

## **THE EVOLUTION OF A SOLUTION**

**By Kinetik Justice <sup>1</sup>**

After 20 plus years of educating and organizing throughout the Alabama prison system, one of the most frequently asked questions I get is, “What is a work stoppage like?” Well, it’s surreal, it’s really hard to put into words and I don’t want to be cliché about it, but I’ll do my best.

It’s 12:01: an announcement is made amongst the prisoners, in every Dorm- IT’S OFFICIAL, WE’RE NO LONGER ON ADOC TIME, WE’RE ON FREEDOM TIME.

Around 1 a.m. the COs (correctional officers) come around to call for kitchen workers. There is this intense thickness in the prison where everybody’s on point to see if the kitchen workers went to work and how the police are going to respond. It’s just this extreme tension that’s so thick. It’s hard to explain but, everybody starts looking around at each other and nobody moves toward the door. Everyone begins chanting, “WE AIN’T GOING”. This feeling of euphoria starts to become contagious. It spreads around the Dorm as everyone realizes it’s on. We’re making a stand.

Then, reports from other Dorms confirm that people didn’t go to work, and so forth, it’s exhilarating and gives this extreme sense of power to hopeless people and that’s dangerous because that’s powerful.

### **What effect, if any does shutting a prison down, have on those incarcerated?**

When you have powerless people who are hopeless and now, they

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<sup>1</sup> Kinetik Justice Amun has been imprisoned and serving life without parole since he was twenty years old, but has not allowed his circumstances to deter him from fighting for justice, for himself and others. For almost all that time, he has been in segregation for once concocted reason or another. While in segregation, he has organized at least two prison strikes, appeared several times on “Democracy Now” and been interviewed by other news sources. Under the most adverse circumstances, he remains optimistic and upbeat, even when prison guards nearly killed him and left him with permanent eye damage that prison doctors have treated only sporadically.

are imbued with all this power, because we began to realize that we are the ones who control the institutions. These officers are here at our leisure, at any moment we could decide that nah, we ain't doing this no more. Then, it would be on them to try to run these prisons and they can't do it. Just that knowledge, that empowerment, changed the power relationship dynamic on a day-to-day basis between officers and brothers incarcerated, because the veil of false authority was lifted.

**How many prison strikes have you been a part of?**

I took part in strikes during 1999, 2002, 2007, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2022. So, I've been directly involved in around nine different strikes within the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC), since I was introduced to the art of work stoppages as a tactic.

At Holman, in the nineties, the Tag plant was one of the most lucrative enterprises in the entire Alabama prison system. With this understanding, whenever things didn't go the way the tag plant workers wanted them to at Holman, they just didn't go to work. Effectively using their labor as leverage. When it was reported that the Tag plant was shut down, Montgomery would instantly send their representative to Holman to see what the problem was, give the workers what they wanted, rectify it, and the prison would go back to normal. It's been a tactic throughout the state of Alabama, it's like the evolution of a solution.

**How did you arrive at Work Stoppages as the best method to address the conditions?**

I was exposed early in my incarceration to work stoppages as a tactic, along with other demonstrations and tactics, such as hunger strikes, letter writing campaigns, litigation, and trying to get lobbyists to pass legislation. Through the process of elimination and through trial and error. I found the most effective tactic was work strikes. So, that's what we placed a lot of our focus on, trying to organize people around their labor and show them how their incarceration was about economics.

We learned that the most effective way to organize on the inside was to maximize religious and educational community times in the classroom. We used those platforms to educate people legally and politically. We taught people about our inhumane treatment and living conditions, and prompted critical thinking and problem analysis. For instance, if we have a problem, we identify the problem, then we work to identify solutions. Once we identify the solutions, we do diagnostics on implementation of it and see how these things work out. Then we have an open dialogue with brothers on the

inside who are the most influential.

