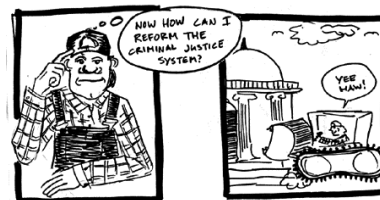


ORGANIZING ADVICE

Reform and Abolition: Points of Tension and Connection

By Cassandra Shaylor and Cynthia Chandler

Most activists in prison and their allies outside want to reduce the suffering of people in prison and people in communities that are targeted for imprisonment. Many also work to challenge prisons more broadly. Increasingly activists and academics are talking about the points of tension and connection between reform efforts that seek to improve conditions in prison and those that take a more radical abolitionist approach to the problem and call for the eventual elimination of the prison altogether.



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While the goals of the prison reform and prison abolition movements are both grounded in a concern for alleviating the suffering of people in prison and communities targeted by the prison industrial complex, there is a growing awareness that the political Right has manipulated and reappropriated the rhetoric and strategies of reform efforts to expand the prison system. There is a resulting need to challenge the Right by identifying those efforts at reform that contribute to an expansion and entrenchment of the system and those efforts that are necessary steps toward a world that no longer relies on imprisonment.

Since the birth of the penitentiary system almost two hundred years ago, the majority of advocates for people in prison have focused on reform as a strategy for reducing the suffering of people in prison. In fact, reform efforts to eliminate public displays of corporal punishment gave birth to the modern penitentiary.¹ Once prisons were adopted as the norm, reformers almost immediately began to voice concern about the impact of imprisonment, in particular the effects of isolation on the mental health of people in prison. Moreover, the rise of the prison system occurred in reaction to the abolition of slavery and from very early in its inception the institution was deeply rooted in racism. Immediately following Reconstruction, the Black prison population exploded through the implementation of Black Codes and the development of the convict lease system.² The legacy of that racism is present today in racial profiling, the tracking of young people of color into state systems, and the disproportionate number of Black and Brown people who continue to populate the prison system.

Reformers historically focused on conditions in prisons. Proponents of women's rights who were alarmed by sexual violence against women in co-ed prisons argued for separate institutions for women for instance.³ Absent a radical critique of prisons themselves, concerns about conditions for women were used as a justification for the birth and mass expansion of the women's prison system⁴ where rampant abuse of women continues.⁵ In fact, one of the legacies of prison reform (as opposed to radical critique and resistance) is the expansion of the prison industrial complex and the increasing use of the prison as a mechanism of social control and State violence.⁶

The history of prison reform efforts reveals that mere reform fails to address the inequalities, oppression, and state violence upon which the institution of the prison is built, leaving the violent foundation intact and rendering ineffective attempts to relieve the suffering of oppressed

people confined within it.⁷ Moreover, all too often such reform efforts are re-appropriated by the Right and used to strengthen the prison industrial complex and to make it more impervious to critique, resulting in bigger, “better,” and more numerous prisons housing increasing numbers of oppressed people.⁸ In the contemporary era of the prison, the Right has used a number of strategies to build the system on the backs of reform efforts.

Strategies of Prison Reform Used By the Right To Grow the System

1. USE OF COMPLAINTS ABOUT PRISON CONDITIONS TO JUSTIFY MORE PRISONS

Complaints of overcrowding or decrepit conditions are often taken up by the Right to justify building more prisons. Complaints about how far prisons are from urban centers are used to justify maintaining those prisons and also building new facilities. Complaints about private prisons and arguments that they are worse than public prisons because of abuses within them or the blatant profit motive behind them are seized on by the Right to erase both the egregious human rights abuses and profit-motive that also exist in State-run prisons. Complaints about inadequate healthcare are taken up to justify bigger prison budgets and increases in staffing that rarely materialize as better healthcare and instead build the prison system.

