort also built on the significant understandings of the role that impoverished rural communities play in the prison industrial complex. The scholarship of Ruth Wilson Gilmore shows us that during the prison-building boom, poor rural towns flexed their political muscle seeking prisons in hopes of reaping the imagined harvest of new jobs, increased spending at local retailers, and greater local tax revenue.

Gilmore's analysis of the effects of California's prison-building boom identified a crucial gap in the prison-backers' argument. She discovered that highly touted benefits never materialized. Corcoran, for example—a town of 8,900 residents—now hosts more than 11,000 prisoners. In this tiny community, the state has spent more than \$1 billion in construction and operations over the past ten years. The benefits are difficult to perceive. In the town, the number of people living below the poverty line has doubled to two thousand.<sup>10</sup> According to a *Fresno Bee* story, when the prison advertised for two clerical positions salaried at \$17,000, more than eight hundred people queued in the rain for applications.<sup>11</sup>

Delano, the community slated for the prison at the heart of *CR v. CDC*, is the birthplace of the United Farm Workers and already played host to both a five thousand-bed state prison (Delano I) and a five hundred-bed community corrections facility. Prior to their construction, the town had a 26 percent unemployment



rate. At the time the lawsuit was filed, nearly a decade after the opening of the first prison, the unemployment rate remained unchanged. It has since increased, hovering at an astounding 30 percent. It is clear that the supposed benefits a prison offers to the host community do not amount to much in the way of employment. During the course of the campaign, this message of unrealized benefits clearly impacted local elected officials and the Delano press.

In his first story on the lawsuit in July 2000, *Delano Record* reporter Bob Cane wrote: “The Delano City Council has supported the prison development because it will bring jobs which are expected to be reflected in the local economy and housing market, and because host cities can add the inmate populations to their population figures for state tax rebate purposes.”<sup>12</sup> After a year of on-the-ground organizing in Delano, much of it spent debunking the myth that prisons are engines of economic prosperity, Cane wrote that “proponents believe that the prison will bring jobs. However there is no assurance that the people taking those jobs will live here or spend their money locally and Delano officials have been shifting their focus from an emphasis on attracting jobs to the area to one on attracting tax-paying business and industry.”<sup>13</sup> “Some city officials have supported the prison on the grounds of jobs it would provide and other potential economic boosts,” Cane later reiterated, “others see it as wasted money, of little benefit to existing unemployed in the community.”<sup>14</sup> The hard work of organizers exposing the prison prosperity myth had begun to reshape public opinion.

### **The Environmental Impact of Prisons**

While legal challenges carry the danger that organizers will lose resources and energy if the issue is defined too narrowly as a legal one for which the remedy is in the hands of lawyers and courts, the Delano campaign successfully undertook an environmental strategy that used litigation, while not relying on it. As the activist lawyers Luke Cole and Sheila Foster point out, “while legal action brings much-needed attention to environmental justice struggles, legal strategies rarely address what is, in essence, a larger political and structural problem.”<sup>15</sup> Recognizing the limits of litigation as a solution to social problems, organizers nonetheless successfully made litigation one strategy in a larger, multifaceted campaign.

The value of environmental law lies largely in the fact that it requires a full public disclosure of the real costs society will pay for building, in the opportunity litigation can provide for public education and organization, and in the possibility it offers for residents to voice their concerns. Environmental law provides that all who might be affected by a project have a right to demand that the negative effects be made public before project approval, and, if possible, that the developer mitigate those negative effects. As we continue to investigate and compile studies about the negative effects of prisons, examining the wide range of people harmed by prisons, we have a substantive campaign to unify opposition to mass imprisonment. These

opportunities melded with the Delano campaign's central premise: if the public knows the damage wrought by prisons, people will organize to stop its realization.

### **Shifting Public Opinion**

Environmental litigation presumes not to stop a proposed project forever. The consolidation of public opinion was crucial to the fortunes of the Delano campaign. A lawsuit alone does little to shift public opinion. But it does provide opportunities for engagements with different media outlets. A crucial piece of the organizing strategy of *CR v. CDC* involved generating statewide publicity. Coverage in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Bakersfield Californian*, and on television and radio stations across the state gave the campaign a visibility that brought additional allies and enhanced its legitimacy.

