Organized Inside and Out: The Angola Special Civics Project and the Crisis of Mass Incarceration
Lydia Pelot-Hobbs
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Torture, Trauma, Violence, and Self-Defense

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The Angola Special Civics Project and the Crisis of Mass Incarceration

Lydia Pelot-Hobbs

During the 1980s and 1990s the U.S. prison system expanded at an unprecedented rate, with the South emerging as the region with the highest incarceration rate in the nation. This article charts how prisoners at the nation’s largest maximum-security prison, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, commonly referred to as Angola, leveraged this moment of crisis to collectively organize for freedom through the Angola Special Civics Project by using a combination of research, political education, electoral organizing, and coalition building. This article contends that their organizing should be conceptualized as a form of prison abolitionist reforms to be learned from today.

Keywords: Louisiana State Penitentiary–Angola, mass incarceration, prison abolition, prison reform, social movements

Introduction

On the banks of the Mississippi River near the Louisiana–Mississippi border sits the penal plantation Angola. Unknown numbers of humans captured from Western Africa were enslaved to work this 18,000-acre plantation throughout the early years of Louisiana’s history. Following emancipation, generations of unfree (mostly) Black men worked under the state’s newly created convict-leasing system at Angola. After the state’s politicians recognized the enormous profit to be made by continuing to work Black bodies in the growing of cotton and other crops, the state purchased the plantation, turning it into...
the Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1901.\textsuperscript{1} Over a century later, the prison, still referred to as Angola, has become the largest maximum-security prison in the nation housing over 5,000 people.\textsuperscript{2} Having earned the status as the bloodiest prison in America multiple times, Angola has continually operated in a series of crises since its inception.

In her book *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore outlines that crisis is the result of social formations unable to be reproduced by existing social relations and structures. This instability is neither inherently positive nor negative but can only be fixed through the struggle of systematic change. Such systematic changes can take innumerable forms from the implementation of an authoritarian state by government actors to grassroots organizers pressuring for a new political-economic order.\textsuperscript{3} One instance where the systematic crisis of racial capitalism seeks to resolve itself is through the production and reproduction of the prison industrial complex. While the prison industrial complex serves as such a “fix,” it is simultaneously in its own state of crisis. This ongoing crisis becomes visible by manifesting at multiple points such as state interventions, conflicts between and among state actors and private interests, and internal strife of prison populations. For centuries, Angola has served as a symbolic and material space onto which these crises emerge and are challenged.

While Angola has often been exceptionalized in the national imaginary, it more accurately can be described as exemplary of the conditions of mass incarceration in the United States. Numerous scholars have pointed to how the prison system has been utilized to stabilize racialized structures of power during moments of political economic shifts and destabilization.\textsuperscript{4} Following Reconstruction, rhetoric and policies grounded in the South but dispersed nationwide strategically intertwined the racialization and criminalization of Black people to regulate and control Black communities and reassert white political and economic power.\textsuperscript{5} Moreover, the unprecedented rise in incarceration during the second half of the 20th century disproportionately imprisoned people of color and continues to be anchored in anti-Black racism.\textsuperscript{6} Scholars have argued this racialized structure of mass incarceration was due to the targeting of communities of color to break Black Power and Third World Liberationist movements,\textsuperscript{7} along with a restructuring economic system that disinvested in urban communities in tandem with criminalizing working class people of color.\textsuperscript{8} Soon, millions of people found themselves ensnared in this seemingly ever-extending apparatus while the places they call home have been ruptured by such forced removals in the name of public safety and order.
Given the deeply political nature of the rise of mass incarceration, it is not surprising that an array of grassroots organizations have emerged to contest the U.S. carceral state in recent years. As people have increasingly recognized how mass incarceration serves as a central linchpin to the production and reproduction of white supremacy and capitalist exploitation, there has been a renewal of political energy that has invigorated antiprison organizing as a key site for racial and economic justice movements. Yet, antiprison activists have been confronted by the conundrum that so often the reforms they have won have been utilized to further expand the prison system. This reality has led to the emergence of prison abolition as a strand of antiprison activism, a liberatory movement that seeks to eradicate not only the prison industrial complex but to also make the idea of policing and prisons unthinkable in today’s society. Still, an abolitionist politic does not necessitate the abandonment of work for prison reforms that make concrete improvements in the lives of incarcerated people. Rather, antiprison activists are faced with the question: How do we continue to work for reforms that center abolition as a goal rather than reform being an end in itself? Or, in other words, how do we as antiprison activists organize reforms that weaken rather than strengthen the prison industrial complex?