Rather than proposing reforms that are readily co-opted to grow the prison system, arguments can be made that critique prison conditions while also challenging the expansion of prisons. Activists can: argue that decarceration should be the answer to prison overcrowding; organize urban/rural coalitions to close prisons in rural locations and stop new prisons from being constructed; work against privatization while simultaneously fighting against imprisonment in any facility; argue for improvements to healthcare that actually decrease prison spending by providing alternative sentencing and/or releasing sick people in prison.

2. COOPTATION OF OUR LANGUAGE AND APPROACHES TO EXPAND THE SYSTEM

In many instances, the Right attempts to co-opt reformist language to its own ends to justify and grow the system. Efforts in California to implement a strategy of decarceration for seriously and terminally ill prisoners through compassionate release have been co-opted by that state, for example. California anti-prison activists have argued that prisons are ill-equipped to deal with the needs of seriously and terminally ill prisoners and therefore they should be released to their families or to hospices in their communities. However, in an effort to keep people in prison and increase the number of beds within the system, the rhetoric deployed by anti-prison activists to persuade politicians and the general public that people in prison who are dying deserve to die with dignity is being used by the California Department of Corrections itself. The CDC is now arguing for the creation of hospices within prisons and corrections—controlled skilled nursing facilities in the community that could house prisoners in locked wings.⁹ This rhetorical reappropriation has had a secondary effect on the prison population by obstructing activist efforts to prevent people, whose seriously compromised health render them particularly vulnerable to the harms of imprisonment from going to prison in the first place—mainly because the State can argue that such people’s health will no longer be compromised during imprisonment, so the argument goes, because there are places within the prison to accommodate them.¹⁰

Because the rhetoric of public safety has become so entrenched, the State can make the claim that the expansion of the system into skilled nursing care is necessary because a person in prison is a threat to society merely by virtue of her status as a prisoner, regardless of her physical or mental capacity. In fact, the strength of those arguments has increased to the point of absurdity:

ostensibly out of security concerns, in 2004 California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed a bill that would have saved California millions of dollars by allowing the early release of the 13 people in California's prisons determined to be permanently unable to tend to any of their daily needs or in a vegetative state.

To ensure that rhetoric aimed at reducing the suffering of people in prison is not used to justify prison expansion, we can work to ensure that decarceration strategies are intrinsically linked to the rhetoric we use. For example, "compassion" and "dignity" for people facing terminal or serious illness in prison should always be linked with "release" and policy aimed at expanding corrections should be resisted. Moreover, we must make and reaffirm the argument that "compassion" and "dignity," as well as "treatment" and "rehabilitation," are fundamentally at odds with the goals of punishment and prisons.

3. USING STRATEGIES THAT CREATE CLASSES OF "DESERVING" VS. "UNDESERVING" PEOPLE IN PRISON TO MAINTAIN THE SYSTEM

Because the existing framework for arguments for changes to the system has become so limited, in many instances reformers rely on arguments that have the potential to create short-term solutions for some people in prison at the expense of a longer-term vision to improve life for all people in prison. The Right then seizes on these efforts to consolidate existing notions about safety, justice, and the necessity of prisons.

For instance, when reformers argue that we should decriminalize petty offenses so that the police can go after the "real" criminals, the approach fits perfectly into the Right's strategy of fear-mongering by evoking the need for "public safety" that is used to justify maintaining the system or increasing its punitive response to all others.

In response, we can frame our arguments in ways that avoid pitting one category of prisoner against another. In a campaign to get rid of three-strikes policies for instance, we can argue that imprisoning people is not making communities safer and that instead we should invest the resources that go into incarceration into programs that would allow people to re-enter their communities and be safe and healthy. And we can argue that as a strategic decarceration approach, abolishing three strikes is a step toward eliminating the prison as a central feature of contemporary life.

