

While Claiming to Defend Freedom Around the World, the U.S. Has Dozens of Political Prisoners—and the Majority are People of Color

Racism is still the driving force behind U.S. political imprisonment

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Political imprisonment in the United States exists primarily as a tool of racist repression. It is aimed disproportionately at people of color, as well as others engaged in anti-racist struggle. Whether in the fight against racism at home or against racist foreign policies, wars, occupation and colonialism, the overarching purpose of political imprisonment is to intimidate and try to crush militant forms of anti-racist struggle.

By treating U.S. political prisoners as “common criminals,” the criminal justice system individualizes each case as if they are somehow separate from their social contexts. This ignores root causes and impedes the development of political solutions to the underlying issues for which people have been arrested.

Readers can discern for themselves what is revealed in the findings presented here, and in the [US Political Prisoner list](#) this article analyzes. The large number of people of color and others involved in the anti-racist struggle arrested for their activities is sadly predictable. Our entire history and existing political and economic institutions are founded and advanced squarely on the foundations of racism.

The problem is the entire U.S. social, political and economic apparatus. It’s the system that must change. Only when that happens will political prisoners find justice and true liberation in the U.S. We fight for the liberation of Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu Jamal. But as wonderful as winning freedom for individuals may be, without a political solution, little is accomplished regarding the causes for which these prisoners have sacrificed their freedom.



Source: syracuseculturalworkers.com

Not all U.S. political prisoners are in jail for explicitly anti-racist struggles. There are those in prison for opposing the whole fabric of militarism and war, women who have defended their bodies from abuse, striking blows against patriarchy, and eco-defenders.

Recognizing the racism that permeates U.S. political imprisonment does not diminish the validity of the struggles for which they were arrested. Without exception, racism and anti-racism is a factor in every facet of U.S. popular movements. For instance, all anti-war and anti-imperialist struggle has a fundamentally anti-racist aspect. The one existing imperial power in the world today is the U.S./NATO Empire, an Empire centered among mostly White nations, in service to global capitalism and western geopolitical hegemony. That Empire is the primary global purveyor of the exploitation and dispossession of Black, Indigenous, and other colonized peoples in the nations of the Global South.

We further recognize that we can and must look to anti-racist struggles, especially Black and Indigenous liberation, for guidance, lessons, and leadership, regardless the area of activity. The [Alliance for Global Justice analysis published August 5, 2020](#) (which this paper updates), explains that,

“...We are convinced that African people, including the African diaspora, play a leading role in all revolutionary and transformational struggles. African and Indigenous peoples have been specially targeted for repression and exploitation from the very beginning days of the global spread of capitalism. Today, in the U.S., the movement for the rights and self-determination of Black people has, above all else, shown that it is not a temporary struggle but that it has staying power.

There is a thread that connects the struggles of the very first enslaved people through the historic Civil Rights Movement to the... Black Lives Matter uprisings today. The struggle for Black liberation in the U.S. is huge, mature yet young: multigenerational, experienced, politically savvy, and enduring. The successes of Black liberation struggles have always, in every instance, opened the way for other struggles. The struggles against slavery and for

Black voting rights led directly to the women's suffrage movement. The Civil Rights Movement was a foundation for an endless list of struggles, including anti-war, anti-poverty, women's rights, Latin American and Asian liberation movements, disability rights, gay rights, and more. (Indigenous defense of the land and its people is, of course, the oldest movement in resistance to Empire in the Americas.) Thus, we can say that the prominence of African heritage political prisoners in the U.S. is a situation that concerns all of us."

AFGJ has maintained a list of U.S. Political Prisoners since 2013, when Stan Smith of the Chicago Committee to Free the [Cuban] Five put that list together for the first time, counting 38 U.S. Political Prisoners. Due to a lack of capacity at the time, we did not undertake an update again until 2018, when we were able to hire Nasim Chatha to help us organize a new comprehensive and updated list. Nasim had been our intern in 2012 and had written some of our pioneering work on the related theme of [Prison Imperialism](#). (Prison Imperialism focuses on the export of the US mass incarceration model to other countries.)

Ours is not the only political prisoner list, and we have always consulted the work of others while augmenting those with our research. We have especially relied heavily on the advice and feedback of Claude Marks from the [Freedom Archives](#) and have regularly referenced the [Jericho Movement](#), the [Nuclear Resister](#), [Earth First!](#), and the [Anarchist Black Cross](#).