Too often questions about the direction of antiprison activism have focused on the ideas of those outside of prison walls without considering the vantage point of those who organize behind bars. Although Louisiana claims the title for having the highest incarceration rate in the country, there has been little research into the state’s rich and textured history of prisoner organizing. In response to the shifting terrain of the Louisiana carceral landscape, imprisoned activists formed the Angola Special Civics Project, also referred to as the Civics Project, during the 1980s to organize for structural prison reform. Incarcerated activists at Angola drew from their own experiences to develop new analyses about the changing penal system. In particular, they identified the key sites of power in the expansion of Louisiana’s prisons to help them build strategic campaigns for freedom. Through coalitional politics, the Civics Project sought to create new mechanisms for release while also building a broader movement for prison reform. While drawing on the longer history of prisoners who contested their confinement at Angola, the Civics Project departed from earlier incarcerated organizers who primarily focused on changing conditions within Angola to focusing their energies on finding avenues out of the prison altogether. By understanding how incarcerated men at the largest maximum-security prison in the nation, in a state with the highest incarceration rate in the world, collectively organized
themselves and built coalitions for prison reform, we can glean new insights for the possibilities of antiprison activism.

This article seeks to grapple with these questions through empirical research of the Angola Special Civics Project. Utilizing a combination of oral history interviews and archival research of the uncensored prisoner publication *The Angolite*, this article excavates this overlooked story of incarcerated activism during the rise of the Louisiana penal system. The story of the Civics Project disrupts the narrative that the rise of the carceral state went largely unnoticed during the 1980s and 1990s, an era often framed as a time of retreat for social movements. Scholarship on antiprison activism has primarily focused on movements of the 1960s and 1970s or on the emergence of recent campaigns and actions, bypassing the very era that witnessed the boom of the U.S. carceral state. In reality there were rumblings from the inside of the prison walls that identified and contested the early manifestations of the growing U.S. penal system. By examining the particular history of the Angola Special Civics Project, we can develop a deeper analysis of how crises can present a political opportunity that provides conditions of possibility even, or perhaps particularly, in seemingly unlikely places.

Social movement scholars have illuminated how shifts in the environment can create opportunities for successful political mobilization. Doug McAdams argues in his seminal book *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* that “any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured occasions a shift in political opportunities.”¹⁰ While Adams primarily focuses on the role of political openings in creating the possibility or activism, other social movement scholars have documented that political threats can also be mobilizing, particularly when coupled with openings. This dialectical process allows for new possibilities in the political landscape.¹¹ This does not mean it was inevitable the Angola Special Civics Project would form at the moment it did, but that a series of structural events provided an opening that was leveraged by those held captive in Angola to wage a collective struggle against the expansion of the Louisiana penal system, and for the goal of freedom.

**From Crisis to Opportunity**

During the 1970s and 1980s, law and order politics swept the nation. Following Nixon’s prioritization of criminal justice as a national political issue in response to Black and Third World liberationist moments, states began enacting a series of draconian laws aimed at locking up
more people for longer sentences.\textsuperscript{12} Louisiana followed suit, expanding its penal system on a scale unmatched in its history during the 1970s and 1980s. This included lengthening prison sentences, restricted criteria for parole and clemency, reduction of prisoners ability’s to earn good time off their sentences, and the elimination of parole for entire classes of prisoners.\textsuperscript{13} These moves fueled hopelessness within Angola as scores upon scores of men, who previously believed they would eventually be released, began to fear dying behind prison walls. However, rather than passively accept their fate, the threat of life imprisonment led to the development of prisoners’ collective resistance.\textsuperscript{14}

This period also brought a key political opening for the men inside seeking new methods of release. Sociologist James M. Jasper has articulated that “opportunities matter most to movements that have few of them, that are severely repressed.”\textsuperscript{15} As incarcerated individuals, the men of the Angola Special Civics Project were highly regulated; opportunities taken for granted by the outside world had enormous impact for their organizing. The central opening was the appointment of a series of reformist corrections officials in response to the mismanagement of Angola during the 1960s and early 1970s. Similar to the history of prisoner organizing in Massachusetts at Walpole, reformist administrators created a climate tolerant to prisoner organizing.\textsuperscript{16} Prisoners were given access to free presses and allowed to hold large events and meetings with outside supporters. In time, these political openings were taken advantage of by incarcerated activists at Angola strategizing for a way out of prison.

