

Abolition means attack! Towards an insurrectionary theory of prison abolition¹

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Abstract

In this article, we propose an insurrectionary theoretical framework for approaching prison abolition. We argue that transformative change arises not merely from top-down legislative reforms and grassroots consciousness-raising but also from sustained, collective resistance generated from within carceral spaces. This analysis is grounded in 20 years of support and political collaboration with prisoners and detainees across the United States, the authors' own experiences of incarceration, as well as careful observation of prisoner and detainee resistance. We use insurrectionary theory to frame our analysis of a strategy for prison abolition that begins with direct resistance and disruption to prisons from the inside, in the form of strikes (including hunger strikes, work stoppages, protests, and boycotts), uprisings, and escapes. Drawing upon 15 years of empirical data collected via *Perilous Chronicle* (a research project one of us helped found, which focuses on the United States and Canada), we illustrate that organized prison resistance constitutes an ongoing movement capable of rendering prisons ungovernable. We end with a call to abolition geographers and other scholars and activists to integrate analyses of prisoner and detainee resistance into their theoretical frameworks and reassess strategic priorities. While an insurrectionary strategy may not be the only or at all times most effective route for dismantling prisons, it does represent a potent, ongoing strategy that many prisoners and detainees themselves choose to wield in confronting the carceral state in the United States.

Keywords

Abolition, insurrection, anarchism, prison, carceral geography

¡Abolición significa ataque! Hacia una teoría insurreccional de la abolición penitenciaria

Resumen

En este artículo, proponemos un marco teórico insurreccional para abordar la abolición penitenciaria. Sostenemos que el cambio transformador surge no solo de reformas legislativas impuestas desde arriba y de la concienciación popular, sino también de una resistencia colectiva y sostenida generada desde dentro de los espacios carcelarios. Este análisis se fundamenta en veinte años de apoyo y colaboración política con presos y detenidos en todo Estados Unidos, en las propias experiencias de encarcelamiento de los autores, así como en la observación minuciosa de la resistencia de presos y detenidos. Utilizamos la teoría insurreccional para enmarcar nuestro análisis de una estrategia para la abolición penitenciaria que comienza con la resistencia directa y la disrupción de las prisiones desde dentro, en forma de huelgas (incluidas huelgas de hambre, paros laborales, protestas y boicots), levantamientos y fugas. Basándonos en quince años de datos empíricos recopilados a través de *Perilous Chronicle* (un proyecto de investigación que uno de nosotros ayudó a fundar), demostramos que la resistencia organizada en las cárceles constituye un movimiento continuo capaz de hacer ingobernables los centros penitenciarios. Concluimos con un llamado a los geógrafos abolicionistas y a otros académicos y activistas para que integren los análisis de la resistencia de los presos y detenidos en sus marcos teóricos y reevalúen sus prioridades estratégicas. Si bien una estrategia

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insurreccional puede no ser la única ni siempre la más eficaz para dismantelar las cárceles, sí representa una estrategia potente y constante que muchos presos y detenidos eligen emplear para enfrentarse al sistema penitenciario en Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave

abolición, insurrección, anarquismo, prisión, geografía penitenciaria

Introduction

On the evening of 12 June 2025, people waiting to see their loved ones outside Delaney Hall, an immigrant detention center in Newark, New Jersey, heard popping sounds coming from inside the facility. They soon started coughing from the tear gas wafting from the building. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) vans started zooming in and out of the driveway, and guards soon announced that visitation had been canceled due to a disturbance inside (Kaulessner and Adely, 2025).

Tensions inside had been building. Reports emerged that detainees had not been fed in over 20 h. The food, when it finally arrived, consisted of cold hot dogs and a bottle of water (Kaulessner and Adely, 2025). The administration only allowed 20 visits per day, despite having a contract to lock up as many as 1196 migrants. According to immigrant rights groups, at least 50 detainees in Unit 5 of Delaney Hall decided not to accept being treated like “animals” that evening. They fought back, eventually knocking down a shoddily constructed wall of the facility through which four detainees escaped (Eyewitness News ABC 7, 2025).

Outside activists and family members quickly amassed outside the facility. They began blocking the entrance, linking arms to prevent ICE vehicles from entering and exiting. The vehicles entering the facility were, presumably, attempting to provide back-up necessary to quell the insurgency within, so these blockades held at least the potential to provide material support that penetrated prison walls. Protesters then clashed with ICE agents who attempted to break their line.

Almost one year later, on May 22, 2026, approximately 300 detainees at Delaney launched a hunger strike and work stoppage within the facility, again inspiring supporters to gather outside to battle ICE, private GeoGroup guards, and New Jersey State Troopers. Both the strike within and the protests and uprisings on the outside continued for 10 days, again setting the high watermark for inside/outside insurgency against the carcerality of the Trump era, and perhaps beyond.

Radical political movements have long acknowledged the capacity of internal insurgencies like these to disrupt and ultimately render carceral institutions inoperable (Abolition Collective, 2018; 2020; Fire Inside Collective, 2017; Fire to the Prisons Collective, 2008: 38; Prison Research Action Project, 1976: 235–40). Yet contemporary abolitionist academic discourse in general, and abolition geography discourse

specifically, rarely mentions the role incarcerated people themselves play in seeking the destruction of the walls that confine them, as detainees in Delaney Hall literally did. Academics working in abolition studies sometimes even downplay the connection between abolition and the imminent ending of imprisonment. As “abolitionist” scholars focus on areas ever more tangentially related to incarceration, we call attention to the ongoing, vibrant social movement daily attacking prisons, jails, and detention centers from within. Although prison rebels usually do not use the term “abolition” to refer to their actions or strategy, we assert here, following and expanding Orisanmi Burton’s (2023: 6) insight about “the long Attica Revolt,” that the acts of prisoner resistance described below not only fit with an abolitionist strategy, but that such resistance *is* abolition.