4. ABOLISHING PART OF THE SYSTEM AT THE EXPENSE OF A LONG-TERM GOAL OF ENDING THE SYSTEM

In many instances, the Right seizes upon political strategies that focus on reforming small parts of the criminal justice system to ensure maintenance of the broader system as a whole. For example, in recent years efforts to abolish the death penalty have gained support in the general public. Unfortunately, the rhetoric of death penalty abolitionists in favor of life imprisonment has limited the terms of the debate around how to address violence and consolidated the idea that imprisonment is the only viable solution. This approach also obscures the fact that people who are targeted for the death penalty, who would then end up in prison for life, are disproportionately poor people of color and mentally ill people of all races. Similarly, the rhetoric of the increasingly popular Innocence Projects, which are geared at aiding only the factually innocent, is taken up to limit the terms of the debate around who in prison deserves legal assistance or public attention to just the innocent. This approach again obscures the abuses that occur against all imprisoned people and the fact that communities of color and poor people of all races are

targeted for imprisonment.

In response to these failings, we can use work directed at a specific population or sub-issue to highlight the broader violence and failings of the prison system as a whole. We can work to abolish the death penalty because it is the ultimate expression of the power of the State to enact violence and because it is a way to eliminate people who are “undesirable” from the perspective of the State – poor people, people of color and people with mental illnesses. We can work to free the innocent as a means of highlighting the inequities that impact all people in prison and call in to question the integrity of prisons more broadly.

Strategies Abolitionists and Reformers Can Use To Move Toward a World Without Prisons

We can simultaneously address the needs of people who are suffering in the system currently and challenge the efforts by the Right to co-opt our attempts to change the system by carefully crafting reform strategies that are about diminishing the power of the system and building alternatives to it.

For instance, a focus on *strategic decarceration* is a significant step toward the ultimate abolition of the prison. Such campaigns focus on: implementing a moratorium on prison construction; closing existing prisons; changing laws and sentencing structures that imprison the greatest numbers of people (such as drug laws, three strikes schemes, property offenses, anti-sex work ordinances, etc); and creating community-based institutions that provide services that people need. When implementing such strategies, however, it is important to build them on rhetorical approaches that do not play into the hands of the Right. An example, which often occurs in relation to death penalty and immigrant rights work, is the pitting of non-violent prisoners (those who “deserve” to be released) against violent prisoners (those who do not) or “innocent” prisoners against “guilty” prisoners.

Though the number of people who are in prison for violent offenses is extremely small, the first question posed to prison abolitionists is the question of how to respond to harms that people inflict. In response, strategies for *creating systems of accountability instead of punishment* when someone is harmed can be developed without relying on policing and prison. While the anti-prison movement has historically challenged racist policing and imprisonment practices, few strategies have been developed for alternative mechanisms of safety and justice. As a result, the anti-violence movement has struggled to respond to interpersonal violence in an era when policing and prisons are often the only available response. Moreover, through a desire to have the State acknowledge the vulnerability of marginalized groups, anti-violence activists often push for increased criminalization, such as hate crimes legislation, as a response to discrimination. Through these practices, activists interested in protecting vulnerable groups can unintentionally bolster the same systems of oppression and State violence that most often target the groups they are seeking to protect. There is a need to break down barriers between and within the anti-prison and anti-violence movements, to expand the definition of violence to include State-sanctioned violence such as imprisonment, and to create tangible alternatives for establishing true safety and justice.

The perceived lack of creative responses to violence has been seized upon by the Right to increase the level of fear about violent crime and present prison as the only response. We know that the numbers of women who are survivors of domestic violence or rape, for instance, have not decreased despite the growing number of people in prison. Therefore, strategies for creating

accountability locally and in communities will go a long way to countering the notion that we have no choice but to lock people up. Many of these strategies are in place on a local level and can serve as models for organizers who are developing alternatives to policing and prisons. For instance, Communities Against Rape and Abuse in Seattle develops innovative responses to sexual assault that do not rely on the police; SistaII Sista in Brooklyn organizes young women to challenge police abuse through direct action, and Generation Five in San Francisco trains community members to implement responses to child sexual abuse that do not rely on child protective services or the prison system.¹¹

We also can implement *changes to language* that both ensure that we are not undermining a longer term goal of abolition and reclaim language that has been appropriated by the Right. For instance, we can avoid using language that pits categories of prisoners against each other (innocent vs. guilty, non-violent vs. violent) and we can also reclaim rhetoric that has been used by the Right to grow the system (prisons don't make communities safe but affordable housing, healthcare, food and education do).

