



History Acts 21:

Prisons in Lockdown

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Activists: Stella Swain ([Cambridgeshire Prisoner Detainee Solidarity](#)), [The Prisoner Solidarity Network](#)

Historians: [Katherine Roscoe](#) (University of Liverpool), [Ben Bethell](#) (University of the Arts, London)

Key questions:

- How has the pandemic exacerbated conditions in prisons and migrant detention centres, and how are abolitionist and anti-prison expansion activists adapting to organising under lockdown?
- How are questions around detention and incarceration, private prisons, and prison abolition situated within mutual aid initiatives and discussions? How does this influence activist organising?
- How can we articulate abolitionist politics in a way that appeals to people who have never given this any thought?
- How can we use statistics and data to support the cases for better treatment of people in prison, against prison expansion, and for prison abolition?
- How will the likely outcomes of the present crisis – such as mass unemployment – impact on campaign strategies? How can we use the new structures that have emerged from this crisis – mutual aid, increased community cohesion – to support these projects?

Dave from the Prisoner Solidarity Network (PSN) explained that the network was formed as the London chapter of the Incarcerated Workers' Organising Committee (IWOC), an organisation that originated in the USA. The name change was made in light of the differences between prison labour in the US and the UK. It signals a shift in emphasis from labour organising within prisons to a more holistic approach. PSN strives for the abolition of prisons. An [information pack](#) is available on PSN's website. The present situation has created some ideological impediments as PSN have had to present their politics with less emphasis on abolition in order to encourage broad support and grow a network of solidarity.

PSN is a network for practical solidarity between people inside and outside of prison. Their activities include a buddy correspondence system between people inside and outside prison, supporting people in prison in making complaints, contacting the media over situations within prisons, sourcing legal advice, and supporting people who have been released. The pandemic has particularly impacted on

PSN's ability to communicate and organise with people inside. While the organisation has active members inside as well as outside prisons, people in prison cannot participate in online organising (just as they previously could not join in-person meetings). PSN is now forced to communicate with inside members by post as in-person visits are no longer allowed. Post is subject to scrutiny by prison staff. In addition the pandemic has made the post slower and less reliable while some issues have become more urgent.

Prisons have responded to the pandemic by isolating prisoners in what are essentially conditions of solitary confinement. The restrictions on communication mean that people inside are not always able to form an accurate idea of what is going on outside. These levels of isolation exacerbate problems that already existed, such as issues with sanitation and hygiene. There is also a lack of PPE within prisons.

PSN are calling for [donations](#) that can be passed on to people inside to enable them to make phone calls and buy sanitation products. The logistics of passing money to people in prison, particularly to multiple people, are very complicated. In addition privately-run prisons can set their own terms for what can be brought in so sometimes money is not passed on.

Stella Swain explained that Cambridgeshire Prisoner Detainee Solidarity were formed very recently in response to a comment thread about prisoner solidarity in a Cambridgeshire mutual aid group. The organisation aims to raise awareness within communities of conditions in detention centres and prisons. The group developed its action plan with support and advice from PSN. Focusing on a different prison or detention centre each week, they offer three practical actions for people to take part in while in-person meetings are impossible. These include email templates, mass tweets, banner drops, and coordinated poster campaigns. The first week focused on Yarl's Wood, where many activists had campaigned before. It is thought that the first case of the virus in a detention centre was at Yarl's Wood, but new detainees were still sent there in spite of this. The group next focused on HMP Peterborough, a private prison run by Sodexo, where there have been cases of harassment and abuse in recent years.

The group's aim is to pursue a politics of abolition without reference to guilt or innocence, and its aims and activities are not intended to be limited to the pandemic and its impact. This has influenced their selection of prisons. This week they have focused on HMP Littlehey, a facility for sex offenders. It is also the site of a trial of prefab cells that points to plans for prison expansion. The case of Littlehey illustrates the group's view that abolition does not seek to deny harms done by people who are subject to criminal justice. Rather abolitionist politics view prisons as perpetuating these harms. The group suggests that transformative and community justice are better alternatives.

Stella concluded that the current narratives that suggest solitary confinement is necessary for safety actually make it more difficult for people in prison to access resources; this situation facilitates abuse. The prison industrial complex is exploiting opportunities to capitalise on the current crisis and carry out its existing plans for expansion.

