

IT'S UP TO US

TO END MASS INCARCERATION!

ISSUE #15 MARCH 2020

A NEWSLETTER TELLING THE STORIES OF THOSE AFFECTED BY THE PRISON SYSTEM, EXPOSING THE INJUSTICES OF THE SYSTEM, AND ORGANIZING RESISTANCE TO END MASS INCARCERATION.

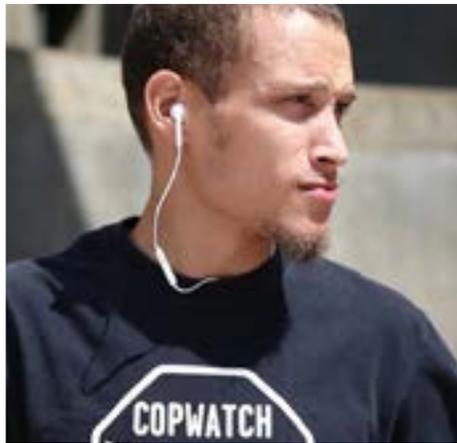
In Prison and Abused by COs for Filming the Police Murder of Eric Garner:

RAMSEY ORTA NEEDS OUR SUPPORT

Ramsey Orta and Eric Garner were friends. On July 17th, 2014, when they were figuring out where to eat, the police began harassing them. We all know what happened next. The police choked Eric Garner to death with an illegal chokehold while he repeated "I can't breathe." *We know this because his friend Ramsey Orta filmed it on his phone.*

No police went to prison for murdering Eric Garner. Even Officer Daniel Pantaleo, who was caught on camera choking Garner to death, was never indicted, though he was eventually fired after much protest and public outcry. *Ramsey Orta, however, was jailed at Rikers Island in February 2015 and has been locked up in upstate prisons since October 3rd, 2016.*

Since filming the police murder of his friend, Ramsey was constantly followed and harassed by police, arrested, and then framed and imprisoned. He plead guilty to drug and gun charges in 2016 and was sentenced to four years upstate. Ramsey admits to having sold drugs to survive, having been around drugs since he was a kid. But the gun police claimed was his was not found on his person or in his home, had no fingerprints on it, and had no clip or bullets



in it, and Ramsey insists it was not his. *Does that sound like a frame-up and retaliation for filming the police murdering Eric Garner to you?*

Joining the police in their insidious plot to punish Ramsey Orta for exposing injustice, correction officers (COs) have inflicted further abuse on him on the inside. At Rikers Island, Ramsey's suspicion that COs were poisoning his food was confirmed on March 3rd, 2015 when the meatloaf served to his cellblock, which was on lock down,

made prisoners *vomit blood* and later tested positive for *rat poison*. COs tried to force Ramsey to eat the meatloaf, taunted prisoners when they got sick from eating it, and refused to give them medical attention. *Yes, you heard right: COs at Rikers fed a whole cellblock rat poison in order to get revenge against Ramsey Orta for filming the police kill a Black man.*

Since being sent to upstate prisons, Ramsey has continued to suffer abuse at the hands of COs. They make clear they know who Ramsey is and why he's locked up, call him racial slurs, and even beat him at times. Ramsey understandably does not trust the food he is given in prison, but the packages sent to him by

continued inside

IT'S THE SAME OLD SOUTH

Beginning December 29th, 2019, a wave of violence swept Mississippi prisons. Several inmates were killed in gang fights in multiple prisons. Prison guards stood by and did nothing. Cell phone video leaked to the outside revealed not only the violence but also the deplorable conditions inmates have to endure daily. The Mississippi state government responded to public exposure of the violence by putting all prisons in the state on lockdown for a week starting on Dec. 31st. At least nineteen inmates died in the two-month period beginning Dec. 29th, some as a result of violence or suicide. What caused this outrageous situation? And what must be done to change it?

LIFE INSIDE A MISSISSIPPI PRISON

Not only does Mississippi have one of the highest incarceration rates in the US, but conditions inside prisons are egregious. Videos, photos, and reports from inside reveal filthy conditions, rat and cockroach infestations, broken toilets, sewage backing up into jail cells, and inmates sleeping in

crowded conditions. Inmates often have to treat their own injuries and chronic health conditions, as medical care is grossly inadequate. For example, at Wilkinson County Correctional Facility, short staffing led to 70% of medical visits being canceled in 2018. Inmates report regularly not getting enough to eat, and in some cases finding rat feces and bird droppings in their food.