In this article, we theorize this movement to begin to articulate an *insurrectionary abolitionist* framework that places the refusal, resistance, flight, and coordinated and spontaneous insurrection of incarcerated people at the center of the action. This designation builds upon the three-part typology developed by Kass and Dunlap’s (2025a; 2025b) analysis of accounts from the George Floyd rebellion, which offers a framework within abolition geography that differentiates abolitionist strategies as procedural, insurrectionary, and autonomous (see also James, 2005; Kass, 2025a; Lang, 2022). We begin by returning to W.E.B. Du Bois’s discussion of the nineteenth-century movement for the abolition of slavery, which provides the theoretical foundation for much of contemporary prison abolitionist discourse. We discuss Du Bois’s analysis of abolition democracy as a “liberal movement” before analyzing Du Bois’s own vision of how the abolition of slavery could come about. His vision was much more focused on considerations of “force or some sort of threat of force,” as prison rebel Thomas Gordon put it in the analysis he shared with one of us of what it takes to assert demands within prisons (Bloc Party, 2018).

Using theories of insurrection articulated by nineteenth- and twentieth-century anarchist movements (Batko Group, 2019; Crimethinc, 2026; Dunlap, 2020; Loadenthal, 2017), we elaborate upon a theory of insurrectionary abolition in order to show the strategic linkage between insurrectionary acts both inside and outside of prisons and the goal of an abolitionist future set by the prison abolition movement.

We draw on contemporary examples from *Perilous Chronicle*, a project that the first author of this article helped found in 2016,

which archives and documents prisoner resistance from 2010 to present. We draw upon this chronicle to argue that insurrection from within the walls of prisons, jails, and detention centers is the most active, direct, and widespread abolitionist movement in existence. *Perilous Chronicle* is the work of more than a dozen people over the course of a decade, compiling stories and refusing to let them be lost to history. As the historian of prison rebellion Berger (2014: 277) puts it, “These stories are crafted collectively and dialogically: they are the work not of one storyteller but rather of a convergence of tellers speaking through a variety of media.”

Perilous categorizes tactics of prison rebellion according to a 13-term typology, including uprisings, riots, work stoppages, food strikes, hunger strikes, commissary boycotts, fires, attacks on guards, escapes/escape attempts, petitions, hostage-taking, protests, and disturbances (*Perilous Chronicle Collective*, n.d.). Here, we focus on three main categories to discuss the concrete forms prison rebellion takes and the ways that each elaborates a strategy of insurrectionary abolitionism: strikes (which include hunger strikes, work stoppages, food strikes, commissary boycotts, and protests), uprisings (which include riots, fires, hostage-taking events, and attacks on guards), and escapes. For each event in our database, *Perilous* collects a variety of information, including date, location, facility name, jurisdiction (federal, state, municipal, private), and tactic. We gather events by using Google Alerts to track online media articles that include a variety of keywords, by combing websites and social media accounts that aggregate information on prisoner activism and rebellion, and by crowdsourcing information from a nationwide network of prisoner solidarity activists and family members.

The research parameters established by *Perilous Chronicle* focus on prisoner resistance that occurred during the period of 2010 to present in the United States and Canada. The temporal parameter is based upon the analysis that the contemporary wave of prisoner resistance is linked to cuts to state prison budgets following the economic crisis of 2008–2010 (Stark, 2018). Drawing upon an analysis of state prison budgets conducted by the Vera Institute (2017) showing that nearly half of the states in the country cut their prison budgets during the period of 2010–2015, Stark (2018) convincingly argues that states with budget cuts during that period are the key battleground states in the Nationwide Prison Strike of 2016 and 2018. This analysis draws a direct link between austerity measures within prisons and prisoner resistance. As such, the *Perilous Chronicle* research parameter begins with the 2010 Georgia prison work stoppages (which saw work stoppages in as many as eight Georgia prisons and may have been the largest prison work strike in history at that time) as the inaugural act in a wave of prisoner resistance.

As scholars who have faced repression for our political engagement (see Kass 2025a, 2025b), including felony charges and the blows of police batons, as well as various periods of incarceration (ranging from 30 h, to 4 days, to 4 years), we

draw upon our own experiences as well as decades of direct support of prisoners and their struggles to produce autoethnographically informed scholarship. As such, we are aware that the acts of resistance described below breed revanchist and repressive responses, frequently violent ones, and we do not wish to romanticize the abolitionist or revolutionary process in a way that disregards its costs. Having experienced repression, we nonetheless follow our incarcerated counterparts in seeking a strategy capable of abolishing the institution of human caging.

From dictatorship of the proletariat to abolition democracy

More than any other scholar, the roadmap for the contemporary struggle against racialized policing, the death penalty, and mass incarceration was drawn by scholar and antiprison activist Angela Davis. Davis traces the abolitionist intellectual and political lineage back to communist theorist W.E.B. Du Bois (Davis, 2005; Gilmore, 2022). In a 2005 interview, Davis drew attention to Du Bois’s concept of abolition democracy, intentionally linking the modern struggle against racialized policing, the death penalty, and mass incarceration to the movement against chattel slavery (Davis, 2005; James, 1998). In Davis’s telling, Du Bois argued that abolition involved not just the legislative prohibition against slavery or prisons but the creation of a new society with the democratic institutions necessary to support people economically and enfranchise them politically, which she says Du Bois calls “abolition democracy” (Davis, 2003; 2005: 91–92).

As others have pointed out (Lester, 2021), Davis’s deployment of Du Bois’s concept of abolition democracy may be somewhat misleading as to Du Bois’s real use of the term. Throughout his book *Black Reconstruction in America* (Du Bois, 2013/1935), Du Bois points out how, as a “liberal” movement, abolition democracy is loyal to both the sanctity of privately held property and, as he puts it, “the general dictatorship of property” and the capitalist state that enshrines it in law and defends it. As Du Bois put it, abolition democracy was a “liberal movement among both laborers and small capitalists, who united in the American Assumption, but saw the danger of slavery to both capital and labor” (1962: 184). Du Bois further indicates that, for advocates of abolition democracy, democracy was only appropriate if the capitalist class were structurally dominant. The leaders of the movement for abolition democracy, in Du Bois’s telling, “never could bring themselves to countenance the redistribution of property in land and tools,” seeking only to expropriate property in the form of slaves considered to be such by the Southern regime (Du Bois, 2013/1935).

