

The Thread: a podcast against mass incarceration
Episode 1 Transcript
Guests: Kinetik Justice, Cheri Honkala



MATT PILLISCHER, *The Thread*: Today on *The Thread*: We have Part One of our Interview with Kinetik Justice talking about his role in the Alabama Prison Strike, Organizing, and so much more; and Cheri Honkala, former Green Party Vice Presidential candidate talking third-party politics, role of the Democrats, her model for organizing, and staying alive to fight another day. [music starts]

[clip of Kinetik on the phone]: “*They’re* using every tactic and every tool available to keep us here to continue to make billions of dollars off of us. So it’s on us to use everything available to us to expose what’s really going on inside these places—what these people are really doing.”
[clip of Cheri interview]: “They had champagne and caviar in the rotunda, and one of the heads of the Democratic Party—I won’t say—came over to me and said, “Cheri, oh my God we’re having this gala tonight, like you can’t be here with these families.” So we just marched all the way from Philadelphia.” [music continues]

MATT: This is *The Thread*, a podcast against mass incarceration. The mission is to create a national organ that weaves together the most politically advanced organizers in the movement against mass incarceration, through which we can explore and unite our strategies, tactics, and histories. Check out podcasts, study guides, materials for suggestions on how to organize around this podcast, and more at defeatmassincarceration.com [music continues]

MATT: I’m Matt Pillischer, the producer and editor, and as part of this project we have a great advisory board that you can check out at our website full of activists and organizers across the country. Our amazing interns are Zach Sturiale, Jordan McIntyre, and Christina Sierra. Theme music is from our friends at the Die Jim Crow project- Check it out at diejimcrow.com. If you think *The Thread* is useful for the movement, please support us on Patreon, also on our website; and we encourage you to organize a study group and send feedback. So, let’s get started— we welcome study groups that are listening to this now and we look forward to your feedback.

MATT: Today we’re going to highlight the struggles going on from inside our prisons, getting some amazing insight on tactics and strategies on organizing behind the wall from one of the main organizers of the Alabama Prison Strike. His name is Kinetik Justice. And we’re also going to talk about the war on the poor that’s going on outside on the streets, which leads many people to prison- and which is part of the overall picture of capitalism and mass incarceration that we’re trying to change. We’ll talk to Cheri Honkala about that, and also about how elections can be used to further our movement goals.

MATT: And now an interview with Kinetik Justice: He’s behind bars in solitary confinement in Alabama’s Holman Prison, one of the most overcrowded prisons in the U.S.

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KINETIK JUSTICE, *Free Alabama Movement*: This current strike began on May 1st, and involved in the strike were two major institutions, as well as a lesser institution. When I say major institution that is what we call institutions that have *industry*. Alabama has several prisons that house industries and two of those prisons are Holman Correctional Facility and Elmore

Correctional Facility. Holman Correctional Facility produces every single license plate tag that's made in this state. Whether it be for an RV, 18 wheeler, motorcycle, regular car, home, whatever it be that requires a license tag is made at a home and correctional facility. At Elmore Correctional Facility they have a canning plant that cans the food that is disseminated throughout the Alabama corrections. They also have a recycling plant and they do the laundry for three major institutions. So on May 1st Holman and Elmore Correctional Facility began a nonviolent peaceful protest, in protest of our treatment inside these institutions, as well as the laws of this state, which stem from the 13th Amendment, and the root of all of our issues is the 13th Amendment. The 13th Amendment was supposedly issued to abolish slavery, however we also have come to understand what it actually did was transform the institution of slavery and codified it so the *local, state, and federal government* could have a piece of it, rather than just the Southern Agriculture Planter.

CHRISTINA SIERRA, The Thread: The 13th Amendment states, "Neither slavery, nor involuntary servitude shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction, *except* as punishment for a crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted."

MATT: Thanks, that was Christina, one of *The Thread's* Interns.