Questions To Ask When Developing a New Campaign/Slogan/Rhetorical Approach:

- Are we responding to conditions by calling for more or “better” prisons?
- Are we calling for new modes of policing that expand surveillance and policing in our communities (for instance electronic monitoring, house arrest, etc.)?
- Are we calling for more money/staff to go into the system?
- Does this pit categories of people against each other?
- Does this approach ultimately undermine the long-term goal of abolition?
How can we shift it without losing our goal of addressing current harms so that it doesn't?
- Can we build into our strategy ways to reframe rhetoric and reclaim language that has been co-opted by the Right, such as “public safety,” “safe communities,” “violence against women,” “compassion,” or “family values?”

Anti-prison activists inside and outside of prison have unmasked the many ways in which prisons are predicated on racism and violence and have clearly argued that there are better ways to deal with social problems and the harms that people inflict than to lock people in cages. Because historically efforts that relied exclusively on reform served to strengthen the system, it is imperative that we take seriously the call to abolish it.

The abolition of the prison is a protracted process, not an overnight transformation. Reforms are necessary on the way to abolition, but as anti-prison activists we need to move away from reform as an endpoint, and we need to consider carefully the impact of short-term goals on the longer-term vision of a world without prisons. Abolition as a goal and strategy allows us to break out of the frame that currently confines our ability to imagine alternatives and pushes us to work strategically toward a world free of the prison industrial complex.

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Words Matter—Thoughts On Language and Abolition