This “liberal” position is not Du Bois’s own. For him, the slaveowner’s private property “rested in fact on no less defensible basis” than their claim to own human bodies and should have been immediately expropriated through the establishment of a “dictatorship of the proletariat” which would

“endure until the proletariat had education and experience and had taken firm control of the economic organization of the South.” This is the Marxist theory of revolution applied to Southern Reconstruction (see also Kass and Dunlap, 2025a).

In analyzing this discrepancy between Davis’s notion of abolition democracy and that of Du Bois, Quinn Lester has labeled abolition a “fundamentally contested concept,” arguing that Davis and others offer only a “thin-definition of abolition democracy” that does not fully explore the term as Du Bois intended it, nor the full implications of what it might actually, tangibly mean to abolish prisons (Connolly, 1993; Lester, 2021). This “thin-definition” of abolition has been the one that has largely taken hold among scholars, contributing both to its popularity and its gravitation away from engagement with insurrectionary contestations of police and prisons. Du Bois is much less agnostic on the subject. True abolition of slavery, for Du Bois, could only be achieved through the military force of the state (Du Bois, 2013/1935). Here, abolition is not a metaphor (Miyake, 2021), nor a scholarly method (Hamlin, 2023), nor an eventual utopian goal. It is a collective deployment of force, including violence if necessary, to concretely rearrange the spatial, economic, political, and social mechanisms that together constitute a repressive apparatus. Although art, imagination, scholarship, and many other factors are certainly involved in this transformation, none of those alone can be substituted for the forceful dismantling necessary to achieve abolition (Kass, 2025a; 2025b; Kass and Dunlap, 2025a; 2025b).

Here, in sketching the outlines of an insurrectionary theory of prison abolitionism, we adopt not Du Bois’s goals of dictatorship, but his sober analysis of force relations. The sometimes vague language of radical thinkers such as Davis (2005) and Gilmore (2007; 2022)—and the liberal language of many of their followers—has established a foundational lack of clarity within academic abolitionist discourse about the force needed to actually abolish prisons, as well as which subjects are best positioned to do so. This lack of clarity, unfortunately, has also carried over into the field of abolition geography.

Academics working within geography’s “abolitionist turn” have emphasized that “carceral abolitionists largely do not advocate tearing down prisons overnight” (Hamlin, 2023). Abolition geographies have been somewhat vaguely defined by scholars as various spatial or place-based invocations of freedom from carceral institutions, that is, “freedom as a place” (Gilmore, 2007: 227), a creative process of “making things” (Gilmore, 2022: 351) and “radical place-making” (Chavez-Norgaard et al., 2022; Heynen and Ybarra, 2021), and “a fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently” (Gilmore, 2022: 351). Abolition geographer Miyake (2021) defines abolition geographies as a transformation of carceral society which entails inscribing freedom into landscapes through the proliferation of new structures and infrastructures; social relations and cultural practices; dreams

and experiments; ontologies and practices, rooted in collective ways of being. Abolition is not a metaphor, but rather, a framework and concrete process of freedom-making through the dialectic negation of unfreedom.

Noting the manner in which abolition geographies are expanding their conceptual reach, Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo (2024a) caution that geographers have extended the concept of “the carceral” to increasingly diffuse spaces and processes at the expense of the prison itself. They call for recentering the prison in the carceral geographies literature, reasserting it as the *sine qua non* of the subfield (ibid; see also Bloch, 2024). The risk of venturing too far afield, they argue, is that the material and physical impacts of imprisonment—which they have elsewhere termed the “somatic carceral condition” (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2024b)—become obscured by abstract formulations of freedom and futurity that, however aspirational, lose contact with the lived reality of incarceration.

“In addition to abolition as a creative praxis,” notes abolition geographer Hannah Kass (2025a: 7), “it is also critical to discuss destructive praxes of abolition, wherein carceral infrastructure is destroyed or disrupted in order to clear or create space for abolitionist creativity.” Kass and Dunlap (2025a; 2025b) have previously intervened in abolition geography conversations with *Dialogues in Human Geography* forum, highlighting the diversity and interdependence of creative and destructive tactics in the antipolice George Floyd rebellion in 2020. Kass’s (2025a) work within the Stop Cop City movement has also sought to highlight how abolition geographies are forged through this interdependency of the insurrectionary, autonomous, and procedural approaches to abolition, helpfully laid out by Black studies scholar of the George Floyd rebellion Lang (2022), drawing on James (2005). Kass (2025b), Kass and Dunlap (2025a), and Dawson (2022) also show how property transgressions play a critical role in interrupting and dismantling the property protection functions of policing. We hope to further contribute to trends toward the insurrectionary within abolition geography literature and discourse.

Scholars working in disciplines outside geography have done important work documenting prison resistance, from which this article will draw. Historians and others have provided a wealth of information on historical prison riots and other forms of prisoner resistance from the first half of the twentieth century (Tepperman, 2020; Willis, 2022) and especially the period of the 1960s and 70s (Berger 2014; Berger and Losier, 2018; Burton, 2023; Thompson, 2016) as well as the 1980s and 90s (Bufkin, 2024). Sociologists have analyzed large-scale prison riots in attempts to explain the conditions that lead to these events and to derive theoretical insights from them (Goldstone and Useem, 1999; Useem, 1998; Useem and Kimball, 1987).