KINETIK: So we wanted to push the envelope, so we got together and we decided to call it May 1st, Mayday, to bring attention back to the state. Don't forget the people who run these prisons have a voice, have a say-so, and we don't agree with building new prisons to deal with the overcrowding, the unsanitary, lack of education. True, a lot of these prisons, need to be torn down and have a new prison built, but that has to be done simultaneously with the process of actually releasing people. So, in protest of that, we have engaged in what we call "shut-downs" or a strike where no one in the institution reports to their assigned duties. In these prison institutions all of the labor from the kitchen, to cleaning the floors, cleaning the grounds, landscaping, as well as the industry work, is done by inmate labor, and when there is no inmate labor, the prison doesn't function. When we shut down, just like any business, you're not making a profit on a daily basis—we're losing money on a daily basis. It has worked phenomenally with getting us an audience, and people before the shutdown that no one cared what we had to say and nobody wanted to hear what we had to say. We had no voice, so we cut out the middleman of lobbyists and politicians and we go directly to the legislator, cut out the politicians, and we use our labor as bargaining chips to administer criminal justice reform that is needed in the state of Alabama. Actually we had people locked up in solitary confinement in retaliation, myself, I've been locked in solitary confinement for 28 months from the work strike of 2014. They brought in some new tactics this time. They immediately started by cutting down portions of food on the first day of the strike. We didn't have a balanced meal, and the officers kept saying, "If y'all don't like the way the food is, then y'all can go back to work and fix it for yourself." After that didn't work, they went to the *work release* and I don't know what they promised or what they didn't but they had guys at the work release come to Elmore and Holman in order to preform the jobs of the industry. They weren't concerned about the rest of the prison running but where they make their money through the industry, because the canning plant is a billion dollar business, and that was what they were more concerned about. Not our humanity, not us eating well, not whether we were facing secure— and they never cleaned the institution. Trash was piled up inside the institution, bacteria, and we argued and complained about the spreading of germs, but what the Department of Corrections was more concerned about was getting workers so they could get paid and that was their first and last agenda.

MATT: So, if I understand you, these were people on *work release* from another institution that they brought in almost like forced scabs to do the work that would normally be done by you all in the institution?

KINETIK: Yes, correct.

MATT: And, the industry jobs are paid *something*, right? But are all the jobs paid or are some of them...

KINETIK: No. Actually no jobs are paying jobs in the Alabama prison system except the industry jobs (canning, recycling) and they are paid starting at \$0.15 an hour and I know a guy who's been working there for 15 years and he's made \$0.60 an hour and everything is made out of the institution. There are forced labor jobs where no one is paid but work 8,10,12 hours a day and receive nothing. However, on the backside of that, we are charged fines and fees yet we work for free. We receive no compensation. Therefore we have established that we are being used to extort money from our family members and loved ones, because when your loved ones send you a few dollars to make sure you have the basic necessities, the DOC freezes the money and takes any money they think they are owed.

MATT: Well, since you bring it up, the cell phone that you're talking to us from, a cell right now?

KINETIK: Mhm.

MATT: And obviously this is contraband and you're risking the fines and more by talking to the outside world, you consider yourself 'at war' you've said and you need to use every tactic available and some of that is illegal, do you want to just expand on that a little bit?

KINETIK: Well yes. I mean every sense of the word when I say we're in a struggle for our lives. I mean that literally as around here people are dying from lack of treatment, lack of security, people are being murdered in all types of messes in which you could lose your life and the quality of life inside these institutions. We understand that they're using every tactic and every tool available to keep us here to continue to make billions of dollars off of us. So it's on us to use everything available to us to expose what's really going on inside these places—what these people are really doing. So the risk of having a phone, or being caught with a phone, is a risk worth taking.

MATT: What was the reaction in 2014 when you did the work stoppage?

KINETIK: In regards to 2014, we covered a lot of ground—we didn't get as far as we would have liked to but we did establish unity across racial line, religious lines, and we established a foundation on the inside that we could organize around, and that was the most important thing that we accomplished in 2014: actually bringing that unified front, and that's where we come with our Freedom Bill, legislation that we drafted up that institutes education, rehabilitation, and reentry preparedness *as a system* inside the department. Not just some kind of program that you can take, but it becomes incumbent everyone who comes in the Department of Corrections that you are inducted into the education, rehabilitation, reentry preparedness programs, and once you complete these programs that your parole criteria has been met.

MATT: I love how you explained how the 2014 actions really solidified your work together, and it sounds like really built your solidarity and organization. Is that where the Free Alabama Movement was started? Was it then, or was it before that?