How we define who is a "political prisoner" is a classification always open to debate. We note that some organizations, such as the Jericho Movement, do not list people as political prisoners unless they have asked or agreed to be so listed. As we noted in our 2020 report,

"There is a concern that prisoners may experience further targeting and harassment as a result of attention brought by well-meaning supporters. We very much respect that. For our purpose, we are trying to build a comprehensive list that reflects the overall extent and reality of politically motivated arrests in the United States. We are not involved in direct advocacy. For political prisoners who have specific solidarity campaigns, we have tried to provide links. If there are no advocacy organizations linked, they may not exist or be wanted."

We are not attempting to maintain a complete list of all U.S. political prisoners. Instead, our list is of [U.S. political prisoners who are also prisoners of Empire](#) (PP/POEs). There are, for instance, animal rights activists whom we do not include. A person arrested for direct action against the inhumane conditions suffered under the conditions of factory farming, or to liberate animals from pens where there is no freedom of movement, is not included, unless there is some element directly related to the struggle against the underpinnings of Empire.



Source: thejerichomovement.com

Even under socialism, under nations in resistance to Empire, sometimes even under locally autonomous communities, there are animals kept and exploited under conditions that can only be described as cruel. But one cannot simply blame Empire for this, even when and if it exacerbates the problem.

How, then, do we define political prisoners who are also prisoners of Empire? Our August 5, 2020 report on political prisoners states:

“Our definition of political prisoners refers to people who are incarcerated for alleged crimes related to resistance and liberation from repression. We believe that these cases should not be treated as isolated, ‘common’ crimes, but [cases that] require a political solution. In many cases, those in jail are there because of false allegations or because they were framed and railroaded through the courts. Our list is not only of political prisoners, but also of what we term “prisoners of Empire.” By that, we mean people who are jailed because of activities that constitute a direct challenge to the national and international dominance of U.S., NATO, and transnational capitalist imperialism.”

We also note in our listing that,

“...political prisoners [...] require a political solution [...] Whether the circumstances of the alleged crimes are true or false, we strenuously reject the individualized and out-of-context treatment of these cases as simply ‘common crimes.’ Our listing of these prisoners does not constitute an endorsement of the tactics or immediate goals of every individual. We also recognize that people have a right to resist oppression, and the failure to do so can be, itself, a crime against the people. In many cases, those arrested have been set up, falsely accused, railroaded, and/or denied adequate defense and basic human rights. More often than not, they have received harsher sentences than usual because of the political nature of their activities.”

Although the origins of our PP/POEs list date back to 2013, this is only the second comprehensive analysis we've published. The first analysis was in response to the 2020 uprising sparked by the extrajudicial killing of George Floyd. We admit that what we have could be significantly augmented.

We need another major and exhaustive review of the definitions, criteria, and categories we employ. Towards that end, we've established a committee that will spend the next year revising all aspects of the list. This is an ongoing process, and if you have suggestions for improvements, we want to hear what you have to say. Feel free to send your suggestions to James@AFGJ.org.

One must also look at the back stories behind the numbers and trends. For instance, in 2018, we listed 50 political prisoners. After several minor revisions in the interim, in which the total was steady, we published a major update in August of 2020, following the peak of the 2020 uprising. We found that after the 2020 uprising, the number of PPs/POE had risen by 12.28% to 57.

As of the present moment, the number has diminished to a count of 55 U.S. PP/POEs, as of August 10, 2022. The decline in the overall number can be attributed to paroles, completed sentences, as well as deaths, of several PP/POEs. Especially, over the past two years, several Black PP/POEs arrested in crackdowns during the previous century have died in prison or been released after decades behind bars. These include the MOVE 9 and participants in historic Black liberation struggles, both armed and unarmed.

In 2020, we found 38.60% of PPs/POE were Black, and just over 72% were people of color. Today, the percentage of Black PP/POEs has dropped to 34.55% (19), while the overall number of people of color who are PPs/POE has dropped to 69% (38). Of the other PP/POEs who are people of color, 10.9% (6) are Latino; 5.45% (3) are North "American" Indigenous; 3.64% (2) are Asian-American (non-Arab, Middle Eastern, or Central Asian); and 16.36% (9) are Arab, Middle Eastern, African Muslim, or Central Asian (one PP/POE is of Pakistani heritage, and one PP/POE is included under both Latino and Arab, ME, etc.-heritage categories).

As for the last category, we have included these together because we've found it difficult to find statistics related to these specific ethnic groups. Instead, we find the closest readily available statistics have to do with Muslims in prison—and Muslim is not an ethnicity and can include people from all over the world, including those who are not necessarily people of color.