Particularly significant in shaping public opinion or forcing a reaction were a *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine* cover story, entitled "The Prison Prosperity Myth," a *New York Times* story, and editorials opposing the prison. Numerous stories in the Valley press publicized the diverse voices questioning whether the prison would prove beneficial for Delano.<sup>16</sup>

With support from the Drug Policy Alliance, we embarked on a related strategy: commissioning the governor's own pollsters to conduct a statewide poll of likely voters. That poll found that Californians strongly favored a freeze on prison construction, as well as cuts to state prisons, to save other programs from cuts during the state's budget crisis. The poll of likely voters also found that three-quarters supported requiring voter approval of new prison construction, which the legislature did not seek before authorizing Delano II—most likely because voters had turned down prison construction bonds by a two-to-one margin in 1990 and again in 1996. Moreover, 71 percent of those surveyed described themselves as conservative or moderate. Organizers flooded media and legislators with the results.

### **Joining Forces: From Coalition Building to Movement**

A turning point in the campaign came when Critical Resistance and the California Prison Moratorium Project organized a conference, held in the San Joaquin Valley, the state's prison alley. "Joining Forces: Environmental Justice and the Fight against Prison Expansion" brought together farmers and farmworkers, while activists from the civil rights and environmental movements met antiprison organizers. Former prisoners and family members spoke with residents of prison towns, and urbanites from Los Angeles and the Bay Area met residents of the San Joaquin Valley's small towns.

These encounters represented an important step in the continuing transformation of the coalition into a movement, but that development was not painless. At one point during "Joining Forces," a Delano resident complained that the town's first prison had brought nothing but weekend visits of prisoners' families, whom she

referred to as L.A. “gang bangers.” From the audience came a member of Families to Amend California’s Three Strikes (FACTS), whose husband was incarcerated in a Valley prison under the Three Strikes law. Angry and hurt, she reminded us that she had no desire to drive five hours each way every weekend to visit her husband in the hot and dusty Valley. To blame prisoners’ families for what was happening in prison towns was to miss a potential ally. The woman from Delano responded, “but I wasn’t talking about *you*.” Through the tears came the beginning of the recognition that the poor people of California’s prison towns are not so different from the poor Californians who fill our prisons.

Another challenge was to ensure that the common goal never became overshadowed by the diversity of groups coming to the movement from very different places—geographically, politically, and culturally. One strategy for cohesion was to allow for different sorts of participation. Groups could agree to sign on to the lawsuit, cosponsor the conference, file comments on the revised EIR, publicize the issue among their constituents, or screen a campaign video produced by activists.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, no one demanded that the Southern San Joaquin Municipal Utility District (the local water supplier) fight about anything but water and the removal of lands from agricultural use, or that the L.A. chapter of the NAACP embrace the issue of San Joaquin Valley air quality. Even so, this strategy complemented organizers’ suggestions that everyone take a broader view of the prison’s negative impacts.

### **Bringing the Battle to the State Capitol**

In June 2001, a Bakersfield, California, Superior Court sided with the activists and ruled that the EIR for the Delano prison was inadequate, barring construction of the prison without further environmental review. Two years later, the activists lost on appeal and the construction of the prison eventually went forward. Litigation could force full disclosure of the negative impact of the prisons, but it could not stop construction. The reality was that because the prison had already been funded by the state legislature, the prison needed to be defunded by the state legislature. So the coalition went to lobby legislators in Sacramento.

What became clear fairly quickly in California’s capitol was that no other advocates were focusing on the prison budget. While the “tough-on-crime” supporters block attempts at progressive legislation, it may prove possible to achieve similar objectives using the budget—a bill of over five thousand pages with many trailers. Like many state capitals, moreover, Sacramento is a very small town, in which you can become quickly known and fairly knowledgeable in an ignored subject area.

Activists used the state’s decreasing prison population, a multibillion-dollar budget shortfall, and the statewide opposition they had generated to try to kill Delano II. After much work including legislative hearings, securing editorials opposing the prison from every major newspaper in the state, and direct action, antiprison activists almost succeeded. The Senate version of the 2003–4 budget bill deleted

funding for Delano II and contained trailer-bill language canceling the project. The Assembly version of the budget bill, however, did not.<sup>18</sup> This difference forced a conference committee on the budget. That particular committee remains notorious for all-night meetings and for often failing to meet the constitutionally mandated deadline for a budget.