The limitations of traditional academic research, such as the challenges presented by institutional review boards, make it difficult for scholars to engage in collaborative

intellectual work with incarcerated people or to even do ethnographic research with incarcerated populations. This challenge provides a fruitful opportunity for disruptive innovation that transcends traditional barriers in order to do the intellectual work necessary for abolitionist scholarship. Scholars Dan Berger, Toussaint Losier, Jarrod Shanahan, Orisanmi Burton, Joy James, and members and contributors to *Abolition: A Journal of Insurgent Politics* have done essential work developing methods of engaged scholarship based on relationships of shared struggle with people in prison (Abolition Collective, 2018; 2020; Burton, 2023; Berger 2014; Berger and Losier 2018; James, 2003; 2005; Shanahan 2022) while others have developed methods of documenting the experience of incarceration autoethnographically (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2021, 2024c, 2025a, 2025b; Kass, 2025a; Olivares-Pelayo, 2023; Walker, 2016) and through coauthorship with currently incarcerated scholars (Xinachтли and Ilyés, 2025).

From abolition democracy to insurrectionary abolition

Here, we define insurrection as an act of direct, combative, and usually collective resistance to a structure of authority, exploitation, domination, or coercion. This definition expands the traditional dictionary definition that specifies the target of an insurrectionary act as “established authority or governmental restraint” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) to include the more diffuse apparatuses of social control that inspire insurrectionary responses.

Insurrectionary theory, as we develop it here, has its roots in nineteenth- and twentieth-century anarchism (Cornell, 2016), as well as what James (2005) has called insurrectionary resistance to (neo)slavery in the United States. In its most basic formulation, insurrectionary theory posits the strategic importance of direct, conflictual, collective, and combative attacks against representatives, property, or other features of repressive power or governance that a movement, group, or other social force is seeking to pressure, transform, abolish, or destroy. Expanding upon the dictionary definition of “insurrection” as “an incipient or limited rebellion” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.), insurrectionary theory also considers smaller revolts against those structures as effective means by which to bring about larger revolutionary social transformation (Batko Group, 2019; Cornell, 2016; Crimethinc, 2026; Dunlap, 2020; Kass, 2025b; Kass and Dunlap, 2025a; Loadenthal, 2017; Weir, 2020).

Insurrectionary anarchist theorists have developed three core tenets of their framework: (1) Permanent conflictuality—the strategic importance of an oppositional movement or force remaining in a conflictual posture and consistently engaged in attacking its enemy without engaging in mediation, bargaining, or compromise; (2) Autonomy and self-activity—the rejection of mediating bodies such as parties, official structured organizations, NGOs, or unions and the rejection of any such representatives or specialists; and (3)

Organization as attack—the embrace of only those organizational forms that further the conflictual engagement with the state, as opposed to organizational forms that are built up and carried on as an end in themselves, which insurrectionists reject as “organizational fetishism” (Batko Group, 2019; Weir, 1988).

Combining insurrectionary theory with abolitionist theory means grounding the creative, place-making strategies of abolitionism with the sober analysis of force relations they will need to ever become material realities. Absent this combative grounding, visions of abolitionist alternatives are no more than intellectual fantasies, disconnected from the friction necessary to generate new truth. Insurrectionary theory posits conflict as a generative process by which new structures are brought to life only as the old ones are negated. Direct, physical confrontation against repressive power is the manner in which abolitionist visions are innovated, tested, and brought to life (see Kass and Dunlap, 2025a; Kass, 2025a). This framework also offers a way to think about what kinds of conflictual activity advance an abolitionist struggle and which (such as fights between groups of prisoners in which force is directed horizontally rather than against the system of incarceration and its representatives) do not.

While specific instances of prisoner resistance described below may not fit with each tenet of insurrectionary theory as outlined above, we argue that as a movement, contemporary prisoner resistance foregrounds a consistently conflictual, autonomous, and reflexively organized abolitionist praxis built upon a generations-long lineage of struggle (Berger, 2014; Berger and Losier, 2018; Burton, 2023) that has updated and adapted itself to the new terrain of the modern carceral environment.

Insurrectionary abolition from the inside

Protests, attacks, strikes, and uprisings, defining forces of all carceral environments, largely go undocumented and are quickly forgotten by history. They are rarely studied by scholars and are not systematically tracked and documented by any governmental or civic body. The US Department of Justice tracks certain acts of rebellion by prisoners through a criminological lens, periodically counting murders, assaults, and other violent incidents (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021; Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2025). Scholars have done some tracking of major prison riots (Useem and Piehl, 2006), but there are no other scholars in any discipline nor any government agencies attempting to comprehensively track and document prisoner-led protest movements.

Perilous Chronicle has spent the past decade compiling a chronicle of prisoner protest during the time period of 2010 to present. The events highlighted below focus on the contemporary era documented by *Perilous*. We highlight three major categories of insurrectionary abolition tactics that arise from the dataset: strikes/protests, uprisings, and escapes.

Although prisoners who use these tactics often explain their actions as originating in reaction to some grievance or as an attempt to ameliorate some condition of confinement, we read them, in aggregate, as an actively unfolding abolitionist praxis that threatens the existence of systems of human caging. In doing so, we make two main arguments. First, following Burton, we argue that attempts to ameliorate particularly egregious conditions of confinement constitute merely the antiprison movement's "minimum demands" (Burton, 2023) and should not be taken as an indication that prisoners therefore lack a more ambitious anticolonial or revolutionary horizon for their collective struggle. Second, while acknowledging that not all of the incarcerated people whose actions are discussed below acted in an effort to negate the existence of prisons, or even of the specific carceral institution they were locked up in, we nonetheless argue that the actions described here, analyzed collectively as a movement, operationalize an insurrectionary abolitionist strategy that holds the potential of making prisons inoperable, if not obsolete. We believe this to be both true and strategically relevant to abolitionists, whether or not incarcerated rebels see it that way. This analysis reflects the reality that incarcerated people hold heterogeneous worldviews and avoids the simplistic assumption, too common among abolitionist scholars and activists, that just because someone is incarcerated, they are necessarily against prisons. Therefore, we simultaneously seek to highlight the ongoing theorization around dismantling prisons going on within prisons while also avoiding the simplistic trap of homogenizing and, therefore, dehumanizing incarcerated people.