Historically, while the Louisiana prison system was continually under scrutiny for its corruption and ill management throughout the twentieth century, it was unusually lenient in the release opportunities afforded its prisoners. From 1886 until 1914, individuals with life sentences were eligible for release after serving fifteen years in prison. In 1916, the legislature created the Board of Parole and gave it the authority to parole lifers after a minimum of five years in prison.\textsuperscript{17} Then, beginning in 1926, the Board of Pardons automatically reviewed all people incarcerated with a life sentence for a pardon after serving ten and a half years.\textsuperscript{18} Although release was conditioned on the approval by the general manager of the prison that held the individual, in practice, people at all levels of the Louisiana criminal justice system began to assume that those individuals serving life sentences with good behavior would be released under the “10/6” law.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, in a 1971 ruling converting a death row inmate’s sentence to life imprisonment, Louisiana Supreme Court Justice Joe Sanders stated that a life sentence “really means imprisonment for only ten years and six months. No true life sentence exists in Louisiana.”\textsuperscript{20} Incoming prisoners carried this understanding of the law. According to Kenneth
“Biggy” Johnston, when he was sentenced to life in prison in 1972, it was “understood that you do ten years and six months on life.”\(^{21}\) However, the political tide was rapidly shifting, and Biggy Johnston soon found himself, like thousands around him, locked away for over twenty years.\(^{22}\)

In the 1970s, the Louisiana state legislature began chipping away at what had become standard Louisiana legal practice for half a century. On June 29, 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court abolished the death penalty, voiding all death sentences across the nation. In response, the Louisiana Supreme Court resentenced all former death row prisoners to life imprisonment.\(^{23}\) In direct response, the Louisiana legislature began implementing stricter and stricter laws governing parole eligibility beginning in 1973. By 1979, the Louisiana Legislature completely repealed the “10-6 law” with retroactive effect, while also becoming one of the first states to institute life without parole, frustrating the scores of men at Angola expecting to be released after serving ten years and six months.\(^{24}\)

Inside Angola’s walls, incarcerated men began witnessing the effects of the changes to the life sentencing laws. Angola Special Civics Project co-founder Norris Henderson states that the changes were dramatic:

> By 1979, they had abolished all benefits around life sentences. No more parole, no probation, no suspension of sentence around life sentences so life actually became life. So the challenge to us now became: our numbers are growing astronomically, we just kind of went from a handful of lifers in the prison to all of a sudden “boom” everybody has life now. … Something is wrong with this picture.\(^{25}\)

When Henderson was first incarcerated in the early 1970s, he was one of a few lifers inside Angola. Within a decade the percentage of lifers inside increased exponentially. In 1972, there were only 193 men serving natural life sentences, but by 1982 those numbers had increased to 1,084.\(^{26}\) Imprisoned men recognized that the changing laws served as a political threat against them.

Legislators were not the only political officials influenced by the law and order politics sweeping the nation. During the 1980s, the issue of crime became central to gubernatorial campaigns with much attention given to the clemency process. In 1979, Republican Dave Treen was elected governor of Louisiana. Treen campaigned as being tough on crime and that he would curtail the use of pardons. As governor, Treen kept true to his word by implementing an unspoken moratorium on clemency during his first year.\(^{27}\) His record during his second year was only slightly better at having granted nine commutations.\(^{28}\) This was in sharp contrast to the previous governor, Edwin Edwards, who commuted 2,218 people between 1972 and 1980.\(^{29}\) Moreover, the parole board, appointed by Treen, created stricter guidelines to reduce the
number of paroles granted. Under these circumstance, Norris Henderson recalls, “nobody’s moving cause everybody’s following the mandate of the governor.” Quickly Angola became overcrowded. While Angolite staffers suggested alternatives to incarceration and an increase in clemencies granted to deal with this situation, Governor Treen sought to fix the situation by implementing “double-bunking,” which was housing more prisoners in cells than they were designed for. Federal courts rejected this plan, but the devaluation of prisoners’ lives under Treen’s administration was clearly evident.

During Treen’s re-election campaign against Edwin Edwards in 1983, the politicians’ different politics on clemency was in the forefront of the election. With Treen trailing Edwards in the polls, he focused his campaign on attacking Edwards’s liberal stance on clemency during his time as governor. Although Edwards ended up defeating Treen in a landslide, Treen’s focus on clemency had ripple effects beyond the election. By highlighting the clemency process during the campaign, Treen brought more visibility to the clemency process than it had ever had in Louisiana. In doing so, he made it a public litmus for other gubernatorial candidates to be measured against in future elections. The other ripple of the 1983 election had a quite different effect. For those incarcerated inside Angola, the differing clemency politics of Edwards and Treen underscored to them that tangible differences existed between Democratic and Republican administrations. This governor’s election demonstrated the material power the outcomes of state electoral politics had on their lives. Such a realization would deeply inform the strategies of the Angola Special Civics Project a few years down the road.