Lockdowns are used on the regular and for extended periods of time, keeping inmates confined to their cells almost all day. Prisoners are also denied contact with their loved ones. During most of 2019 at Southern Mississippi Correctional Institution, prisoners were not allowed to get visits due to a lockdown. Mississippi used to allow some extended visitation—lasting a weekend—but ended this in 2012. In 2014, conjugal visits were no longer allowed.

Dealing with these dehumanizing conditions daily is enough to make anyone snap. Thomas Lee, a 49-year-old inmate who recently committed suicide, was reported to have said shortly before his death: "I'm tired of this shit. They don't care about me or my food. I'm about to kill myself."

GANGS AND GUARDS

It's no surprise that in this tinderbox of trauma, violence would erupt among inmates. Gangs are often prisoners' only means of feeling protected, and prison guards often use gangs to control inmates. Violence has become pervasive in Mississippi prisons. Official reports indicate that in the three-year period ending June 2019, there were 7,900 inmate injuries, 265 inmate-on-inmate assaults that resulted in serious injury, and 1,525 assaults without serious injury.

Media reports have drawn attention to the understaffing of Mississippi prisons as a cause of the violence. The number of prison guards has indeed decreased dramatically, from nearly 1,600 in 2014 to 731, according to a recent report, and Mississippi prison guard starting salaries are the lowest in the country, which breeds corruption. Those of us who know that COs regularly brutalize and mistreat inmates, however, are skeptical that simply hiring more guards will decrease prison violence... it may just change who's perpetrating the violence.

PARCHMAN PENITENTIARY FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, which houses about 3,600 of the state's 19,000 inmates and was recently the site of nine inmate deaths within a month, is an embodiment of what Mississippi prisons are really all about. Founded in 1901, Parchman Penitentiary was modeled after Southern plantations. Conditions for Black inmates there were not unlike during slavery. They were forced to pick cotton, chop wood, and plow fields, sometimes for fifteen hours a day. "Trustees"—violent inmates who guards recruited to supervise Black inmates and punish those who did not obey—played the role of overseers. Guards received bonuses if they killed prisoners who tried to escape, much like slave catchers. And if those parallels to slavery weren't enough, guards used a leather whip, called "Black Annie," to punish and terrorize Black inmates. It seems the only real difference between slaves of the pre-Civil War South and Black inmates at Parchman was that the inmates' owners—the state of Mississippi—did



Parchman Penitentiary, Mississippi back in the day: Black prisoners forced to work the fields. Parchman Penitentiary, Mississippi today: prisoners crowded into a cell with a backed-up toilet, sleeping on the floor.

not have to pay for them.

These brutalities continued into the 1960s; in recent decades they have been replaced with new forms of brutality. Inmates have reported sewage backing up into cells and cafeterias, not having working showers or toilets for days, sleeping on concrete floors, and inadequate food that was filthy or spoiled. At Parchman's notorious Unit 32, recently reopened, inmates are locked in their cells in conditions similar to solitary confinement. Given these miserable conditions, it's no surprise that Parchman has been a site of gang violence, especially since the COs seem to use gang violence as a method to control inmates, much like

their predecessors used "trustees" in the past. Parchman shows us that the oppression of Black people in the US, from slavery to sharecropping and Jim Crow to today's poverty, prisons, and police brutality, has only persisted in new forms.

THE STRUGGLE AHEAD

Public exposure of the conditions in Mississippi prisons that gave rise to the recent wave of violence has caught the media's attention and forced government officials to respond. People have protested at the Mississippi state capital, with families of inmates who suffer or died in prison speaking out. Jay-Z and Yo Gotti helped inmates to file a lawsuit,

and the federal Justice Department announced a civil rights investigation.

While lawsuits and investigations are positive developments, what we need more than anything else is *resistance*, with prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families front and center. There has been much talk of "criminal justice reform" over the last decade, and Mississippi had even been praised in recent years for prison reforms that have brought down the number of inmates. But the reality is that for prisoners, nothing has really changed. So if we want the deplorable conditions inside Mississippi and other prisons brought to an end, we're going to have to fight for it, just like people fought to end slavery and Jim Crow.