In June 2002, the budget conference committee began meeting and activists began lobbying. They met with staffers, prepared fact sheets, obtained even more press coverage, attended many late-night meetings, and held their breath as the Delano budget line was passed over again and again. Finally, in the middle of a nightly session, came panicked calls. The prison project stayed in the budget.

Yet it is our experience—not the outcome—that suggests activists should continue to work in state capitols. But legislative work needs to be combined with building a movement. Legislation will never bring about substantial change on its own, and real change on these issues requires a solid, well-organized movement. In this regard it is instructive to note that Governor Ronald Reagan signed California's Prisoners Bill. Reagan signed that bill not because he was a staunch defender of prisoners' rights, but rather because there was a movement demanding he do so.

The movement to stop construction of Delano II combined grassroots organizing and legislative work in a myriad of creative ways. At the "Joining Forces" conference, Laura Pulido said, "we need to consider prisons as part of the landscape of everyday life, not something 'out there' or removed. Even though they may be in rural communities, they involve all of us."<sup>19</sup> The Delano II campaign demonstrates that the use of a combined grassroots political and legal strategy, borrowing from and interweaving with the environmental justice movement, holds promise in moving a wide range of groups and individuals from education and awareness to involvement to mobilization against the many ill effects of imprisonment.

On June 1, 2005, hundreds of millions of dollars over budget and more than four years after its initial projected opening, the state began to house inmates at Delano II. The extremely protracted battle leading up to this event forced the CDC to declare Delano the end of the current prison-building era. Agency officials reiterated that this was the first time in two decades that California did not have a prison in planning or construction. The movement built in opposition to Delano II is now working to sustain this new status quo, while proactively pushing for reductions in the number of Californians in cages and close prisons.

### **Cumulative Impacts**

Some recent antiprison activism and scholarship has deep roots in environmental justice activism. Crucial to environmental justice analysis (and to California environmental law more particularly) is the concept of cumulative impacts. This doctrine requires that the mitigation suggested by the developer must not only mitigate the environmental impact on a single subject area (e.g., the loss of habitat); rather, the

EIR and mitigation must take account for further environmental impact—current, planned, or foreseeable. In *CR v. CDC*, the court found that while the mitigation offered to Delano was sufficient in each subject area, it was *not* sufficient as a whole. Specifically, the CDC failed to properly mitigate for the cumulative impacts of the prison over time and considering upcoming projects.

Environmental activists have struggled to insist that no emission, no development, no reduction in habitat occurs in a vacuum. The impact of such decisions has to be assessed within the context of all the other current and projected future environmental impacts. During the remarkable prison buildup of the past quarter of a century, policy debates on crime and safety have become increasingly one dimensional, focusing on the individual “criminal.” So much of our discussion on public safety is about the problem of crime, to the exclusion of issues raised by the provision of health care, or guaranteed wages, or affordable housing, or quality education. The anthropologist Allen Feldman suggests that “arrest is the political art of individualizing disorder.”<sup>20</sup> His formulation points to the task for both analysts and activists: to rearticulate crime and punishment within a broader social, political, and economic framework.

Part of the art of conservative scholars like William Bennett and John DiIulio has been to discredit the criminology, sociology, and common sense of the 1960s and 1970s that suggested that crime prevention might come from job programs, better wages, decent housing, and a range of other environmental factors. That broader social context has returned to the table in recent years in at least two forms.

During the past generation, California’s prisons have grown at almost twice the national average. Probably the largest single factor causing that growth has been the state’s proclivity to send parolees back to prison, especially those without new convictions. At a rate of 70 percent, California returns parolees to prison at twice the national rate. Many of the returnees are sent back for technical violations such as missing a meeting with a parole officer. According to the criminologist Michael Jacobsen, “California’s astonishing rate of 70% is more than 2 times Texas’s rate and almost 12 times Florida’s rate.”<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, California could drastically reduce its prison population simply by following the leads of other states and not return people to prison for every possible violation of parole conditions, no matter how minor.