While the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the expansion of the Louisiana prison system, the era was also accompanied by the institutionalization of reformist corrections administrations. These officials’ tolerance of prisoners’ organizing provided a valuable political opportunity for incarcerated activists. Their actions allowed for prisoners to have connections to the outside world unimaginable in most prisons. This raises the question: how was it that a reformist administration come to reside over one of the most notorious prisons in the nation? During the early 1970s, another series of crises led to the changing of the state’s corrections department.

When Edwin Edwards entered office for his first term as governor in 1972, Angola was rife with mismanagement and corruption. He appointed Elayn Hunt as Corrections Head to clean up Angola, who in turn appointed out-of-state reformer C. Murray Henderson as warden of Angola. Edwards was pushed to appoint more reform-minded officials in 1975 when federal district courts instructed the state of Louisiana to overhaul the Department of Corrections in response to
a lawsuit by prisoners challenging conditions at Angola.\textsuperscript{38} In addition to following the regulations set in place by the court order, the administration sought greater transparency between the population of Angola and the staff. To that end, prison administrator C. Paul Phelps allowed the prisoner publication \textit{The Angolite} to run as an uncensored paper, and committed that \textit{Angolite} staff have access to the information they needed for their journalistic work.\textsuperscript{39} Moreover, prisoner organizations were allowed to have outside free people attend their meetings.\textsuperscript{40} Although Governor Treen dismissed the majority of reformist administrators while governor, once Edwards re-entered the governor’s office in 1984 reformist administrators were re-instated and previous policies were re-adopted.\textsuperscript{41} These administrations would prove to be fertile ground on which prisoners began to self-organize against the new laws by the mid-1980s.

\textbf{Collectivizing Freedom: The Angola Special Civics Project}

Faced with the changes to the Louisiana criminal legal system, the men inside Angola refused to give up their hopes for freedom. The crises produced by the expansion of the Louisiana penal system highlighted to those imprisoned at Angola the structural nature of their incarceration. While previous generations of prisoners at Angola had individually petitioned the governor and parole board for release, with those mechanisms cut off, prisoners were required to develop new strategies for release. Having the collective memory of a different era in the state’s attitude towards incarceration and believing it could change again, Angola activists formed the Angola Special Civics Project in 1986.

By the mid-1980s, despite the impact of the re-election of Edwin Edwards in 1984, times were desperate at Angola. Morale among the prisoner population had gotten so low that there was speculation that the prison was about to erupt in a riot. In the words of Norris Henderson,

\begin{quote}
All the things they measure were ripe at Angola. I mean hopelessness was there. Nobody was going home, people with long sentences. You name it. It was evident in Angola. So at this time, we, me and some other guys, started thinking about what we can do to change, \textit{not necessarily our conditions, but our circumstances} [my emphasis].\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

By this Henderson meant they should not focus on making the conditions \textit{inside} Angola better, but rather should focus on no longer being incarcerated. Lifers as a group within Angola were particularly politicized, at this time, on the need to change structures based on their shared experience not only of incarceration, but of life without
parole under the new laws. This shared experience proved crucial in their development of a collective political identity.\textsuperscript{43} Their strategic framing of the structural constraints of the new political stance necessitated collective strategies of resistance.

Lifers and jailhouse lawyers, Kenneth “Biggy” Johnston and Norris Henderson, responded to the crisis by forming the Angola Special Civics Project. The two met years earlier when Henderson was first working to overturn his wrongful conviction. Over time they built a foundation of trust not only amongst themselves but with other prisoners at Angola seeking legal support.\textsuperscript{44} This form of relationship-building proved to be fundamental in recruiting people into the Civics Project.