Although Muslim or perceived-as-Muslim peoples are not ethnicities, they are discriminated against as if they were, targeted as a class because of their actual or perceived religious identification. Similarly, prison population statistics regularly confuse the count of Latino prisoners by counting most of them simply as "white."

To understand the racism revealed in these percentages, we must compare them to the demographic percentages of the US population as a whole. Respectively, we find that the U.S. general population is [13.6% Black](#), [18.9% Latino](#), [1.3% Indigenous](#), and [1.1% "Muslim."](#)

The racist application of the "criminal justice" system is a feature of the entire system, not just of political imprisonment, which itself reflects a larger reality. For instance, we find that Black persons are incarcerated at a rate [3.5 times higher than that of Whites](#).



Source: benjerry.com

We need to place the differences and the total number of PP/POEs within context. Among the U.S. PP/POEs, it is significant that just over 14.55% (8) of the total are those incarcerated for their activities during the 2020 Uprising. There are also still two PP/POEs that remain in jail for activities related to the Ferguson uprising in 2014, following the extrajudicial killing of Michael Brown. If we add those together, we find that 18.18% of U.S. PPs/POE have been jailed in relation to charges stemming from the birth and continued growth of the Black Lives Matter movement.

How do we determine who and how many are PPs/POE because of anti-racist struggle? We count 22 of 55 PPs/POE, or 40%, arrested for domestic anti-racist actions. As an international solidarity organization, AFGJ is keenly aware that U.S. foreign policies and international relations are extensions of the same policies, attitudes, and actions that drive domestic racism. U.S. wars, sanctions, blockades, and Prison Imperialism are overwhelmingly wielded against nations with a large majority of people of color, countries of the Global South. We find that 11 PPs/POE are in jail for actions of international solidarity with specific nations targeted by Empire (as Noam Chomsky defines it, “an integrated policy of U.S. military and economic supremacy”).

Another 8 are people involved in activities of self-determination, liberation, and defense of their territories from occupation, war, sanctions, and blockades.

Among them are Simon Trinidad from Colombia, Ivan Vargas from Colombia, Alex Saab from Venezuela, the Virgin Island Three, Mun Chol, Myong, and Leonard Peltier (in defense of the Lakota nation in occupied South Dakota). Together, these represent 34.55% (19) of those engaged in struggle directly against the international application of U.S. racist and political repression. When we combine those arrested for domestic and international resistance to U.S. racism, we find that 42 of 55 PPs/POE, 76.36%, are incarcerated for acts of anti-racist resistance.

In other words, more than three quarters of US/POEs are in jail for activities that can be described as anti-racist.

We also count 5.54% (three) PP/POEs jailed for eco-defense. 7.27% (four) were arrested for activities generally or directly opposed to U.S. militarism and wars. 7.27% (the Cleveland Four) are in prison for generalized resistance to the U.S. political system and global capitalism. 3.64% (two) women are in jail for defending themselves from their abusers or rapists.

As for the last category, the reality is that there are hundreds if not thousands we might include in that category. We need to pose several questions and investigations to determine who and how many of these there are and who, if not all, could be considered Prisoners of Empire. We ask the reader to be patient with us as we delve into this complex and challenging area of research for next year's report.

For now, we include Maddesyn George and Fran Thompson as emblematic cases for which we know there is a much higher total.

We also note that there is overlap in some of these categories. For instance, Fran Thompson is included as a woman arrested for self-defense and an eco-defender, exacerbating her prosecution and sentencing. There are other cases where people are counted in more than one category.

At the 2013 Tear Down the Walls conference in Tucson, Arizona, Margaret Prescod of [Global Women's Strike](#) argued that all those interned under the inherently racist and classist U.S. model of mass incarceration are political prisoners. That may not be our definition, but who can honestly claim she was wrong?

In our list of classes of political imprisonment, we include those held in immigrant detention centers and those still held in occupied Cuba at the Guantánamo prison. But they are not counted among the 55 PPs/POE that we document.

We do know this—even if we added the 36 inmates in Guantánamo, the thousands held in immigrant detention centers, the many women jailed for defending themselves against their rapists and abusers, and, therefore, in resistance to the patriarchal underpinnings of the Empire, these inclusions would only underscore what we already know: political imprisonment in the U.S. is a tool of racist as well as other easily identified forms of repression both at home and abroad, and all of these cases require political solutions, not individualized and decontextualized punishment.

Ultimately, systemic change is needed, which is another way of saying revolution.

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