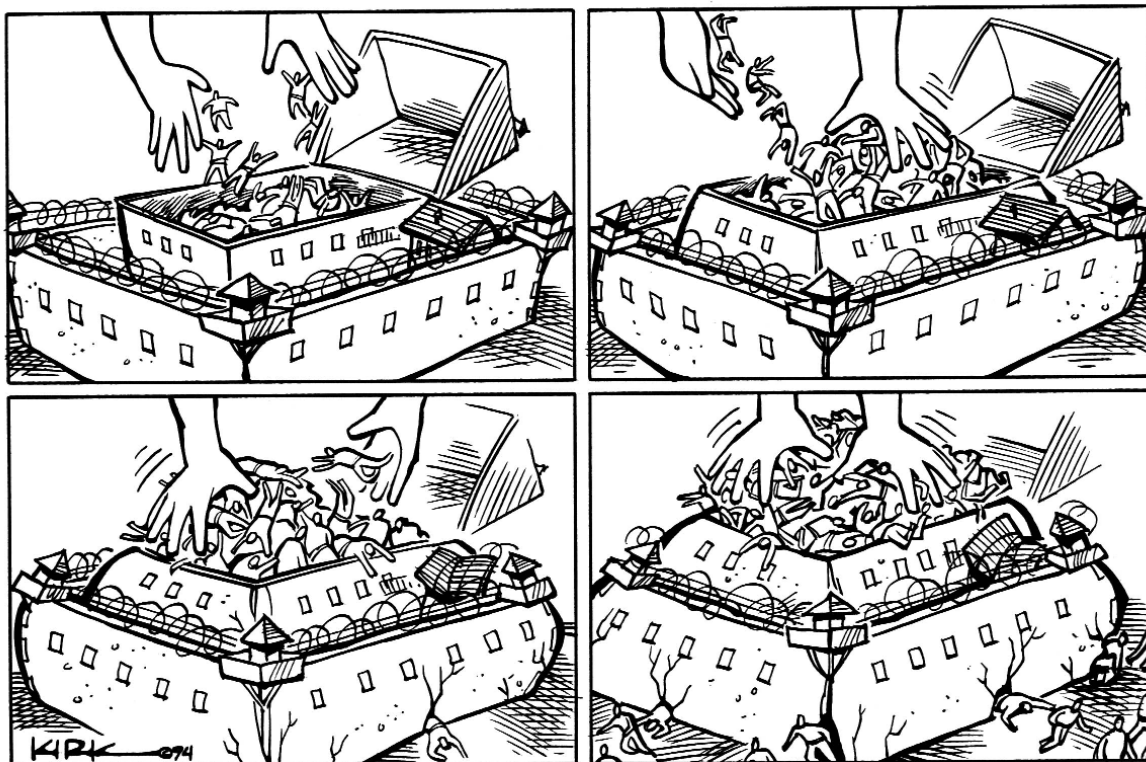
By Critical Resistance

Words alone can't save us. But our language does shape what we can imagine, and by using new words and old words differently, we can imagine new things. A major reason the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) grows is that we are told there isn't another option. We need to use language creatively to make healthy systems possible as we develop strong, specific challenges to the PIC.

The way people talk about policing, prisons, safety, and "crime" shapes what we think these things are, and forms the ways we imagine change can or should happen. Words are not neutral, and it's important that we break down and reshape their meanings in our own materials and conversations. We can use language to shift debates, make people see things differently, and challenge our own assumptions and fears. Below are discussions and specific examples of how our word choice can not only help us make stronger abolitionist arguments, but figure out what abolition can look like.

<u>INNOCENT</u>	<u>VIOLENT</u>	<u>CRIMINAL</u>	<u>PRISONER</u>	<u>VICTIM</u>	<u>SAFETY</u>
GUILTY	NON-VIOLENT	CONVICT	INMATE	JUSTICE	PUNISHMENT

These words get used all the time when people talk about prisons, police, courts, and "public safety." They are used as often by people who support the PIC as people fighting against it. They are filled with assumptions about the people and ideas they describe. Often, these same assumptions make the PIC seem logical and necessary. They redefine people and actions in terms of the category or idea represented by the word. In this way a person becomes a criminal, and the act of the State putting someone in a cage becomes justice. This maintains people's fear for their safety, their understanding of what they need to be safe, and their reliance on and acceptance of



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police and prisons.

Most of these words work in pairs: when we use one, we are really using both. Innocent and guilty are a pair like this—the idea that innocent is opposed to guilty (you are one or the other) is considered a “natural” assumption and it’s what immediately comes to mind for most people. So saying that “innocent people” shouldn’t be in prison (which most of us can agree is true), also says that “guilty people” should be. It implies that most people who are locked up deserve to be there because they “did something.” If we want to say that people are being picked up, harassed, or held without charges; there’s a way to say it without suggesting that people in other circumstances are worse, or are “bad” people, or deserve to be in cages.

It’s important to pay attention to the words we use to describe people in cages. Most commonly, they are called “inmates,” “criminals,” and “prisoners.” What are the differences?

1. **Inmate.** Originally, this term meant someone who shared a house with others. Currently, it mostly refers to people in prisons and mental institutions.
2. **Criminal.** This term doesn’t just mean someone convicted of a crime, or even someone who harms others. It implies that causing harm is essentially a part of this person, maybe even the most meaningful part of their personality.
3. **Prisoner.** This is someone kept in a cage against their will by a powerful institution (like the State), whether or not that institution is just.

These words are raced and gendered. For example, “criminal,” and “Black,” are often code words for each other. There is tremendous pressure from white supremacy in media, or in policing, (or both, as in Cops and the local news) to make an automatic connection between these terms, both by assuming a “criminal” is going to be a Black person, and in assuming that a Black person is going to be a criminal. There are particular ways terms like these get gendered too. “Welfare queen,” is one term that might be thought of as a femininely gendered word for criminal. It works to make Black women and criminals interchangeable. This combination of gendering and racing applies to men as well. “Gang member” and “rapist” are two examples of words that work to make Black men and criminals equivalent.