Having learned about prison riots that occurred in New York, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, activists inside Angola identified that after the dust had settled, at the worst the riots had brought increased repression, while at the best they brought better conditions, but either way everyone was still behind bars.\textsuperscript{45} With this knowledge, Johnston and Henderson decided to go a different route in strategizing a way out of the penitentiary. Based on their experiences at Angola under different governors’ administrations, they identified state officials, not prison administrators, as the real site of power. With the gubernatorial election on the horizon, they decided to organize their friends and families on the outside to vote as a bloc for Edwards who they perceived as most amicable to their goals. This strategy would both put a governor they viewed as more sympathetic in office while also demonstrating their political power—making it impossible for politicians to ignore their demands for reform.\textsuperscript{46}

Towards this goal, Civics Project member Checo Yancy shared the expertise he gained working for the Clerk of Court in Orleans Parish and the Election Commission. He began educating everyone in the Civics Project about electoral organizing.\textsuperscript{47} Soon, the Civics Project had mapped out the different precincts across the state and began charting the different districts where the prisoners they knew had family and friends.\textsuperscript{48} At this time the Louisiana penal system had a population of approximately 15,000 and Angola had a population of over 4,000.\textsuperscript{49} Members of the Angola Special Civics Project figured if they could get even a fraction of prisoners involved in organizing their friends and families to vote in the upcoming campaign, they could sway the election.

During August of 1987, the Angola Special Civics Project received a boost from outside allies. New Orleans organizer Ted Quant of the Loyola University Institute for Human Relations was invited to attend an Angola Special Civics Project meeting. When he walked into the meeting, the walls were covered with charts and graphs. He remembers, “they had these magnificent graphs—how much it
costs to incarcerate, how many people in prison, how many family
members, what it would mean if a certain number of those people
voted. 50 During the meeting, members got up and detailed their plan
for outside allies to organize as a bloc to flip the governor’s race, and
put prison reform on the agenda. At the end of the presentations,
Quant, deeply impressed with their strategy and organization,
decided to join them.51

With only a few months left until the election, the Angola Special
Civics Project went into high gear in its campaign. The members
focused on setting up networks outside the prison consisting of their
families and friends. From within Angola, members of the Civics
Project conducted a letter writing campaign in which they described
the issues in the upcoming election and asked their families to get
involved. 52 They met together in geographical groups across Louisiana
to set up support networks and pool resources from their home com-
communities.53 In New Orleans, Quant help coordinate family members
and friends while also reaching out to organizations and community
groups that already had relationships with currently or formerly
incarcerated people including resident council leadership from the
C.J. Peete and Lafitte housing projects, Hope House, and the Loyola
Urban Partners program.54 From both inside and outside, activists
focused not only on getting people aware of the upcoming campaign
and registered to vote, but used the moment as an opportunity to draw
attention to the social and economic costs of expanding the Louisiana
prison system while shrinking the state’s social services. Also, they
emphasized how the expansion of the prison system was dispropor-
tionately affecting Black Louisianans and the need to recognize this
issue as connected to the historical legacies of racism. They hoped this
could be a moment to catalyze people across the state to work for struc-
tural prison reform.

Throughout the process, outside allies were accountable to Civics
Project members. From the beginning the Civics Project made clear
that the people in prison should be the leadership of this movement.55
Furthermore, imprisoned leaders explained that as prisoners had
already been disempowered and silenced through the criminal legal
system; if they replicated those same dynamics through the organizing
process it would contribute to their continued subordination. Prison-
ers had identified the issues and they had envisioned the strategy—
there was no one better to lead the prisoners to freedom but them-
selves. At the same time, they articulated the need for contributions
from outsiders in solidarity with them. Being held captive inside
Angola meant they were cut off from certain information about the
outside world. Therefore, outside allies had key information to share
to strengthen the campaign. Additionally, the allies’ role was not to
indiscriminately agree with all of the incarcerated leaders’ ideas, but to work in mutual partnership in ways that pushed the group forward. Romanticizing prisoners would not contribute to their freedom.\textsuperscript{56}

To publicize the campaign, the New Orleans group of allies and the Civics Project held sister press conferences on September 22, 1987 a few weeks before the election. In the morning, the New Orleans group announced their support for the Civics Project and called for prison reform. At the conference they emphasized the structural inter-relationship between the rise of law and order politics and slashing of social services across the state.\textsuperscript{57} After the conference, they distributed thousands of leaflets outlining their strategy which included not only voting in the upcoming election but a prison reform platform of expanded parole eligibility, shorter sentences, incarceration alternatives, and educational programs geared at successful re-entry.\textsuperscript{58} That afternoon, the Angola Special Civics Project and representatives from other prisoner organizations held a press conference at Angola announcing their aim to generate a voting bloc amongst their families and friends. In their speeches, Civics Project members stated this effort would not end after this election, but would strive for a long-term statewide constituency that could effectively impact Louisiana politics.\textsuperscript{59} At neither press conference did they announce for whom they were planning to vote. Civics Project leaders recognized that based on the current tough-on-crime political climate, they would give their opponents ammunition against their favored candidate if they announced their plan too early. Hence, their outside allies kept secret who they were planning to vote for until the day of the election. Furthermore, the Civics Project decided not to employ their voting bloc until the run-off election when the Civics Project would have the largest opportunity to be the deciding factor. They figured once the election had been won, Edwards, would be compelled to support prison reform.\textsuperscript{60}

