

Sacramento: A day of solidarity with prisoners and formerly incarcerated people

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Dorsey Nunn of All Of Us Or None (in red shirt) speaks at Sacramento rally Aug. 8.
SLL photo: Gloria Verdieu

Based on remarks at the Socialist Unity Party national plenum on Aug. 13.

This is the story of my experience going to Quest for Democracy 2022 on Aug. 8 in Sacramento, California's state capital.

I was offered the opportunity to go to Sacramento with All Of Us Or None (AOUON), a grassroots organization led by formerly incarcerated people, whose purpose is to strengthen the voice of people most affected by mass incarceration and the growth of the prison-industrial complex. Their goal is to build a powerful political movement to win full restoration of human and civil rights for incarcerated and previously incarcerated individuals.

I was told Quest for Democracy is a statewide lobbying day giving incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals and their families the opportunity to meet with state representatives and learn the process by which bills are passed. Most important, it is a chance to hold elected officials accountable.

We were given a list of bills and asked to choose a couple that interested us. When meeting with assembly members, we were to speak on why the bill is important and ask the representatives, "Can we count on your 'yes' vote on this bill?"

I was a bit hesitant, because I was told not to bring up other issues and stick to the issues on the list. I don't consider myself a lobbyist and I don't have any confidence in the capitalist criminal justice system or the politicians to do the right thing.

Early on the morning of Aug. 8, a group of seven activists, including me, boarded two flights from San Diego to Sacramento. We rented a van and drove to the capital, where everything was set up.

Some groups came the day before and received training on how to approach assembly members and present their concerns in a concise manner. The time you have is very limited, so you must make your point in 2 to 3 minutes or less.

There was a line at the AOUON booth to get t-shirts, a lunch ticket, a packet listing

summaries of many bills on prison reform, and a package of “courage score sheets” for state representatives. We were asked to review this information before going to visit with our assigned representative. I knew little about what was going to happen when we sat with the State Assembly member.

End involuntary servitude!

I was excited when the announcement was made from the capitol steps for everyone to gather in a semi-circle to prepare for a rally.

The rally began with a respected Indigenous community member acknowledging the land where we gathered and the ancestors whose shoulders we stand on. He emphasized that we stand together to do the work here today that will bring justice and dignity to all those in prison and those of us who are in transition, our families, friends and all our relations.

The first speaker was Dorsey Nunn, co-founder of All of Us Or None, executive director of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (LSPC) and one of the organizers for Quest for Democracy. Nunn was sentenced to life in prison when he was 19 years old.

Nunn spoke about justice, dignity and humanity for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, and the importance of ACA 3: the California Abolition Act – a bill which would amend the state constitution to end involuntary servitude in prisons.

Although more than 100 people came out and many groups were represented here, there was a great sense of unity, community and commitment to the issues of prisoners, families, reunification, support and education. It was very welcoming, and I could feel the gratitude towards everyone that came out on such a hot day.

Listening to the stories from the speakers, all former incarcerated individuals, I felt

the heat was nothing compared to what those in prison go through every day.

I thought about the MOVE 9 and Sekou Odinga, who told their stories at the Malcolm X Library in San Diego. In my mind I compared their stories of life as formerly incarcerated people in the U.S. with that of the Cuban 5, who returned to Cuba as heroes after 16 years in U.S. prisons.

All the bills addressed issues that the Cuban people had already worked out through roundtable discussions and popular mobilization using the principles of socialism. Cuba is our shining example; Cuba has paved the way.

Fighting for basic needs

Christopher, a 17-year-old completing his first year at San Diego City College, came with our group. His thoughts on the bills echoed mine when he said, “Why should there be a debate about a prisoner’s right to call their family for free?”

Prisoners and families should be able to call without paying extortionate phone rates (SB1008). Families should be encouraged to visit and stay connected with their loved ones in prison (AB990). Families should be notified right away when an imprisoned son, daughter, father, mother, brother, or sister has a medical emergency (SB1139).

There are so many bills that resonated with me, like one to prevent children 12 years old from being tried in juvenile court (SB429). Or the bill to release medically vulnerable people who are the most expensive to incarcerate and least likely to reoffend (AB960).

I was somewhat surprised as one of the State Assembly members spoke. I didn’t get her name, but I heard her say: “People just don’t know about the inhumanity that is prevalent in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). Some think [imprisonment] is a vacation or a break.

“You spend months, years or decades in prison, and when you get out you get \$200. What the fuck can you do with \$200?” she shouted.

She supported a bill that would raise the “gate money” given upon release to \$1,300, which she said is “still not enough.” (SB 1304) What’s needed is a path to reentry – training, counseling, housing, a job with a living wage, and compensation while you make that transition.

There were many bills that impacted incarcerated peoples’ reentry into society. These are issues that Cuba has figured out. Yes, in Cuba you do the time, but the whole purpose is to come out restored, renewed, reunited with family and community, and hopefully you will do better. The system is not set up for you to fail.

As Gerardo Hernandez, one of the Cuban 5 who is now head of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), said: “Our purpose is to help. We talk with the family, we encourage the family to stay involved, because it is understood that the family suffers when a loved one is incarcerated.

“Prisoners need not be discriminated against because they went to jail. Our objective is not to make a repressive action against those persons but to help those persons, who are victims themselves in many cases.”

Cuba’s neighborhood CDRs number 138,000, with over 8 million members, and continue to work on programs and solutions to the problems of petty crime, drugs and mental illness.

Solution to mass incarceration

I think about the remarks by Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel on May 16: “In the United States, 2,000 children are arrested every day and 44,000 are in prison. We only cite this data to demonstrate, once again, the hypocrisy and double standards of those who presume to judge what happens around the world.”

Diaz stated, before our people and the world, that in Cuba no one under 16 years of age is imprisoned!

There are coalitions such as those which organized Quest for Democracy 2022 throughout the U.S. The Socialist Unity Party's Prison Solidarity Caucus will work with these groups. We will support incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, listen to their demands, support their efforts to reform this system and fight for their right to exist and live with dignity.

These organizers are aware of the hard, long struggle it's going to take to pass these bills, because it took 10 years just to pass "Ban the Box" - the box on applications that is used to deny formerly incarcerated people access to livable wages, decent housing, medical care and many other life-sustaining benefits.

When we had our 20 minutes with State Assembly member and Local Government Committee Chair Cecilia Aguilar and two of her staff, I asked about ACA-3, the amendment to end involuntary servitude. Aguilar said: "This is a hard bill to pass. My staff and I will research this bill. This is what we do with all bills."

Each person spoke about bills, and she expressed her support for all of them. We thanked her for taking the time out of her schedule to talk to us and she thanked us for coming.

We returned to our rented van and made our way to the airport for our 5:00 flight back to San Diego.

It was a learning experience. It didn't change my position on lobbying with the politicians, but I am glad I went. It just shows how much work we must do to educate our class about socialism.

Prisoners should be compensated for their labor while incarcerated and at the time of their release. They should have a path for reentry, be united with family and

community, be treated with dignity, and not be punished or discriminated against because they went to jail.

With over 2 million people in U.S. prisons, affecting millions of families, this is a major concern.

Every hard-won reform and act of solidarity, however small, is important. But as Cuba shows, the only solution is a socialist revolution.

Abolish capitalism! Shut down the prison-industrial complex! End mass incarceration now!

For more information about LSPC, AOUON and Quest for Democracy, visit PrisonersWithChildren.org/Policy-Advocacy/.