**What kind of progress have you all gained from work strikes?**

When you're dealing with work strikes, organizing, or activism work, it can be really hard to quantify results because advancing everywhere, especially in prison can be painstakingly slow. But over the last ten years of my doing this work, there have been great strides that I've seen in progress towards a change. They seem incremental in phases, if you look at them through little gaps. But looking at the big picture in the historical context, I'm really proud of the work that we've done in Alabama in organizing, educating and exposing a lot of the things going on and trying to foster change in society, at large.

**How were you able to help organize the 2016 National Prison Strikes from solitary confinement?**

As a part of our advocacy, we hosted a bi-weekly Blogtalk Show. This brought us into contact with advocates, organizations and other prisoners across the country. All of this was done from segregation with the use of smartphones. While ADOC may claim that access to cell phones needs to be prohibited to prevent those incarcerated from facilitating criminal activity from their cells, the use of phones to expose injustices, organize prisoners and demand their rights is the real fear. ADOC does not allow journalist access to prisoners to express their grievances for the same reason. In any event, being in segregation wasn't a real obstacle as long as we had access to technology, I have been able to network just like I was in a population.

**Are there any ongoing organizing efforts among prisoners?**

There's always communications and dialogues going on with different organizations and different groups throughout the institutions. It's an organic environment that is always changing. So, there's always dialogue about the things that are going on. For example, somebody got killed here, somebody got assaulted there, the police lied on someone here. You know, all of these issues have come up and all of them are on the table and anyone of them could serve as the catalyst for action. Therefore, every day interactions become opportunities for organizing.

**What are some of the drawbacks of using the tactic of work strikes?**

Shutdowns brings out the worst in some people, in regards to their emotions and levels of discipline. One must be gifted with the inclination

for Understanding and Patience NATURALLY, then use each day to nurture and maintain it. I tell no lies to you, trying to lift up your comrades with one arm while trying to fight a behemoth with the other arm is a formidable task and can seem like a romantic futility. The system doesn't want change and the enslaved don't desire to know they need to and can bring about change.

The frustration that is integral to prison organizing can be a real challenge. The apathy amongst the incarcerated is debilitating. On many days, I think of quitting the whole Activism demo and finding a new passion. The Pros/Cons chart would back that decision. But, something internal compels me. The principle of Justice does really drive me.

However, one of the most frustrating things about a shutdown is the need for constant intervention, the need for constant pep-talks. It gets frustrating when we have over 100 men in a dorm and maybe 80 or 85 of them are not as committed to the struggle but, they are with the cause and their resistance is breaking down. They are ready to give in to their drug habit. They are ready to give in to their lust or, ready to move around and try to do something. You have to constantly stop all the run ins between dudes because frustrations run high. And then you have to give talks of why are we doing this? Is this going to work? What happened last time? And, there's just a lot of negative individuals and so forth that you have to eliminate. A lot of fires you have to put out. You have to become a peacemaker. You have to become a man of many hats during the shutdown because a lot of people turn to you for guidance and instruction on what to do, how to maneuver in these situations, and how to deal with this situation.

### **What was the reaction from prison officials?**

It may be surprising, but many "correctional" officers support the prisoners demands and even strikes. Depending on the institution, you could have maybe 50-50, 60-40 sometimes. However, the majority are going to be understanding and supportive of what we are doing on the inside as they understand the situation and circumstances. And then you might have a percentage who just want to undermine the efforts of prisoners just because they don't acknowledge the humanity of those incarcerated. But no one has really just taken strong opposition, the opposition has always been from Wardens. As they are charged with keeping the prison generating revenue.

But, there stance always seems to be, "This may not be the right way to do it, let's let the lawyers do this", it's always conciliatory, to try to get things back to normal and everybody back working. During an actual shutdown, I have yet to experience a real hostile situation myself personally.

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I have heard of brothers who have received hostile responses from certain officers and so forth. But for the most part, it's like 50-50, with one half being a little sneaky and deceptive and trying to undermine by back-biting and gossiping and whispering and so forth and others being more supportive, even if they have to give their support on the down low.