Katherine Roscoe is an historical criminologist with a particular interest in mid-nineteenth century crime and punishment in Britain and its former empire, and her contribution to the meeting focused on transported convicts. She explained that she would be using nineteenth-century vocabulary but that she was aware of the implications historical terms have in the present day and she invited meeting participants to discuss this. She noted that present-day prisons often reproduce distances between people inside and outside of prisons that are comparable to nineteenth-century practices. Visits to people in prison tended to be severely restricted in the nineteenth century, making it difficult to pass

on information about conditions within the prisons. Prisoner testimonials were rarely a priority, even for reformers. Katherine's contribution offered historical parallels that she hoped would be useful for activists communicating across comparable barriers. For instance, the nineteenth century saw the development of vast correspondence networks that relayed information about conditions in colonial prisons to Europe through media such as the press and parliamentary speeches. These networks were primarily middle-class and often pursued reform from a religious background; but they excelled at creating international networks involving different influential figures such as government officials.

Epidemics spread rapidly in nineteenth-century prisons with lethal effects, but these details were often covered up or misrepresented. Racist language was sometimes used about prisoners, such as with reference to Rottneest, an Australian prison where indigenous people were incarcerated. Sanitary reform did not change the structural conditions of the prison apparatus; in fact reforms could sometimes work to sugar-coat the system. Nineteenth-century prison reform activists were not prison abolitionists, and reforms were often part of paternalistic policies.

Speaking to Dave and Stella's points regarding the visibility or invisibility of people in prisons, Katherine noted that physical distance does not always matter in the context of popular awareness. Using the example of the disproportionate effects of epidemics on nineteenth-century prisons and prison ships in particular, she pointed out that authorities generally aimed to lock down the prisons to prevent the disease from spreading to the communities beyond. This is comparable to the observations made by the activists that the current crisis is exacerbating conditions that already existed. Based on evidence from her research Katherine noted that a state of emergency often allows authorities to introduce a temporary fix and elide larger responsibilities. She also recognised parallels with present-day narratives around heroic voluntary responses to disease. Nineteenth-century prisoners sometimes volunteered as nurses during epidemics and their sentences could be reduced in consequence.

Ben Bethell's research focuses on the period following Katherine's, exploring post-transportation penal history and the rise of high-security prisons. He explained that eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century British prisons such as Newgate created a less controlled environment where more communication with the outside world was possible. Developments in the nineteenth century produced so-called 'model' penitentiaries with single-prisoner cells and a greater focus on solitary confinement. This design was strongly linked to management of diseases such as epidemic typhus or 'gaol fever'. These prison reforms actually anticipated the wider sanitary reform of the nineteenth century. The new prisons were much more sanitary than the city around them. They were often quarantine zones and could escape altogether from epidemics that affected the surrounding communities because contact was limited and entry and exits were controlled. Prison discipline was an added advantage in the prevention of 'moral contagion' through communication between prisoners.

Ben noted that over the course of much of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the prison population in the UK dropped and there was widespread support for a politics of minimising incarceration and closing prisons. The prison population only began to rise again after the Second World War and has been rising steadily since the 1950s. He pointed out that the beginning of March 2020 had seen a promise from the government to release large numbers of prisoners in response to the pandemic. Different participants in the meeting found conflicting figures regarding the numbers actually released, but they consistently seem low compared to other European countries. Ben concluded that at this time, contrary to earlier in the century, the idea of release seems to go against the grain. The government now feels it has succeeded in containing the virus in prisons but this has been achieved through very stringent lockdown measures creating intolerable conditions of solitary

confinement and reduced communication which, it has been suggested, may remain in place for as much as a year. Ben argued that this was motivated in part by fear of the tabloid press in case released prisoners would reoffend, but also by fears of mass death and/or disorder in prisons affected by outbreaks of the virus. He suggested that this crisis could work as a reverse 'shock doctrine' as defined by Naomi Klein. A mass release would beg the question of why these people had to be incarcerated in the first place.

Participants asked how discussions around abolitionist politics have been playing out in the context of mutual aid organisation. There is a difference in popular perception of prisons and detention centres and people engage more readily with activism relating to the latter. In addition mutual aid activists can be resistant to explicit politics. Activists should be wary of focusing their narratives and campaigns on speaking only to sympathetic examples. For instance, nineteenth-century reformers tended to focus on individual admirable prisoners in order to gain popular sympathy. Accounts of prisoners' experiences were often written up by middle-class people at a significant remove from conditions inside. These narratives are also relevant in the context of the privatisation of prisons. Popular sentiment tends to be more opposed to private prisons because the presence of a profit motive violates the idea that prisons serve a moral purpose.