Unfortunately, before the run-off occurred, the election was over. While Governor Edwards was considered the candidate to beat, Republican Buddy Roemer began winning endorsements from across the state. After the primary Roemer was the front-runner with Edwards coming in second. Edwards then shocked everyone by dropping out of the race, leaving Buddy Roemer to assume the governorship.\textsuperscript{61} The Civics Project was never even given a chance to see if their electoral strategy would work. Activists inside Angola were disheartened both by the anticlimactic nature of their campaign, and the election of another law and order politician.\textsuperscript{62}
Return of Crisis and Reformulation of the Civics Project

Buddy Roemer entered office in March of 1988 committing to professionalize and depoliticize the Louisiana clemency process, and ignored virtually all pardon recommendations sent to him during his first year in office. Faced with these circumstances, prisoners at Angola entered into a new period of bleakness with the suicide, murder, and attempted escape toll steadily growing through 1988 and 1989. Attempted escapees explained their actions by stating they had given up hope of ever getting out of prison. In June of 1989, Federal Judge Polozola declared that Angola was once again in a state of emergency and ordered a full civil and criminal investigation of Angola.63

In response, Larry Smith was appointed as the first Black Deputy Secretary of Corrections and Interim Warden of Angola. Wilbert Rideau recalls that Smith’s appointment signaled to prisoners at Angola the possibility of hope. “For them, Smith embodied hope because he represented the impossible in their lives—a black man running Angola. If that could happen, maybe the impossible could happen for them too.”64 Once again, out of crisis, came the appointment of reformist prison administrators, this time surprisingly one who specifically supported prisoner organizing.

Feeling deflated after the aborted Edwards campaign, momentum around the Civics Project drastically declined. Still, the Civics Project was not over. Although the project was put on hold immediately following Roemer’s election, the reforms following the state of emergency served to rejuvenate the project.65 During 1988 and 1989, leaders of the Civics Project assessed their previous work. First, leaders evaluated their strength within Angola itself. While they had amassed significant support from organizations such as the Lifers’ Association and The Angolite, there was still hesitation by other prisoners. The Civics Project leadership recognized that they needed to democratize their organizational structure in order to create a truly collective prisoner movement. They decided to have members representing various groupings at Angola—the different cellblocks and camps within Angola, geographic areas of Louisiana, plus representatives of various sentences and convictions. While it was impossible to have the entire prison population attend Civics Project meetings, having forty members representing assorted groups within Angola would include important cross-section of perspectives that would help them most effectively organize the rest of the prison.66

Back at square one following Roemer’s election, members of the Civics Project decided to focus on what they were trying to highlight above everything else: life sentencing. Beginning with the knowledge they had developed from their experiences, they sought to deepen their
analysis of the Louisiana criminal legal system with research. They began by conducting a ten-state study to compare Louisiana’s laws to other states across the nation. Members of the Correspondence Committee sent out questionnaires to other states’ prison administrations including Texas, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, and Florida while the Legal Research Committee analyzed the responses. Soon, they discovered that Louisiana had more people serving life without parole sentences than any other state despite its much smaller population than other states with life without parole. The Civics Project members felt that they had identified a winnable campaign.\textsuperscript{67} With this information they “began using the weapons that were available to [them], and the weapons that were available were the law.”\textsuperscript{68}

The Civics Project leadership began drafting an alternative to the current life sentencing legislation. They decided that what was important was ensuring that there be a mechanism for release available to everyone and focused on expanding parole eligibility. However, this was easier said than done. Deciding how much time someone should serve before becoming parole eligible became a contentious issue. According to Henderson, this issue became one of the biggest fights internal to the Civics Project. Questions emerged such as “What kind of restrictions are we putting on ourselves? When do we say we are eligible to get out of this place? And that became a real struggle. Who are you to decide how long I’m going to stay inside?”\textsuperscript{69}

This internal struggle highlights the issue that in order to attain freedom, members of the Civics Project were crafting legislation that reproduced the concept that people should be incarcerated in general, and specifically that certain convictions “required” longer sentences. For many prisoners distinctions based on convictions felt arbitrary. Eventually the Civics Project decided to support a graduated parole eligibility proposal differentiated by people’s convictions because they believed it was politically viable and therefore most likely to benefit the collective whole.\textsuperscript{70} Once they came to an agreement internally, they needed to gain the support of people both inside and outside if they hoped to make their legislation a reality.