Such figures offer openings to activists. Decades of work to provide better services to parolees has intensified and expanded, and former prisoners run many of these programs. Groups like All of Us or None have taken up the extensive legal prohibitions that limit opportunities for those formerly incarcerated to create a stable life after their release. Those with felony convictions can be barred from public housing, financial aid for higher education, and other forms of public assistance. And many employers exclude anyone with a felony conviction from consideration for a wide range of jobs.<sup>22</sup>

As groups struggle to provide services and counter discrimination against

those coming out of prison, the fight to change the state's parole policies continues. Responding to a series of reports, press coverage, public pressure, and a budget crisis, the legislature quietly passed important parole reform in 2003. But the Department of Corrections delayed its implementation, the powerful prison guard union CCPOA attacked its provisions, and soon after Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger took office, the prison agency officially shelved the reforms.

A second trend has been a series of studies and actions demanding that we look at the full and cumulative costs of our twenty-five-year-long prison-building boom. The Real Cost of Prisons Project provides training that helps activists understand the political economy of the prison system, including information about who profits and who pays. The group has produced three comic books to supplement the workshops.<sup>23</sup> Such popular education projects draw on the work of researchers such as Dina Rose and Todd Clear, who have produced a series of articles on the effects of overincarceration at the neighborhood level. They have shown that taking too many people out of a neighborhood actually has a negative effect on reducing crime.<sup>24</sup> Another highly influential study showed that for the incarceration and parole supervision of a single city block's residents, the state of New York spends over \$1 million per year. That study, and the graphic map that accompanies it, has allowed activists to push for a reallocation of public resources away from prisons and into education, health care, housing, and other social services.<sup>25</sup>

Such work has empowered urban activists to make the argument that arresting, convicting, and imprisoning too many people has important negative consequences for fragile networks of survival in Black and Brown neighborhoods, especially since those going to prison tend to be concentrated in a few neighborhoods.

In Oakland, California, activists are organizing to stop Operation Impact, which according to Sitara Nieves of Critical Resistance, is a national policing program in which local police departments join with the highway patrol, county sheriffs, and other law enforcement agencies to target, racially profile, and criminalize all residents in a so-called high-crime community over a period of days or weeks. Operation Impact often stops every car and pedestrian who passes through blockades and funnels people from these targeted neighborhoods straight into prison or deportation. In Los Angeles County, activists from various organizations (Critical Resistance, California Prison Moratorium Project, All of Us or None, Youth Justice Coalition, and Labor Community Strategy Center) have collaborated in the ongoing "No New Jails" campaign, fighting to reverse increasing numbers of arrests and convictions in the state's biggest city and county. The sorts of negative effects prisons produce in their host towns have provoked fights against prison building in communities across the state and country. Usually fighting at only the local level, activists have succeeded in turning away the promise of development through prison building from El Centro to Farmersville.<sup>26</sup>

Poor people of color in California's urban neighborhoods and rural towns bear the costs of overincarceration. These are the readily observable costs; most of the detrimental effects are less clear. Antiprison activists have worked with unions representing public employees to fight ever-increasing corrections budgets during the state's five-year-old budget crisis, a crisis that has seen state spending on K-12 education and health services slashed and tuition raised at all levels of the state's public higher education system. Among the innovative coalitions working to reduce the state's prison population is the Coalition for Effective Public Safety, whose members include the California State Employee's Association, Service Employee's International Union Local 1000, the Friends Service Committee, the American Civil Liberties Union, Drug Policy Alliance, and other antiprison groups.<sup>27</sup> Another coalition, Education Not Incarceration, has worked with the National Education Association (NEA) to develop a workshop to train teachers how to help organize to push for moving public funds from corrections back to education. The NEA has pressured Governor Schwarzenegger to close the state's scandal-plagued youth prisons.<sup>28</sup>

Common to these organizing efforts has been the understanding that many of the costs of overincarceration are hidden, but that they can, once revealed, prove very effective in moving new and formerly unlikely allies into the fight to reduce the numbers of our neighbors locked away.

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Today, the three Ps—police, pollution, and prisons—continue to threaten both urban and rural communities. Just a few short years after the youth identified these threats in the San Joaquin Valley, a movement emerged to join forces across issue areas. This movement has already dramatically impacted both the antiprison and environmental justice movements, prompting significant changes in the state of California's prison system.