We note that our typology of resistance tactics does not include many forms of resistance that are not included in the *Perilous Chronicle* and which never make the news because they remain below the threshold of disruption that triggers reporting. These include forms of "soft resistance," which push back against prison authority, mostly without breaking rules (Crewe and Laursen, 2026), as well as "everyday resistance" including slowdowns, noncooperation, and avoidance (Scott, 1985), and clandestine forms of resistance through which incarcerated people subvert prison authority but are never caught.

Strikes/protests

Strikes are the most common form of prisoner rebellion. Strikes encompass hunger strikes (in which prisoners refuse to eat at all), food strikes (in which they refuse to accept food trays), work stoppages, and commissary boycotts. Hunger strikes and food strikes cause economic and operational disruption by forcing prison administrations to document the strike (usually only after 72 h or nine refused meals) (ICE, 2025: 108), by triggering mandatory medical procedures after a required length of time, and because frequently outsourced meal providers are paid by the number of trays served and experience economic losses when

prisoners refuse meals. Commissary boycotts have a similar economic impact. In prisons, jails, and detention centers, which are structured around the tightly operationalized provision or denial of incarcerated peoples' biological existence (Bufkin, 2024), a refusal to participate in those operations in any way constitutes a disruption of the structure's functionality, while also demonstrating a collective capacity to act in opposition to the prison administration's desires—the very existence of which constitutes a threat to the prison's ability to continue to reproduce itself. Our argument here is not that hunger strikes or food strikes constitute an insurrectionary act in and of themselves, but that as methods of making prisons inoperable, they are better understood through a framework of insurrectionary abolitionism rather than a form of proceduralism (see James, 2005; Kass and Dunlap, 2025a; Kass, 2025a; Lang, 2022).

Protests are similar to strikes in that they require the unification of prisoners around shared grievances and involve refusal of participation in the operation of the facility. Protests frequently take the form of sit-ins, in which prisoners sit down in the prison yard, common area, or other area of the prison and refuse to leave. For example, prisoners classified as female at the Arizona State Prison Complex (ASPC)-Perryville in Goodyear, Arizona, engaged in a collective protest in August 2023 when prison guards ordered them to shut their cell doors amid a heatwave that saw cell temperatures reaching as high as 100 degrees, according to people incarcerated there (Stapleton, 2023). The prisoners refused to do so, collectively engaging in a protest that threatened the fragile balance of power upon which the prison relies.

The acoustic environment of a prison can be an additional means for a group of prisoners to collectively take action upon the prison administration (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo 2025). For example, prisoners will bang on cell doors, food trays, bunks, sinks, and plumbing for hours at a time, creating a synchronized sonic assault which is carried by the ventilation systems and reverberates through entire housing units. Prisoners call this tactic "banging them out," as it recruits the physical bodies of guards and administrators into the protest, breaking the rhythm of sleep throughout the night shift and disrupting the administrative cadence of the institution. In contrast to a hunger strike, which may take days before being registered in mandatory documentation, banging has an instantaneous effect on operations. Also, unlike a riot, which would invite massive use of force from the administration, banging exists in a gray area where administrators find it difficult to suppress the activity without escalating the situation. The sonic attack is outside the procedural grievances through which prison administrators habitually interpret prisoner action and therefore makes the emotional world of the prison unmanageable without destruction. A sonic protest involving approximately 300 ICE detainees occurred at Winn Correctional Center in Louisiana in 2020, which banged on their food trays and cell doors for hours and painted a banner with the word "freedom" (Fatica, 2020a).

Other notable protests include the sit-down strike of approximately 40 prisoners at the ASPC-Lewis, who refused to leave the dining hall after the kitchen workers were replaced en masse with scabs (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2013), the protest at Cibola County Correctional Center in New Mexico, when a large number of prisoners refused to leave the yard for over 12 h (KOAT Action News, 2013), the mass suicide threat at Etowah County Jail, which involved immigrant detainees climbing up on a ledge, tying bedsheets around their necks, and threatening to jump (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2020f), the protest at the Charles Egeler Reception and Guidance Center in Michigan, in which about 40 prisoners refused to leave the dining hall to call attention to conditions (Noll and Topp, 2020), the mass refusal of prisoners at Airway Heights Correctional Center in Washington in January 2021 to participate in a COVID-related transfer they believed to be unsafe (Mercer 2021b), a sit-in protest among ICE detainees at California City ICE Detention Center in September 2025 (California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice, 2025) and a protest among dozens of immigrant detainees at Bluebonnet immigrant detention center in 2025, who used their bodies to spell out the letters “S-O-S” in the prison yard as a media drone was flying by Cooke and Hesson (2025).

Of the general category of tactics we are calling strikes/protests, hunger strikes are by far the most common. Although most carceral institutions are legally obligated to document refused meals, many hunger strikes are never documented because they do not reach the minimal thresholds discussed above. Nonetheless, incarcerated people, their loved ones, and supporters rarely use the same juridical framework to discuss hunger strikes as prison administrators do. Instead, they credit a collective act as a hunger strike when prisoners refuse even one meal, especially when they do so in concert across a cell block, larger unit, facility, or in the rare events in which such strikes spread throughout a state’s prison system, as they did during the statewide hunger strikes that occurred in California in 2011, which involved as many as 7000 prisoners at its height (Lovett 2011, Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity, n.d.) and again in 2013 (Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity n.d.). More than anything, a hunger strike is an act of coordinated refusal, a demonstration of collective power.