KINETIK: Actually, for years, for the last 15 years we've been part of a law class. A group of us have taught each other law and we go through the practical application of using the law. We do the elderly people in the prison's work for free, and we've done that for several years. As a part of trying to do something to help the larger part of the prison population, we came to bring our legal understanding together with our organizing ability. And we organized around our labor. And we use our legal expertise to draft up our Freedom Bill. We went about educating and organizing throughout the prison, naturally, we turned an idea into a movement.

MATT: Now, for people on the outside who haven't been in prison, can you explain a little bit about what it actually looks like to organize in the prison, in terms of the Free Alabama Movement, you said you had all these great ideas and it caught on and everyone in pretty much the state of Alabama who's in prison would have something to gain from it, what does it look like? You're obviously talking to people I guess when you're out and not inside solitary.

KINETIK: Well how it works is, inside a prison, you have different religious communities. You have the Christians, you have Islam, Catholics, you have different affiliations on religious borders and what I did is just spoke to the caste of the Imam or the head of these communities and I was awarded an hour during their services and I educated at their religious services and I used that time to explain what was going on, the outside help we had, what we needed to do on the inside, and that's the method I used here at Holman to organize the religious communities. And the street gang organizations, I went through the heads of the organizations and I had a leadership conference with the head of every community and got them on board and they took it back to their respective houses and explained further, and they invited me in to give a more in depth understanding, and that's the process of how we educated and organized here at Holman.

MATT: Wow, thank you, that's extraordinary to hear. It makes a lot of sense, but I don't think I've heard in that much detail how it was carried out. Obviously you did a huge amount of this work. Without naming other people, did you have other people that were doing similar things in terms of giving speeches or talking to different groups?

KINETIK: Actually, um, we did speakerphone to different institutions. I would give a lecture at a certain group and somebody would put it on speakerphone for that community in another prison, so I was actually giving two for one. I know a lot of the Islamic communities they had me on speakerphone with different Islamic communities at St. Clair and Elmore and different prisons so that they could get firsthand accounts of what was going on and what was expected of them. But yes I have several other brothers throughout institutions who do their part; brothers at different institutions who do their part. And that's what we use: heads of different communities, whether they be street gangs, religious organizations, or social communities, whatever in prison that there's a function and they have a head—that's who we target. Leaders. And we give the leaders an understanding and we give the leaders the opportunity to bring that back to their flocks or to their communities, and we follow-up and lay it all out on how this is going to go, who's going to do what, and when the protests on the outside are going to be, when the press conference is going to be. We try and lay it out and give everybody as much information as possible because I understand the more information you have, the more informed decision you make and you usually make better decisions when you have more information.

MATT: There's some perception of people outside, or even inside the prisons probably, that heads of religious communities or heads of street gangs are not interested in politics, or they're just sort of interested in religious issues, or their own leadership of a certain group of people, or sectarian issues, but that doesn't seem to be the case here and I wonder if you could just talk about that experience. I mean, me as an organizer I think if you bring really good ideas to people that explain circumstances and have some solutions to their problems they're probably going to get on board with it. It sounds like that was your experience.

KINETIK: Well that was it exactly. In organizing, knowing the people, the needs—you gotta get amongst the people and once you talk to the people you know what the issues are with the people. It's natural for people to be more attentive to things that affect their daily lives, and when you can talk about things that affect their lives then it's usually all ears. Especially if you can come up with a solution to the problems that they have, then people are a lot more inclined to be on board and that's what we were able to do. It's a given that since I've been in prison I know the issues that are effecting people. I know how to communicate those issues, and I know who to talk to inside the institutions so like I just talked to the leadership, and the leadership is gonna take it, and they package it in a way their congregation can accept it, and you know if you can convert the leadership, you convert the flock.

MATT: Can you explain/talk about the structure of the Free Alabama Movement? You said you were on a conference call with them just before our first interview. Can you describe how decisions are made? Is it democratic decision making, is there leadership? Can you just talk a little bit about the structure of Free Alabama Movement?

