

JAIL, SOCIAL PRISON, ... OR?

*A Call for an Anarchist Response to the
Construction of the Youth Jail at 12th & Alder*



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**THE SOLUTION ISN'T TO LEARN
HOW TO PLAY THE SYSTEM FOR
OCCASIONAL VICTORIES OF THIS
ORDER, ALTHOUGH I'LL ADMIT
THESE SOMETIMES HAVE
A TACTICAL ADVANTAGE.
WINNING COMES ONLY IN
DESTROYING THE SYSTEM ITSELF.
WE SHOULD NEVER BE
CONFUSED ON THIS POINT.**

George Jackson,
"Remembering the Real Dragon:
An Interview on May 16 and June 29th 1971"

**MIGRATION MANAGEMENT
CANNOT BE ATTACKED,
BUT WHAT CAN BE
ATTACKED ARE
THE CONCRETE EMBODIMENTS,
STRUCTURES, AND PEOPLE
THAT MAKE IT POSSIBLE.**

*"Nothing is Finished: Essays from the
Anti-Prison Struggle in Belgium"*

The jail is ironically framed as a project that benefits poor people and communities of color. Like most things in Seattle, this jail is being built to benefit white, wealthy functioning citizens. The people funneled into the jail are made invisible in a cage behind a colorful mural. On top of that the surrounding space is made uninhabitable for them. It is an unsurprising paradox that the prisoners and their families who will be in the jail are not allowed to actually exist or be seen in the space around it.

Unsurprisingly, it has been liberals and radical prison abolitionists alike that have been the torch runners of this new expanded disciplinary logic. Less prisons, more state-based 'transformative justice' "Bigger Cages, Longer Chains!" Let's just say it. In this case, transformative justice means the further transformation of a world with prisons into a social prison.

In the struggle against the CFJC there have been few voices heard outside of the state, its collaborative muses: NGO coalitions, and liberal groups that claim to represent the community. We have no interest in justice meted out by the state and it's pigs, managers, and executioners. We know the state cannot be rationally persuaded to abolish its systems of control.

We don't have to choose between jail and social prison.

Let's destroy both.

For the past year the City of Seattle has been in the planning stage of building a new "Children and Family Justice Center" (CFJC) at the site of the current youth jail at 12th and Alder. The new facility's name and much of the rhetoric obscures the fact that one of the central functions of the new construction will be creating more cages to put black and brown youth in. Nevertheless, it would be shortsighted to simply understand this project as the creation of another jail. The state has already anticipated arguments from leftist organizations and community groups that jails 'don't work'. In fact, the state recognizes this reality and is shifting its approach in response to it. When prison reformers and even radical abolitionists insist that jails 'don't work' what they really mean is that jails are increasingly becoming an inefficient means of regulating the lives of black, brown, poor, and/or trans* people. To critique the prison system because it 'doesn't work' is to parrot the states logic. A 'working' criminal justice system is a system that effectively reproduces a world built on domination, violence, and racism.

For progressive bourgeois Seattlites, however, this new project looks like a common sense approach to dealing with 'criminals' that is clean and rehabilitative. In addition to the construction of a 154-room detention center, the CFJC is proposed to "make the criminal justice system work" by providing access to "mentoring and support services, education and employment services for youth on probation," as well as a number of alternative-to-incarceration programs for young people who would otherwise face jail time.

It is not surprising that the levy to fund the CFJC passed. The rhetoric surrounding it fits nicely into a liberal view of prison reform and progressive partial decarceration. It acknowledges that some people do not ‘deserve’ to be in prison because they can be reformed by either being given better opportunities or given the skills to ‘make better choices.’ This rhetoric is appealing to liberals who congratulate themselves and sleep well at night because its implementation in Seattle has already decreased the population of the juvenile detention center. In the past decade, alternative-to-detention programs, ‘community courts,’ and ‘problem-solving justice’ initiatives have bolstered a new dystopian logic that paints policing, prison, and ‘criminal justice’ as a calming massage to restore social peace.

While it would be reactionary to condemn putting less people in prison, we refuse to listen to the state’s narrative of ‘progress.’ Let’s respond to the small concessions of the state by spitting in its face, not by asking to suck its toes.

The product of a decreased prison population and lower rates of recidivism is not freedom from domination, but rather domination in another form, namely increased surveillance, monitoring, and control for the same people who would have been filling jail cells. Family courts, drug treatment courts, youth-led peer courts, and punitive social services all work to rehabilitate those who can assimilate back into society to be functioning, whitewashed productive subjects. Their stated objective is to ‘increase youth investment’ in the criminal justice system. This system of control further reinforces the division between the ‘criminal’ and the ‘good citizen’ by insisting that the ‘criminal’ can be ‘saved’ and can become a ‘good citizen.’ However the mutability of these categories is a farce. The idealized good citizen in America has always been a white, cismale, wealthy, and able-bodied subject. The state has defined the category of ‘criminal’ in practice as black, trans*, poor, and undocumented. It should be no surprise then that as the prison population has decreased the disproportionate incarceration of black and brown youth has increased.

These new methods of control often mean that instead of serving a short sentence for getting in a fight after school, a 16-year-old kid will be funneled into a system of punitive social services for a much longer period of time with the threat of jail hanging over their head. The state has no power without the threat of force. So we see that the ‘alternative to incarceration’ is entirely dependent on the threat of force that looms behind it – the ever-present possibility of a prison sentence. Concretely, this looks like trading a few nights in jail for months or even years reporting to a social worker, being in court-mandated therapy sessions, having attendance and grades monitored, regular drug testing, and community service. Who would enter into this process without a pig pushing them against a wall and reaching for their handcuffs? All of these techniques make the ever-expanding snares of racist social control and assimilation look like “progress.”

This dystopian picture isn’t just about policing or creating a jail that is billed as a therapist’s office. It is about transforming the physical space around the current detention center to hide and displace the people who are being policed in order to make their existence itself invisible. The city explicitly explains the bourgeois camouflage of the new building:

“Families and youth accessing Juvenile Court Functions within the facility should not be directly visible from the street or from the entry drive along the Alder Connection. The project design will need to incorporate amenities along 12th Ave and along the Alder connection that provide a pedestrian experience equivalent in quality to the experience provided by transparent storefronts. This may be achieved through public art, landscape, sculpted facade elements, or other streetscape strategies typically associated with a significant civic building where retail frontage is not desirable”¹

1 CFJC Program Report – Chapter 4: Building and Site Design.