Other notable hunger strikes since 2010 include the hunger strikes at Guantanamo Prison in 2013 and Menard Correctional Center in Illinois in 2014 (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2014) and 2015a (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2015b), the hunger strike at the Eloy Detention Center in Central Arizona that involved over 300 immigrant detainees in 2015 (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2015a), the #FreedomGiving hunger strikes on the day before Thanksgiving, 2015 carried out by Southeast Asian immigrant detainees that spread to six ICE detention centers in California, Alabama, Colorado, and Texas (RT, 2015; Michaels, 2015), the repeated strikes at Northwest

Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2020a; Seawood and Villatoro, 2021), which supporters claim number in the hundreds (La Resistencia, n.d.), the 2016 hunger strike among immigrant mothers detained with their children at Berks County Family Residential Center in Pennsylvania (Foley, 2016), the strike at Essex County Correctional Facility in Newark, New Jersey on March 17, 2020, that marked the beginning of the wave of COVID protest behind bars (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2020e), the Black August hunger strike among Haitian immigrants at Pine Prairie ICE Processing Center in Louisiana in August 2020 (Fatica, 2020a), the strike involving 350 detainees at Stewart Detention Center in Georgia in March 2020 (Perilous Chronicle Collective 2020c), the strike at the Hudson County Corrections and Rehabilitation Center, in Kearny, New Jersey, in March 2020, the strike at Adelanto ICE Processing Center in March 2019 (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2019) and April 2020 (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2020d), the coordinated strike at two prisons in Saskatchewan, Canada in January 2021 (Stadnyk, 2021), the strike at the Santa Rita County Jail in January 2022 (Oakland Abolition and Solidarity, 2022), the December 2023–January 2024 hunger strike against long-term solitary confinement at Red Onion State Prison (Oakland Abolition and Solidarity, 2024), the strike at the new California City Immigrant Detention Center in September 2025 (California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice, 2025), and the strike among female prisoners at Perryville Correctional in February 2026 (Law, 2026).

Work stoppages, or work strikes, or “shutdowns” as prisoners in Alabama who promote the tactic call them (Kimble 2026), have been promoted by incarcerated antiprison activists as a direct response to the condition of “prison-slavery” which they use to draw an historical trajectory from chattel slavery to the modern condition of incarceration (Free Alabama Movement, 2015). Prison work stoppages are organized around the strategic insight that most prisons rely on the labor of prisoners for their basic operation—whether prisoners are paid a pittance for their jobs or do the work of reproducing prison life through unpaid work assignments (Free Alabama Movement, 2015; Wang, 2022). This is because profit-conscious private institutions or budget-conscious county, municipality, state, and federal facilities cannot afford to hire workers to fulfill all the essential functions of the facility. Without the labor of prisoners who frequently cook and serve the meals, clean the prison, run the library, cut hair, do landscaping, or maintenance work, and perform a number of other essential functions (Wang, 2022), the basic operation of prisons grinds to a halt. By withdrawing their labor, prisoners refuse to participate in the reproduction of the facility, thereby engaging in direct conflict with its basic operation.

As stated previously, the Perilous Chronicle dataset marks its beginning with the massive prison work stoppage involving thousands of prisoners that occurred in as many as eight facilities across the state of Georgia in December 2010.

Georgia prisoners were paid nothing for their labor despite being required by the prison to work. Strike organizers demanded they be paid, rather than subjected to “involuntary servitude” as well as improvement of a variety of deplorable conditions of confinement (Prison Law Blog, 2010; Wheaton, 2010). Prison guards at several facilities met the strike with brutal violence, including beating two prisoners nearly to death.

After that event, prisoners in the state of Alabama have consistently led the way in collectively refusing work in order to disrupt the operation of the facilities that encage them. Prisoners in Alabama staged work stoppages at two facilities (at William C. Holman Correctional Facility and Elmore Correctional Facility) in Alabama in January 2014 and at a third facility (St Clair Correctional Facility) in April 2014 (Eidelson, 2014; Underwood, 2014). Alabama prisoners at Elmore and Holman went on strike again in May 2016, during which at least 400 prisoners refused to report to work, and again in September 2016 in coordination with the first National Prison Strike (Davis, 2016; *Perilous Chronicle* Collective, 2016a).

Alabama prisoners innovated the work stoppage tactic, beginning in 2014, after seeing the limited success of the massive, statewide California hunger strikes of 2011 and 2013 (Free Alabama Movement, 2015). In a statement entitled *Let the Crops Rot in the Fields: A Call For New Strategy in The National Movement Against Mass Incarceration and Prison Slavery*, a group of prisoners and their supporters calling themselves the Free Alabama Movement (FAM) called for prisoners to withdraw their labor and other financial support from carceral structures in order to bring them down. Creatively linking the modern-day system of mass incarceration to chattel slavery, FAM wrote, “Let the crops rot in the field is a proven strategy that was passed down to us from our Ancestors from the slave plantations that was used to disrupt the economics of the field” (Free Alabama Movement, 2015). Free Alabama Movement was clear that the goal of the work stoppage was not to win demands but to end, or abolish, prisons as such.

Alabama prisoners again launched a work stoppage in September 2022 that led to operations of “most major male facilities” to grind to a halt (Fatica, 2022a). The strike was organized in response to a variety of collective grievances about their horrific conditions of confinement, which have been abundantly documented (Fatica, 2023). The strike drew the participation of an estimated 80% of the state’s prisoners, or as many as 12,800 people (Fatica, 2022a). Kinetik Justice, an Alabama prisoner whose legal name is Robert Earl Council, explained to one of us in an interview at the time his reasons for striking:

It makes no sense for us to continue to contribute to our own oppression. We finance our own incarceration through our free labor and spending every dime we get in they canteens and so forth. It is our money and our family’s money that is used to keep us incarcerated and oppressed like this (Fatica, 2022a).

Although strikes within carceral environments are forms of disruptive direct action rather than procedural tactics, they generally remain peaceful and are disruptive even while remaining largely orderly. As a part of the subtle balance of power that exists within carceral environments between groups of prisoners and their loved ones, prison guards, staff, and administration, incarcerated people use strikes as a form of escalation when their grievances are not met through requests and petitions. Sometimes, when prisoners are sufficiently organized and unified in their shared grievances to pull off a strike and administrators are arrogant enough to ignore their demands, strikes escalate into protests or even uprisings.

Uprisings

According to *Perilous Chronicle*, an uprising is

A collective act of rebellion in which a group of prisoners act in a disruptive way. Uprisings exceed the usual scope of a protest and are often destructive, violent, chaotic, or unpredictable. They are also clear collective attempts at expressing either specific grievances within the context of incarceration (food issues, rights-based issues, working conditions, etc.) or with incarceration as such. They often follow a series of protests or other attempts at addressing grievances and can involve a stage of relative calm in which prisoners make plans together, issues demands, call the media, or take other actions to further their cause (*Perilous Chronicle*, n.d.).