KINETIK: Yeah. How we function? Brother James "Dhati" Pleasant is at St Clair correctional facility. Melvin is at Donaldson Correctional Facility, and I'm at Holman Correctional Facility. These are Alabama's three maximum security prisons, and Free Alabama Movement initially started out at the maximum security prisons and this is the first ground that we began organizing on in the maximum security prisons. People who had a few years in the system and knew what the system was about and how the system worked, so that's where we began. Over the course of developing it, as I told you yesterday, Free Alabama Movement is an inside/outside solidarity network of prisoners, as well as political groups, family members, loved ones, etc. We have a few women on the outside who function in the capacity of being our hands, and our feet, and our mouths in society, and those three women make up what we call Mothers and Family Members, which is a nonprofit group we created on the outside for them in a supporting role of the things that the Free Alabama Movement are doing on the inside. So our conference calls are genuinely made up of myself, Melvin, and Dhati, and the sisters from Mothers and Family Members. That's genuinely the core decision-making body, however three times a week we do a Universal Peace and Unity conference, which is made up of 10 different brothers from different affiliations and different institutions, that we bring all the leadership together on a weekly basis and we discuss the things that are going on in different institutions. And we come up with policies and educational curriculums that we implement in these different institutions to try to keep down the violence and create some kind of self-help educational programs on the inside for ourselves. The Free Alabama Movement, our decision making is usually made between myself, Melvin, and brother Dhati with the sounding board of the Mothers and Families, the sisters on the outside we confer with.

MATT: Wow, so you keep yourself busy with a lot of different meetings it sounds like.

KINETIK: I just— I don't know if you're familiar with Pastor Kenny Glasgow?

MATT: Was he the one on *Democracy Now!* with you?

KINETIK: Yes, that's him. When we came up with the concept of Free Alabama Movement, I knew we needed an outside spokesperson to do the negotiating and mediating for us and he was the person that came to my mind. So when I got in touch with him and explained the idea and the vision of what we were doing, he was 100% on board with it and he's been 100% on board since then. So, yeah, I do a lot of conferring with the Ordinary People's Society as well as the Formerly Incarcerated [And Convicted] People's Movement.

MATT: How are you affiliated with the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee of the IWW?

KINETIK: In 2014 when we launched the first work strike we were networking and reaching out to different groups and organizations and affiliations and we ran across Jimi Del Duca a member of the IWW, and then IWOC is the branch that they created to do more inside prison work and that relationship with Brianna has blossomed into all of the pamphlets we created, all of the literature, all the articles we wrote and put together and selected writings, we were able to get with Brianna and we put those together in Kansas in booklet form to try to educate prisoners across the country and she's done an exceptional job getting literature and getting information inside of institutions across this country. So we linked up with the brothers from UNAM, and that's United Nations Against the Machine, and these are the brothers responsible for the 2010 work strike in Georgia. We met them in January of 2014, right after the work strike. After networking with these brothers for a couple of weeks I think they were all targeted and placed on what's called a tier program, they created some kind of security housing unit special program and all of the leaders or the organizers of the shutdown they placed on solitary confinement in the tier program. So when we lost communication with them, we began doing a Blog Talk Radio show twice a week, and as a part of that we met a sister from Mississippi and she is an ex-corrections officer, and she was interested in the work we were doing and she's seen a need for that type of work in Mississippi. She introduced us to a couple of people and over the course of a few months we were entrenched in every prison in Mississippi and as relationships continued to grow, we began to meet our brothers throughout the country. One of those brothers is from California, brother Anthony Robinson [Jr.], he's a very prolific writer, and we explained to him our concept and ideology and the things that we're working on and what we're striving for, and as a result of that he created the New Underground Railroad Movement, which is formatted basically just like the Free Alabama Movement is. The IWOC and the Free Alabama Movement aided and assisted in drafting up the manifesto and creating the Free Virginia Movement. I think I told you yesterday that I communicate with one of the members of the Lucasville 5, brother Siddique Hasan, who's on death row in Ohio, and we were able to pull some people together to help them structure the Free Ohio Movement, so now looking at the Free Ohio Movement, the Free Virginia Movement, Free Mississippi Movement United, and the New Underground Railroad which is geared towards California, and the brothers from Texas...

MATT: It's all sort of repeating your organizing model.

KINETIK: It's the same exact model.

MATT: So, as someone that's just becoming familiar with all the prison organizing that you're talking about, because I had only really read about the Pelican Bay and California prison strike and the Georgia strike, and it sounds like they had some influence, I'm sure that you studied and followed those...