After months of work, the Civics Project unveiled their platform at the first ever penal reform symposium held at Angola in March of 1990. The seminar brought together a broad cross-section of attorneys, outside activists, a member of the state legislature, judges, corrections officials, and educators among others. With such leaders and media present, the symposium was a tremendous opportunity for the Civics Project to show the fallacies of the state’s current law and order politics and hopefully build a shared analysis on the problem of incarceration. The Civics Project shared their research on the inequities of criminal justice in Louisiana and the state’s life sentencing laws.
Following discussion about the problems of the criminal justice system, Civics Project leaders presented their fifty-page report. They outlined their proposal for graduated parole. Hoping to sway political opinion on the issue of life without parole, the Angola Special Civics Project mailed every state legislator and other relevant public officials copies of their report. In attendance at the symposium was State Representative Naomi Farve. Believing in the concept that people should have the opportunity for the second chance that parole eligibility provided them, she announced at the symposium that she would carry the bill in the next legislative session to begin in April. Representative Farve began working against conservative Louisiana legislators for the passage of the Civics Project bill.

This time around the Angola Special Civics Project decided there needed to be a formal organization on the outside to direct their family and friends towards. Members of the Civics Project this founded the Louisiana Coalition in Support of Penal Reform (LCSPR) as a grassroots organization for outside allies to join and build political leverage in solidarity with prisoner activists. Building from their experiences with the gubernatorial election, the Civics Project supported the development of seven chapters across the state. The LCSPR worked both to broaden outside organizing for prison reform, to re-organize to form an outside voting bloc, and to support the passage of the lifer parole eligibility legislation, House Bill 1709. To increase organizational membership and publicize the state legislation, LCSPR members held informational meetings in their home communities, wrote letters to The Angolite encouraging free readers to join their efforts, and explained the structural issues of the Louisiana criminal legal system to passengers on the buses between New Orleans and Baton Rouge to Angola. In addition, the LCSPR organized lobby days on behalf of the bill, and coordinated phone banks to reach out to their state legislators. There was particular emphasis on conveying to their families and friends that they were organizing for laws and structures that would collectively benefit incarcerated people rather than specific individuals given the broad patterns of injustice.

While the LCSPR was organizing to build political leverage in support of prison reform, Representative Farve was working to get the bill out of committee. After over a year of unsuccessfully working to get the legislation to the floor, she was offered the compromise to pass amended legislation. The amended legislation would make people parole eligible after serving twenty years and reaching forty-five years of age, but only to “practical lifers” or those serving “numbered” terms such as 50, 99, or 399 years. Anyone serving a natural life sentence would be excluded from the legislation. She brought the option to the Angola Special Civics Project to decide whether or not to take
the offer, although it would exclude most of the organization’s mem-
bership. Civics Project members decided denying legislation that
would allow anyone to get out would be against their purpose as an
organization. Moreover, winning this piece of legislation, which
became known as the “20/45 law,” seemed like a victory that they
could build off of as they continued to press for expanded parole eligi-
bility. Once the legislation passed incarcerated activists rejoiced at
their sense they could shift the political tide, and they deepened their
sense of hope that further change was on the way.

However, this was not to be the case. The passage of the “20/45 law”
became the highlight of the Angola Special Civics Project. While the
Civics Project and the LCSPR continued to push for parole eligibility
and organized as voting blocs around state and local elections,
the political openings that had once afforded them the structures for
organizing began to close. While Civics Project leadership always
centralized their focus on collective struggle, they continued to work
on their individual cases as well. Several began individually attaining
their freedom sometimes with the boost of the 20/45 law. Furthermore,
the era of reformist officials came to a close with direct conse-
quences for incarcerated activists. In the 1992 gubernatorial race
between Edwin Edwards and Former Ku Klux Klan leader David
Duke, Edwards committed to appoint more conservative prison
administrators in exchange for the votes of the states’ prison employ-
ees. Then, after Burl Cain became the warden in 1995, he shut down
the open press and increased restrictions on prisoner organizing.
Over time the era of the 10-6 life sentence has been wiped from the
collective memory of Louisiana prisoners. Increasingly, the people
housed at Angola have only known an institution with thousands of
lifers who have no expectation of release within their lifetime.