Uprisings are the most destructive, costly, disruptive, and impactful acts incarcerated people can engage in. As such, they also usually result in the harshest repression. Prison uprisings can cost already cash-strapped prison systems hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars in damage and overtime pay. They can even result in the closure of facilities or the cancellation of contracts with private prison corporations, as occurred with the State of Arizona’s contract with the Management and Training Corporation for the Arizona State Prison at Kingman in 2015 (Olgin, 2015). They also draw unwanted scrutiny to carceral structures that thrive when they are ignored by the public and the governmental structures that ostensibly oversee them.

When met with simultaneous pickets, protests, or uprisings led by supporters and loved ones on the outside of the facility as well—as happened at Delaney Hall, discussed in the above introduction—this simultaneous need to control territory both inside a facility as well as on its perimeter quickly exceeds the facility’s defensive capacity, resulting in the deployment of special response teams and law enforcement from both local and neighboring jurisdictions. In addition to coordinating their protests with outside supporters, prisoners sometimes explicitly link their resistance inside the facility to political events on the outside. At the Kinross Correctional Facility in September 2016, prisoners staged a protest in coordination

with a call for a national prison strike that resulted in a wave of strikes, protests, and uprisings in prisons across the United States. The protest at Kinross quickly escalated into a full-scale uprising. During the protest, prisoners chanted “no justice, no peace,” a chant widely used during the uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri, in response to the murder of Michael Brown, and the resulting wave of Black Lives Matter protests across the country (Michigan Abolition and Prisoner Solidarity, n.d.). Similarly, during the Mother’s Day riot at the Tecumseh State Correctional Institution in Nebraska in May 2015, prisoners chanted “hands up, don’t shoot,” a slogan popularized by protesters and combatants during the Ferguson uprising the year before to call attention to the fact that Brown was shot by Officer Darren Wilson while his hands were in the air (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2015c). During the 2017 uprising at the James T. Vaughn Correctional Center in Smyrna, Delaware, which is one of the most significant prison uprisings within our scope of research, prisoners called the media and explained that their protest was partly inspired by the election of Donald Trump as president and the right-wing policies he was enacting (Thompson, 2017).

Strikes and protests frequently result in repression from prison administrators, including rule infractions resulting in solitary confinement, loss of privileges, and retaliatory transfers, but rarely new criminal charges. Prison administrators would far prefer to handle such disciplinary infractions internally through reclassification to higher security units. Uprisings, however, almost always result in immediate Special Response Team suppression through force, followed by even more drastic disciplinary repression, as well as criminal charges filed through the county prosecutor that add prison time for the participants.

While frequently spontaneous, uprisings are not always mere acts of aggression or anger as they are frequently painted in the media, and by politicians and prison administrations. According to Thomas Gordon, who participated in the Vaughn uprising described above, uprisings are often a strategic deployment of force rather than an irrational act of lashing out. Gordon told one of the authors in a phone interview in 2018, “Sadly in an institution that is run solely off of fear and solely off of aggression and solely off of violence, the only way that they’ll listen is if you, in return, apply some sort of force or some sort of threat of force yourself. And that’s just the nature of the beast within the present institution because they respect nothing else. They respect nothing else” (Bloc Party, 2018). Gordon’s insistence is not a lone militant voice within an otherwise peaceful movement. It is the ordinary language of prisoner resistance as it unfolds every day inside facilities across the country.

Dwayne Staats, another prisoner who was involved in the uprising at Vaughn, explained that despite the harm it caused, the uprising was a necessary deployment of counterbalancing force in the face of a prison system that refused to hear their

demands in any other way. As Staats put it, “While critics question the methods we employed to carry out our mission, none of them—not even in hindsight—has offered any viable alternative that would have urged higher-ups to address concerns (Cherry, 2019).”

Uprisings are usually called “riots” or “disturbances” by prison administrations and media and often are conflated with brawls or other prisoner-on-prisoner violence. Some notable prison uprisings since 2010 include those at Tecumseh Correctional in Nebraska on Mother’s Day, 2015 (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2015c), during which prisoners used office phones to call their mothers and the media, and again almost exactly 2 years later in 2017 (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2017b), at Kinross Correctional Facility in Michigan in 2016 (Michigan Abolition and Prisoner Solidarity, n.d.), at the Saskatchewan Penitentiary in Canada in 2016, during which prisoners caused an estimated \$3.5 million in damage to the facility (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2016b), at Holman Correctional in Alabama in March 2016 (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2016c; 2016d), at the James T. Vaughn Correctional Center in 2017 (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2017a; Thompson, 2017), at ASPC-Yuma in 2018, during which a prisoner named Adam Coppa was shot in the back and killed by a prison guard (Jenkins, 2018; Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2018), the uprising in response to the COVID pandemic at Northwestern New Mexico Correctional Center in Grants in March 2020 (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2020b), at Ellsworth Correctional Center and Lansing Correctional Facility, both in Kansas (Associated Press, 2020; Stavola, 2020) in April 2020, at the Krome Detention Center in Miami-Dade County, Florida in April 2020 (Madan 2020), the series of uprisings in the St Louis City Jail in December 2020 (Byers, 2021), February and April 2021 (Mercer 2021b) and twice in July 2021 (Byers, 2021), the ASPC-Perryville uprising (which escalated immediately from a protest to an uprising) in August 2023, and at Delaney Hall in Newark, New Jersey, in June 2025, as discussed in the introduction.

What these uprisings refuse is the posture of petition that abolition democracy inherits from its nineteenth-century liberal lineage. When prisoners participate in an uprising, they do not ask for mediation. Instead, they impose costs. This is permanent conflictuality in its most elemental form (Weir, 1988), an oppositional stance that stays in attack rather than settling into negotiation. The absence of visible leadership in these events is not a defect of organization but autonomy and self-activity as the Batko Group (2019) frames it; a rejection of the representational structures through which procedural abolitionism routes its claims.