“Prisoner” stands apart from “inmate” and “criminal” because it describes how people are put in cages. It helps us remember that people aren’t in cages for their own good or simply as a place

**WHAT ARE THE WORDS YOU USE AND HEAR TO DESCRIBE PEOPLE IN CAGES?
WHAT MEANINGS DO THEY HAVE?**

Language works not only to define types of people in relation to the PIC, but types of actions as well. People fighting prison expansion or working to end the drug war often focus on capitalizing on public sentiment about “violent” vs. “non-violent” crimes, or concerns about locking up too many drug users and not enough drug dealers. For instance:

- *The drug laws drive prison expansion, fill prisons with non-violent, minor offenders, and drain resources from other services, such as drug treatment and education.*
- *Non-violent drug offenders are spending more time in prison than murderers and rapists.*

What distinctions are being made between violent and non-violent offenders here? What is implied about the use of prisons generally? How could you re-phrase this information to be consistent with the ideas that no one should be in a cage, and that putting people in cages helps no one?

to stay (which “inmate” implies), or that they are inseparable from the harm they might/might not have caused (which is implied by “criminal”). It helps us to see the State as actively choosing to put people in cages, while “inmate” and (especially) “criminal” imply that imprisonment is the only or even the best way to handle certain people. In this way it also gets away from the harmful gendered and racial dynamics of a word like “criminal,” which helps to disrupt the linked White supremacy and sexism of the PIC.

We can use language and ideas to transform how people think about what makes them safe. We can challenge the ways people are told to imagine what makes their communities safe and create materials that makes clear a vision of community safety that does not rely on controlling, caging, or removing people. We need to be able to determine and create safety for ourselves, without leaving anyone behind. In creating materials, we need to recognize how we can best use language to make our ideas clear and common sense, without falling into the trap of “tough on crime” rhetoric that compromises the long-term goal of abolition. Here are some further exercises that might be helpful for thinking about language in your work.

A. Get out materials and literature that your organization uses (or that the State or other organizations use). Go through these questions to try to understand more critically what the language is doing.

1. Who is this language addressing? Who is it accessible to? Where is this literature used?
2. What categories are used to describe:
 - people
 - institutions
 - political systems and ideals

What political views do those categories back up?

3. What political message is being sent—how is or isn’t that abolitionist? What is the role of cages in the political program being suggested?
4. How could you change the wording to more clearly oppose all aspects of the PIC? Or, if you’re using material you disagree with as an example, how does the language support the PIC?

B. Pick out one (or two, or however many you want to handle) words, and try to see how it is used, and how you might use it in a more radical way. For example, you might choose “punishment.”

1. Brainstorm all the meanings it has—whose agenda(s) do those meanings serve?
2. What other words is it closely connected to? What do those connections do?
3. Where do you hear this word used commonly? By whom?
4. What other words (maybe “reconciliation” or “responsibility”) address some of the same issues and assumptions in different ways?
5. Are there ways to use the word “against itself”—to use it in a way that challenges the way it’s most commonly used right now?

The point here is not just to change the words we use, but to examine how changing our words

changes what we can see. It can also help point out what assumptions we might decide to hold onto. We can agree that there is a difference between stealing a stereo and hurting another person, but saying “non-violent” and “violent” is only one system for showing that difference, one set up by the State through its laws. We validate that State action every time we use this distinction.

Critical Resistance (CR) works to build an international movement to end the Prison Industrial Complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe. This article first appeared in the Critical Resistance Toolkit and is reprinted with permission. To order a copy of the CR toolkit, call (510) 444-0464 or visit www.criticalresistance.org.

Ground Rules & Tips for Challenging the Right

By Political Research Associates

What Can I Do?

Recognize the Assault

The Right’s many groups organize on a wide variety of specific issues, from education, the environment, civil and human rights, immigration, and criminal justice to developing new constituencies such as fathers and conservative people of color. Often they will link one issue with another under a broad umbrella campaign, such as “traditional family values,” “fiscal responsibility” or “compassionate conservatism.” Look for connections across their issues, and observe patterns and trends in how specific topics are addressed. For instance, projects in one state are often duplicated in others such as attempts to roll back gay rights or bilingual education. Find out as much as you can about the right-wing groups and spokespeople that work nationally and in your area and what influences them. Realize that the Right has influenced the “center” of U.S. politics to be more conservative. Learn to recognize that moderate public statements often mask deep conservatism, especially in areas where race plays a big part, such as criminal justice and education.