Discussion explored the differences between the prison industrial complex in the US and the UK and asked whether understanding of the privatisation of prisons in the UK can be developed in the context of the history of empire. Ben and Katherine explained that private prisons are a recent re-introduction within the UK: for instance, eighteenth-century prison legislation abolished fees charged to prisoners by gaolers. This did not apply to the empire, however, as colonial convicts were exploited for profit. The link between the present-day prison system and histories of racial injustice are clearer-cut and better understood in the US than in the UK.

Participants also recognised the issue of profitable work being done by prisoners even in state prisons. It was pointed out that most of the work done by people in prison is reproductive labour that maintains the prison itself, such as cooking and cleaning. It is worth asking why so much labour is required for the maintenance of these institutions. Historical discourses around prison work argued that it should work simultaneously to reform and punish the prisoner. Nineteenth-century prisoners were designed to pay for themselves through prisoners' work; with the rise of the labour movement trade unions raised objections to this as undercutting outside workers. The prison population still exists in the popular imagination as a 'reserve army of labour' that can be mobilised to discipline other workers. For instance the combined impact of coronavirus and Brexit have created a crisis in agricultural labour and it has been suggested that prisoners could do this work.

Participants asked what the impact on the activists' organising had been of the tendency to police the lockdown, both within mutual aid discourse and more widely. Speakers noted that the ideology of self-policing as a form of 'neighbourhood watch' has been deliberately fostered. It is part of the system that enables carceral logic by arguing that 'good people' remain safe so long as 'bad people' are policed. Prisons claim to banish evil from society but they actually work to banish people and communities from society. Popular conceptions of what constitutes a crime are very malleable and dependent on social context. Criminal justice and convictions now have a much longer effect, for instance on employment and access to benefits. Speakers reiterated that this crisis is revealing issues that already existed, such as poverty and discrimination against working-class and BAME communities. The personal problems the crisis is causing for large numbers of people also causes disengagement from wider social problems. This individualism is what we must resist.

Discussion also explored the impact of the crisis on people's mental health, in prisons and detention centres as well as in high-security mental health institutions. Confinement and lack of communication are having widespread negative effects on the mental health of incarcerated people.

Building on discussion in History Acts session 20 on 'Fighting with Data', participants asked how statistics and data can be used to support the case for prisoner solidarity and prison abolition. What kind of information would be useful to activists in this context, and how will the likely outcomes of the crisis, such as mass unemployment, affect their campaign strategies? Dave and Stella were clear that abolitionist arguments must not be dictated by a narrative of crisis, as the issues they addressed have long-term impacts. The activist response should focus not only on keeping people in prison safe from coronavirus but also on organising against the long-term impact of isolation, poor conditions within prisons, and expansion measures such as prefab cells. Wider issues such as increased police power and a rise in poverty also interact with the abolitionist project.

Attendees with related interests shared details of their projects. [Peter Mitchell](#) (Manchester) called attention to the oral history project [NHS at 70](#) at the University of Manchester. He has been documenting experiences of healthcare in prisons and asked to hear from activists, former prisoners, probation officers, or anyone else involved in working within or against the system of healthcare provision in prisons. [Katherine Bruce-Lockhart](#), historian of colonial and postcolonial prisons at the University of Waterloo, Canada, also asked to be part of continued discussion.

In conclusion, the speakers contextualised the official response to the crisis within longer-term developments that have increased the power of the carceral apparatus, such as the increased influence of the justice system on people's lives beyond their sentence, the application of terror legislation to control and suppress trade unionists and environmental activists, and the increase of data surveillance. They pointed out that historically emergency legislation often went on to become the 'new normal', and that historical periods of mass unemployment such as we can expect after this crisis often produced emergency legislation and a carceral response. However they also see the present as a moment of opportunity for change, for instance in terms of decarceration. They agreed that it is important to pass on the historical memory of social and activist movements as well as to learn from historical developments. Activists can build on the new structures that have emerged in response to this crisis, such as mutual aid and community cohesion. It is important to guard against paternalism and continue to emphasise mutual solidarity between people inside and outside of prisons. Activists are grappling with contradictions in their activist discourses in the context of this crisis. They are working towards creating liveable conditions for people who are currently in prison, but it is important not to lose sight of the aim of abolition and not to make compromises with discourses of innocence and reform.