KINETIK: Absolutely, absolutely.

MATT: And it sounds like you really created your own model for Alabama's prison conditions and connected with some people in the IWW that wanted to help support from the outside as well as the Ordinary People's Society. And it sounds like IWW or IWOC has really helped support you, get you materials, but also connect you and network with other people in other states' prisons to help them model sort of the same type of organizing that you're doing. Is that sort of right?

KINETIK: Oh absolutely, absolutely The IWOC, well I give credit to the IWOC but we deal directly with Brianna.

MATT: And if there are people in prison who hear about this and want to become connected to it, do you think the IWOC is the best organization for them to contact to get plugged in to this work?

KINETIK: I do a lot of work with ABC, the Anarchist Black Cross, out of Denver, out of Chicago, Wisconsin, and Georgia. I do some work with the Black Autonomy Federation with brother Lorenzo Ervin out of Tennessee. But the IWOC would definitely be a great place to start if you're trying to get plugged in.

MATT: So there's lots of different groups depending on the state and the location, there's different groups working on this issue. It sounds like there's still yet no national solidification of an organization. It's part of the work that I'm trying to do with this podcast, is on the outside it's similar to—there's not yet one national singular organization that has brought together both formerly incarcerated people and people who have not been in prison but want to fight mass incarceration, and I'm trying to use this podcast as a way to try and weave together different pockets of organizing that I've seen as I've toured *Broken On All Sides*, and to get the smartest, most advanced organizers on the show to talk through their tactics and strategies, you know the different issues so that we can kind of learn from each other, and like you said taking a pulse from people to try and figure out what's going on in California is not the same as what's going on in Alabama or Texas or Maine. So I'm doing my best to try and make those connections with this show and to share some tactics and strategies but also some history and some theory. So you've really done a little of everything but what I'm really so thankful for is to learn about how you've done the nuts and bolts of organizing inside and it's really the most detailed I've heard from someone so I think this is going to be really useful to both other people in prison that get access to this podcast or the transcripts, but also to organizers on the outside that are, you know like you said when you're talking to the pastor, it's like how do we not have people show up at a protest but actually become organizers and build a movement? It's not easy to do and so we're all struggling with these questions.

KINETIK: That is a *major issue*—how to bring all of these fragmented movements and resistance groups together up under *one umbrella*. That is the million dollar question: how do you do that?

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MATT: That was Part 1 of our interview with Kinetik Justice of the Free Alabama Movement. Next up is our interview with Cheri Honkala, known for her organizing work with the Kensington Welfare Right's Union, the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, for her candidacy of Sheriff of Philadelphia in 2011, under the Green Party ticket, for her run as Vice Presidential candidate for the Green Party in 2012, and is currently organizing The March For Our Lives on July 25th. We interviewed her in her apartment, which also doubles as a working office. And you'll also hear Galen Tyler who is another organizer with Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign.

CHERI HONKALA, Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign: My name is Cheri Honkala and I always say that at the beginning of all interviews because I'm a part of a class that has been made consciously invisible forever. I'm a formerly homeless mother of two children, and I have a passion for wanting to end the violence of poverty, hunger, and homelessness in this country. I have four boxes of unlawful arrests, Front Line has determined I'm one of 13 people doing human rights work in the U.S. that are in most danger, and they flew me to Ireland to meet with other human rights defenders from around the world, people that were dealing with bomb threats, and all of these other horrible things. They were giving out grants to these different people for extra security outside of their homes and teaching some of the women how to look under their cars for bombs and all of these kinds of things, and then it came to me. We live in the country that houses the school of the America's and teaches dictators and military how to kill people, and invade people, and do horrible human rights violations all over the world in very very covert ways and theirs was just like "good luck!"

MATT: Can we talk about Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign? Maybe you can explain a little bit, I read that it was largely started in response to Bill Clinton's infamous welfare reform. Can you talk a little bit about that and maybe we can go in to the Democrats a little bit?

CHERI: Well, I started the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, I did the thing that no woman is supposed to do—I was living in the Twin Cities, I was homeless with my son Mark, and we were taking over houses, in abandoned government owned houses in order to stay alive and help other families stay alive. We call it the new Underground Railroad.