Ramsey Orta

continued from front page

his fiancé Deja are often tampered with or destroyed, and COs have made a habit of crushing food that Ramsey has in his cell. He is constantly transferred from one prison to another—a total of ten prisons so far—in what is surely a conscious effort by prison officials to make it difficult for his supporters on the outside to visit him and write him letters. Ramsey is given trumped-up citations for breaking any one of the absurd rules prisoners are subjected to. These citations have resulted in Ramsey losing privileges, having his prison time extended by six months, and being sent to solitary confinement multiples times. *Ramsey Orta has spent a total of over one year of his prison sentence in solitary confinement.*

On February 3rd, the Support Ramsey Orta Facebook page reported that "Ramsey is in good spirit and mind. He has been transferred to Mohawk Correctional Facility (his 9th facility), and is taking time to adjust. He appreciates the letters and will be a little more responsive in the coming months." But they also mentioned ways that the abuse by COs has continued since his transfer: "A couple CO's have informed Ramsey that they know who he is. Ramsey's typewriter was broken into pieces upon arrival. Two days ago he caught his first citation, and yesterday after our visit, they took Ramsey's privileges for two weeks. At face value, this appears to be part of the pattern we have come to expect from NYDOCC. Low intensity systematic repression." Then on February 7th, the Support Ramsey Orta page announced that *Ramsey was again put in solitary confinement after catching an additional two citations.*

Ramsey Orta was just transferred to Mid-State Correctional Facility and is supposed to be released

this coming summer. This brother needs our support through his last months in prison, and to make sure COs don't frame him and keep him incarcerated even longer. And when he is released, we know the police will be out to get him again. So let's get his back. Ramsey Orta is an example of both how this system routinely locks Black, Latino, and poor people in prison, and how people who dare to stand up against injustice are punished for doing so. *Let's not let them punish Ramsey Orta any longer. Here are some ways you can support him:*

Follow the Support Ramsey Orta Facebook page for updates:

<https://www.facebook.com/SupportRamseyOrta/>

Send Ramsey letters and books to keep his spirits up and let him know he has support on the outside:

**Ramsey Orta 16A4200
9005 Old River Road
PO Box 2500
Marcy, New York 13403**

Check the Facebook page above for any updates in case they transfer Orta to yet another prison. If you want to send letters electronically you can do so by signing up with <https://www.jpays.com/>.

Ramsey needs money on his commissary to buy food given that COs have poisoned his food. To contribute to his commissary, you can PayPal OfficialRamseyOrta@gmail.com.

Ramsey also has a welcome home fund: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/ramsey-orta-welcome-home-fund>

If you have any questions or know of any prison/parole rights lawyers that can help Ramsey, please reach out to OfficialRamseyOrta@gmail.com.

SUPPORT GROUP FOR PEOPLE WITH INCARCERATED LOVED ONES AND FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED PEOPLE

Are you dealing with the pain and stress of having a loved one who is locked up? Are you trying to navigate a legal system that is designed against us? Is your lawyer not providing adequate help? Did you recently get out of prison or jail and are now trying to get your life back together, find a job, and deal with the trauma of incarceration?

It's Up To Us hosts a regular support group for people with incarcerated loved ones and for formerly incarcerated people. Here, we can come together, vent our anger, share information and resources with each other, find collective solutions to the problems we face, and empower ourselves to stand up against the injustice and brutality of the prison system.

If the scheduled dates and location do not work for you but you would like to attend the support group, get in touch with us:

itsuptoustoendmi@gmail.com. We can work with you to schedule another day or to set one up in your neighborhood. If you would like to attend but need childcare, email us so we can try and make arrangements.

WHERE? THE 125TH STREET LIBRARY COMMUNITY ROOM

224 East 125th Street, New York, NY 10035
(btw 2nd & 3rd Ave)

WHEN? THE FOLLOWING SATURDAYS:

March 14th, 2-4 pm

March 28th, 2-4 pm

April 11th, 2-4 pm

April 25th, 2-4 pm

May 9th, 2-4 pm

IT'S UP TO US

TO END MASS INCARCERATION!

1. Mass incarceration must end. The prison system, courts, parole, and probation dehumanize millions of people inside and out.
2. Mass incarceration is the leading edge of white supremacy and the oppression of Black people in the US. It is the new Jim Crow.
3. It is the struggle of people, especially those most affected, that will stop this. We can't rely on politicians and the court system.
4. We stand with our immigrant sisters, brothers, and children locked up in detention.

email: itsuptoustoendmi@gmail.com

[facebook.com/NoCriminalization/](https://www.facebook.com/NoCriminalization/)

twitter.com/itsup2us2endmi

[instagram.com/itsuptoustoendmi/](https://www.instagram.com/itsuptoustoendmi/)