Defend the Basics

Defending democracy means reclaiming as progressive ideals the basic values and practices of the democratic process such as fair elections, a vibrant free press, liberty, human rights for all people, social and economic justice and the chance for everyone to lead dignified lives. Counter to these values, the Right seeks to attract the allegiance of some by limiting the rights of others and by sanctioning benefits for its supporters. At the same time it claims to do this in the name of freedom and democracy. Recognize and expose this hypocrisy and contradiction, such as the claim that a tax cut for the rich will benefit everyone. Work to extend basic rights and seek social and economic justice for all people. This work will pose a significant challenge to the conservative vision of the United States.

Get Involved

If activism is new to you, channel your insight and motivation into action. Notice the issues that strike a chord for you and seek out like-minded individuals and groups interested in the same things. Recognize that working for an issue that defends basic democratic values can be as valu-

able as working with a group that specifically organizes against the Right. Consider your circumstances, your comfort level, and your skills, and do what's comfortable for you. There are as many ways to participate as there are issues and perspectives, and activism includes much more than electoral politics.

If you have been involved and focused on a single issue, be open to its possible connections to other topics. Sometimes single issue organizing can miss opportunities for bringing on more supporters. Consider acting on those connections. The Right successfully makes such connections across issues all the time, and they have used this strategy successfully to build their influence. A good place to start is Political Research Associates' website, <http://www.publiceye.org>. Look under "Building Equality" for a list of organizations on a range of issues. If you have experience with political groups, reflect how your understanding of the Right can help inform their goals and planning. Share these insights with others, and keep informed about new developments.

Maintain Momentum

Progress towards reclaiming democracy depends upon sustained effort. Luckily there are many ways of participating in the democratic process. Support those who organize such tactics as voting campaigns, educational projects, demonstrations, boycotts, letter writing, phone chains, lobbying and internet activity. Continue to participate yourself, including with financial assistance if you are able. Finally, recognize that understanding and challenging the Right takes time. Be determined, outraged, committed, but also patient.

Do Your Homework

Recognize that the Right is a complex movement.

No one organization "controls" the Right. No single funder is "behind" the Right. Some large organizations are important, but many others appear to be more influential than they really are. Recognize that there are multiple networks of organizations and funders with differing and sometimes competing agendas. Find out as much as you can about the groups you see. Incorporate this information in your educational work. It is helpful in organizing to know a great deal about your opponents. Be alert to evidence of the Right's "new racism." The Right has replaced simple racist rhetoric with a more complex, "colorblind" political agenda which actually attacks the rights of people of color. See the Resources sections of this kit for some assistance in your research.

Decode the Right's agenda on your issue.

The Right often attempts to pass laws that take rights away from groups or individuals. Under the guise of addressing some compelling societal need, they often frame the issue by appealing to prejudice, myth, irrational belief, inaccurate information, pseudo-science, or sometimes even by using outright lies. Further, right-wing organizers often appropriate the rhetoric of the civil rights and civil liberties movement to portray themselves as victims of discrimination. Actually, they most often are seeking to undermine the existing protection of individual rights, increase their freedom to accumulate profit, and undermine the wall of separation between church and state.

Be careful to respect people's right to hold opinions and religious beliefs that you may find offensive.

Everyone has an absolute right to seek redress of their grievances. This is equally true when those

grievances are based on religious beliefs. In an open and democratic society, it is important to listen to the grievances of all members of society and take them seriously, even when we might be vehemently opposed to them. They do not, however, have a right to impose those beliefs on others.

Distinguish between leaders and followers in right-wing organizations.

Leaders are often “professional” right-wingers. They’ve made a career of promoting a rightist agenda and attacking progressives and progressive issues. Followers, on the other hand, may not be well-informed. They are often mobilized by fears about family and future based on information that, if true, would indeed be frightening. This so-called “education” is often skillful, deceitful, and convincing. These followers may take positions that are more extreme than those of the leaders, but on the other hand, they may not know exactly what they are supporting by attending a certain organization’s rally or conference. To critique and expose the leaders of right-wing organizations is the work of a good progressive organizer, writer or activist. In the case of the followers, however, it is important to reserve judgment and listen to their grievances. Do not assume that they are all sophisticated political agents or have access to a variety of information sources.