Escapes

As imprisoned Black Panther and Black Liberation Army soldier Russel Maroon Shoatz put it, “almost from the first importation of enslaved Africans, there developed a tradition of flight from slavery: Africans ran away to the forests, swamps and highlands” (Shoatz, 2010). We extend this

assertion to posit that from the first invention of a cage, there developed a tradition of flight from them. That tradition remains alive and well among those incarcerated in prisons, jails, camps, detention centers, cop cars, medical units, and anywhere else designed to cage human life anywhere in the world. Escape from modern-day carceral environments is an act of insurrectionary abolition with deep roots extending back to escape from slave plantations and the establishment of maroon communities throughout the Americas (Shoatz, 2010).

An escape is “an event in which a group of two or more prisoners either successfully leave the grounds of the facility at which they are incarcerated *or* an event in which prisoners plan to execute such an escape but are caught in the process”. If the core of incarceration is the imposition of control and limitation upon the mobility of the incarcerated person, the escape is the most fundamental negation of that relation. At the same time, the escape usually leaves the carceral structure and its agents entirely intact, and the escaped person is almost always recaptured within a day or two of the escape. In this way, it is the most fundamental, but often the least effective, form of insurrectionary attack on the prison system and its logic, given the present configuration of carceral society in which the logic of carcerality is not limited to the carceral institution but continues to confront prisoners even after they flee the prison grounds (Fontes, 2022).

Escape attempts are most common among prisoners confined to county, city, and municipal jails, as well as lower security facilities such as juvenile detention centers and work camps. Still, of the 10 escapes and serious escape attempts documented by *Perilous Chronicle* during the first 90 days of the COVID uprisings, five occurred in state prisons (Perilous Chronicle Collective, 2020e).

On August 13, 2023, an Alabama prisoner serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole staged an elaborate escape attempt. He locked a group of guards in an office, took a gun that a guard was illicitly concealed carrying within the prison, and tried to flee. After cutting himself on razor wire and realizing he was more likely to get shot than to get free, he returned to his dorm, where he recorded his testimony on a Facebook Live video. Shaw explained, in far greater detail than most prisoners ever have the opportunity to, his motivations for acting (Fatica, 2023).

“Told y’all I’m leaving this bitch one way or another bro,” said Shaw. “I got to leave here. Shit. This shit be feeling like it be closing in... They just want me to die a slow and horrible death. In a cage. Fuck that. No” (ibid.). Shaw goes on to communicate his theoretical framework for a fundamental negation of incarceration that refuses the logic of negotiation, discourse, and the very juridical frameworks upon which the system of incarceration is based. According to Shaw, the abject conditions of his confinement, and his own near-certain trajectory toward premature death as a result, are justification enough for him to seek out lines of flight that he hopes might result in freedom for himself and others.

Conclusion

In this article, we show that abolitionist rebellion is a sustained struggle from within the walls of prisons. Over the course of 2010 to the present day, prisoners’ direct actions toward prison abolition have threatened the operation and existence of the prisons in which they are incarcerated. If, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007: 227) claims, “freedom is a place” constituted by socio-spatial relations and processes of resistance to unfreedom—by abolition geographies—then we must take the abolition geographies formed by incarcerated people within carceral spaces seriously. Prisoner resistance shows that abolitionist struggles cannot be adequately understood, recognized, and encapsulated by vague descriptions and definitions of abolition through a geographic lens. The abolitionist struggle must be specified and identified by prisoners’ hostile action against prisons. These actions are not symbolic but existential—for both prisoners and prisons alike.

We demonstrate several instances of abolition forged using direct action tactics, which we broadly encapsulate as an insurrectionary theory of abolition. We categorize tactics, gleaned from the 2010 to present *Perilous Chronicle* archive of prison resistance, into three overarching tactical categories: strikes/protests, uprisings, and escapes. Within strikes/protests, we show that hunger strikes, food strikes, work stoppages, and commissary boycotts wielded by prisoners attack the operation of prisons by disrupting them economically. These tactics use economic losses and administrative procedures against prisons in order to undermine or stop their operations and disrupt the everyday forms of violence they entail. Uprisings also attack prisons’ economic viability, sometimes through the termination of contracts with private prison corporations or through millions of dollars in losses in the form of destroyed prison infrastructure, while simultaneously drawing attention from the outside to dehumanizing conditions on the inside. Finally, we highlight escapes and escape attempts as significant tactics of abolition from prisoners—prisoners directly negating the carceral condition by freeing themselves. While escape is often not a sustainable or effective tactic given the current carceral condition of society, this tactic still deserves recognition as a common form of direct action toward prison abolition.

These tactics force a revision of how abolition geographies are conceptualized. Prisoner uprisings do not “inscribe freedom onto the landscape” of the prison (Miyake, 2021) or add “a fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently” (Gilmore, 2022). Rather, they subtract governability from the prison. Destructive and disruptive praxes carve out the interior space in which any other form of abolitionist creativity might become possible (Kass, 2025a). Although prisoners stand up for each other, form networks of mutual aid, and innovate subversive spatial practices within the rigidities of carceral space, radical abolitionist place-making inside a normally functioning prison is a fiction. For abolition to become possible from the perspective of the inside, the prison has to first be made to falter, then to fail, then to close. To do

just that, incarcerated people across the country are both theorizing and enacting directly combative and deeply impactful radical abolitionist praxis, and they show no signs of stopping. The only question is whether abolitionist geographers will join them.

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Ethical considerations

This article is based on archival data. There are no human participants in this article and informed consent is not required.

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Data availability statement

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

Note

1. This article's title is an allusion to a common anarchist slogan, "solidarity means attack," first used by Animal Liberation Front political prisoner Craig "Crittter" Marshall in a 2003 article in the Anarchist Black Cross newsletter Break the Chains (Break the Chains Collective, 2003). The slogan was later used by the Conspiracy Cells of Fire, Imprisoned Member's Cell to communicate a similar message (2014).

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