Conclusion: Towards Abolitionist Reforms

The 1970s to the 1990s was a profound era in the development of the
Louisiana carceral state. Over a twenty year period Louisiana saw
sweeping changes in its penal system with the passage of scores of
new tough on crimes laws, the expansion of pre-existing prisons,
and the construction of several new state prisons. This explosion of
mass incarceration both produced and was a product of the crises of
racialized neoliberal economic restructuring. While many free activ-
ists and organizers during this moment were unaware of the political
underpinnings of this penal expansion, for those locked away at
Angola recognizing the shifts towards mass incarceration was
unavoidable. On one hand these shifts led to despair within Angola
contributing to internal crisis that forced the state to appoint
reform-minded prison administrators, on the other hand it pushed prisoners at Angola to develop a structural analysis of their imprisonment. By developing such an analysis, incarcerated activists mobilized to found the Angola Special Civics Project to craft strategies for their collective freedom. Taking the cue from their experiential knowledge, members of the Civics Project conducted research to understand the state of Louisiana’s prisons system in order to identify campaigns that targeted the structural conditions at play. Through forming coalitions with outside allies, the Civics Project combined electoral organizing, political education, and the drafting of new legislation to both create new mechanisms for release and foster a movement for prison reform. Indeed, by focusing on the ideologies and practices of “lock them up and throw away the key” politics, they contested the very logics of the prison system which sought the public forgetting of the warehousing of thousands of people at the plantation of Angola.

The case of the Angola Special Civics Project challenges us to move beyond a dichotomy between prison reform and prison abolition. Even though the members of the Civics Project did not explicitly identify as prison abolitionists, their focus on the structural conditions of life sentencing offers a possible avenue for “non-reformist,” or “abolitionist reforms.” Or in the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the Civics Project is an example of “people who might not call themselves abolitionists having an abolitionist agenda.”84 Given their experiences with imprisonment, the activists of the Civics Project organized to create tangible improvements in the lives of those on the inside, while also seeking to unveil the political and economic systems at play that produced the ballooning of the Louisiana penal system. Their refusal to frame their work as either only about the macro structures of mass incarceration or only about making life within Angola bearable allowed them to break out of previous perceptions of what prisoner organizing could entail and use their imagination to scheme and dream new approaches to antiprison activism. Their work points us to the conditions of possibility that are available when we open ourselves up to the idea that frameworks which appear contradictory, could actually generate innovative approaches to political struggle. It is this type of expansive thinking and shifting out of pre-conceived notions that is imperative for the building of a world where policing and prisons are no longer solutions to the crises confronting us. Rather, let our responses be grounded in the vision of collective freedom that refuses the dehumanization of anyone as we strive to make the world anew.
Notes


6. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Pierce the Future of Hope: Mothers and Prisoners in the Post-Keynesian California Landscape,” in Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex, by Julia Chinyere Oparah (New York: Routledge, 2005), 246. It is worth noting the insight developed by the anti-prison activists of Mothers ROC that Gilmore documents. To explain the ongoing centrality of anti-Black racism in the prison industrial complex and the increasing incarceration of other communities of color, particularly Latin@s Mothers ROC activists developed the analysis that the U.S. criminal legal system has two laws: one for white people and one for Black people in which you “have to be White to be prosecuted under White law, but you do not have to be Black to be prosecuted under Black law.”


12. Parenti, Lockdown America, 8–12.


22. The Angolite is filled with stories of men growing old in Angola who were sentenced to life by trial or as a plea bargain and were promised by their personal attorneys, judges, and even prosecutors that they would only have to do ten years and six months.

23. Rideau, In the Place of Justice, 75.


26. Foster, “What is the Meaning of Life.” By 1994, there were over 2,500 natural life sentences in the Louisiana prisons system.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.


51. Ibid.


60. Ibid.


64. Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 204.


69. Ibid.


82. Rideau, In the Place of Justice, 241.


About the Author

Lydia Pelot-Hobbs is pursuing a Ph.D. in Geography and a certificate in American Studies at the City University of New York Graduate Center. Her research interests include critical prison studies, racialized and gendered violence, statecraft, social movements, activist knowledge-production, and the U.S. South. Her most recent writing is forthcoming in Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas (Fall 2013).