Rebut, Rebuke, Reaffirm.

It’s important to remember that while the tactics of the Right may be obvious to you, they are not necessarily obvious to others, even though they might be part of the political process. The ways in which the Right distorts and misleads the public must be carefully explained. Use a 3-step process. Rebut false and inaccurate claims. Rebuke those who use scapegoating or demagoguery. Reaffirm what a progressive goal or agenda would accomplish for the betterment of society.

Stay Cool in Public

Use the opportunity of public forums to present your position.

Approach any public event as a chance to state your case. Come fully prepared to explain why you are right. Although your audience may be unfriendly, remember that you are often an invited guest at such events. Audience members are expecting you to represent your group, even though they may not expect to agree with you. Your task is to convince these listeners, not the representatives of the Right who may be your debating opponents or fellow panelists. Do so using short, clear sentences, not long, abstract paragraphs. Many audience members are your potential supporters, available to join your ranks. Provide them with reasons and ways to do so.

Demand documentation.

Common tactics of the Right include distorting the truth and manipulating facts and figures in order to deceive the public. You can often expose false charges and baseless claims by demanding that their sources be cited. The leadership of an organization can and must be held fully responsible for every spoken or written word that comes from him or her or the organization they represent. If you are thoroughly prepared, you will know the weaknesses of these sources and be able to refute them publicly. At the same time be prepared to document your sources in order to maintain your credibility.

Address the issues, not just the actors.

Try to avoid personalizing the debate or focusing entirely on the presentation by the Right’s representative. Take time to clarify what the real issues are, what tactics are being used, why

these issues are important to the Right and what the implications of the debate might be.

Criticize the outcomes, not the intent, of the Right's agenda.

If you focus only on exposing the purpose of a particular campaign, you may find yourself locked in a circular argument about who knows better what the Right seeks to accomplish. It may be more productive to look at the implications of the issues at hand and to explain that the logical outcome of adopting your opponent's position will be a serious threat to the goals of your group.

Avoid slogans, namecalling, and demonizing members of the Right.

Slogans and sound bites have their place, but they are not sufficient as an organizing strategy. Simple anti-Right slogans do not help people understand why the Right sounds convincing but is wrong. And responding in kind to being called names weakens your position with some of the listeners you are trying to convince. Phrases like “religious political extremists” are labels, not arguments, and often will backfire on the neighborhood and community level.

Expose who benefits from right-wing campaigns.

One of the most common ways the Right advances its policies is to argue that they will benefit the “average” person, though that most often is not the case. It helps in exposing this deception to point out who actually stands to benefit and who stands to lose from the policy being proposed. Exploring whose self-interest is served can help organizers as they seek a clearer picture of the forces behind a particular campaign. Sometimes, the greatest beneficiaries of a right-wing campaign are the organizations conducting it. Campaigns are recruitment tools. So if potential new members can be reached by a certain position, that is sometimes in and of itself the reason the campaign is mounted.

Keep Organizing

Keep your supporters informed.

Signing up supporters is a good start, but your job includes keeping your supporters well informed. Often the Right will switch tactics or redirect its energy. If you are in the middle of an attack, these changes may be puzzling. Keep in mind that the deep agenda of the Right remains unchanged despite these apparent shifts. Persist in explaining this to your colleagues.

Involve clergy and other respected community members in your organizing.

Since so much of the Right's rhetoric has been influenced by the Religious Right, progressive, faith-based organizations and their representatives have great potential for increasing your chances for successful organizing. Sympathetic religious leaders can present an alternative interpretation of scripture and often have access to large congregations who may be interested in your work.

Be patient.

Change takes time. Your organizing today is laying the groundwork for tomorrow's successes. Patience, optimism and a sense of humor are key ingredients in opposing the Right.

Endnotes Available Online!

All citations and references are available at www.defendingjustice.org or by contacting PRA.