### Notes

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1. For a horrifying overview of the Valley's environmental devastation, see Gray Brechin, "The Broken Promised Land," *Terrain* no. 33 (2002), available at [www.ecologycenter.org/terrain/article.php?id=13183](http://www.ecologycenter.org/terrain/article.php?id=13183).
2. Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 71.



3. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, nationally the prison population grew from 304,692 to 1,410,404 between 1980 and 2004. The number of people locked in prisons and jails combined as of June 30, 2004, was 2,131,180.
4. Cole and Foster, *From the Ground Up*, 12.
5. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Race and Globalization," in *Geographies of Global Change: Remapping the World*, ed. R. J. Johnston, Peter J. Taylor, and Michael J. Watts, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 261–74.
6. "Joining Forces" was cosponsored by Critical Resistance, the California Prison Moratorium Project, the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, the United Farm Workers, the Center on Race, Poverty, and the Environment, Fresno State Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA), the Fresno Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, and the West County Toxics Coalition.
7. Juana Gutiérrez, remarks at "Joining Forces," February 10, 2001, Fresno, California. For more about MELA, see Mary Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Gabriel Gutiérrez, "Mothers of East Los Angeles Strike Back," in *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*, ed. Robert Bullard (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994), 220–33.
8. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prison, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
9. The Real Cost of Prison comics illustrate the impact of overincarceration on the families and communities left behind. See [www.realcostofprisons.org](http://www.realcostofprisons.org) (accessed April 5, 2006). See also essays by Dina Rose, Todd Clear, and others on the same Web site.
10. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*. See also Gregory Hooks et al., "The Prison Industry: Carceral Expansion and Employment in U.S. Counties, 1969–1994," *Social Science Quarterly* 85 (2004): 37–57, available at [www.realcostofprisons.org/papers.html#workshop](http://www.realcostofprisons.org/papers.html#workshop) (accessed December 19, 2005).
11. *Fresno Bee*, January 9, 2000.
12. Bob Cane, "Suit Says Delano Two Not Needed," *Delano Record*, July 12, 2000.
13. Bob Cane, "Prison Plan in Comment Period," *Delano Record*, September 27, 2001.
14. Bob Cane, "DOC to send EIR Change," *Delano Record*, December 13, 2001.
15. Cole and Foster, *From the Ground Up*, 47.
16. Mathew Heller, "The Prison Prosperity Myth," *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*, September 1, 2002. Evelyn Nieves, "Storm Raised by Plan for California Prison," *New York Times*, August 27, 2000.
17. *A Prison in the Fields: False Progress in the Central Valley*, dir. Ashley Hunt, CHF Film and Video and Critical Resistance, U.S., 2001.
18. The Assembly Budget Subcommittee overseeing prison spending was (and still is) headed by Rudy Bermudez, a current CCPOA member and a parole agent on leave.
19. See *A Prison in the Fields*, a documentary film made for the campaign and available through Critical Resistance. See also Laura Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996).
20. Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 109.
21. Michael Jacobson, *Downsizing Prisons: How to Reduce Crime and End Mass Incarceration* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 142.
22. See the group's Web site, [www.allofusornone.org](http://www.allofusornone.org) (accessed December 19, 2005).



23. RCPP comics and other materials are available at [www.realcostofprisons.org](http://www.realcostofprisons.org) (accessed December 19, 2005).
24. See Dina R. Rose and Todd R. Clear, "Incarceration, Reentry, and Social Capital: Social Networks in the Balance" (paper presented at the conference "From Prison to Home: The Effect of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities," National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, January 30–31, 2002). See also Keith Harries, "Violence, Change, and Cohort Trajectories: Baltimore Neighborhoods, 1990–2000," *Urban Geography* 25 (2004): 14–30.
25. Susan B. Tucker and Eric Cardora, "Justice Reinvestment," *Ideas for an Open Society* 3 (2003): 2–5.
26. See Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, "The Other California," in *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World*, ed. David Solnit (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2004), 381–96.
27. See the coalition's Web site, [www.effectivepublicsafety.org](http://www.effectivepublicsafety.org) (accessed December 19, 2005).
28. See Education Not Incarceration's Web site, [www.ednotinc.org](http://www.ednotinc.org) (accessed December 19, 2005).