MATT: You moved homeless people in to these empty houses?

CHERI: Yeah, so we didn't want to be a part of the nonprofit industrial complex. We didn't want that model, so we went internationally and looked at things like large numbers of people impoverished in Africa, and dealing with the issue of AIDS and not dealing with any money; and they had a very different way of organizing themselves—it wasn't like "let's get together and first write a foundation grant, and then we'll end our devastation." They just know that they had to move. So in that process we learned some important things: we've learned the importance of having fun, music, dancing, taking care of each other, all these things that people consider to be hokey, are absolutely essential, and if you meet their basic needs, but if you also feed their mind and have them understand that they really can't go anywhere, that they really are needed, not bullshit, then they stay around. So we do educational, we do study and all of that kind of stuff because we think it's very important that people understand the politics of hunger and homelessness, because they tell us all the time that there's not enough to go around and that this whole thing is about scarcity and we don't believe it. It's manufactured scarcity—there's

enough of everything. I joke all the time-my name is Cher because I share, and there's a bunch of selfish-ass bastards, ya know? And that's a hard thing, you know what I mean?

MATT: I was going to ask you a question about the nonprofit industrial complex, so let's talk a little bit about that. I feel the same way you feel about it. I don't think people understand that it's a somewhat recent phenomenon, and I think it's interesting that you would go internationally to look at models of grassroots organizing because it's been pretty much since the 60's and early 70's and that wave of radical grassroots organizing is when the government pushed "solution is not that—it's professional activism, it's nonprofit, it's foundation money; work within the system" and so I grew up, we're growing up, you grew up in a system where unless you read history books, or talk to people that have passed down that radical grassroots activism, don't have it very much in this country and that something I'm very much trying to support and uplift different voices doing that.

CHERI: They teach people not to be—to dumb it down, not study. People have to start asking some very critical questions and it's not just about, "Is Hillary or Trump gonna be president of this country?" This question of "are we gonna have to pay for fresh air, or water, our planet, or not having a public education system anymore; the privatizing of everything." And with the further atomization and technology and communication, like every kind of job. So if people are not able to sell their labor in order to survive, then I think the generations to come have some very critical questions to ask.

MATT: Well here's the thing: that technology could be used to make all of our lives so much better, and easier.

CHERI: I don't wanna work in a factory!

MATT: But under the system of capitalism and ever-increasing profits, it's not making lives easier. The iPhone—you're doing twice the work and you're doing it in bed, you're doing it when you're on the toilet, because these things aren't designed to make our lives easier. They're designed to make other people profit.

CHERI: At the end of the day it's going to be about who's in control. Whenever you think that there is some progressive media on the horizon, then all the cockroaches come around and offer anybody with an independent voice a few carrots, and then you don't see that kind of investigative journalism, critical thinking, looking for the root... that's the difference between us and the nonprofit industrial complex, and that's why they've got us shut up and make us invisible.

MATT: And take credit for your ideas and your victories.

CHERI: In all social movements, the authentic, real aspects, you have to create some fake bullshit so that you can misdirect those movements.

MATT: When you say "you," you mean the status quo, not us?

CHERI: Yeah, the bad guys, the powers that be, I mean you know when we were first getting started and we were excited to have different people interested in us, and you know the Ford Foundation flew us to the Kennedy Library, put a bunch of lawyers in the room, people from

academia, bought us really good food, and spent all day and then flew us around the country and had us talk to gajillionaires, and we thought “WOW, we’re gonna get some money for this movement! We’re gonna end poverty, they’re putting us in the room with people that got some money and”

GALEN TYLER, Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign: Took all the information and then hired other people to do the exact same thing.

CHERI: That’s exactly what happened.

MATT: And then the people who are doing that work, even if they come in as enthusiastic about the issues as you, are tied to the funding, and people self-censor because they think “is this gonna scare Ford”

CHERI: We were the poster children for the Ford Foundation. You know what the Ford Foundation did? One of the program officers went and started a whole separate organization— took members from our ranks, raided our shop. We can’t say it out loud or we’ll die and we don’t wanna die yet. How intense is that? The same program officer that took time out at the Ford Foundation, to go work on the Obama campaign.

GALEN: But it took us a while, I mean, they put us on this international network and they wanted us to relate to other poor people’s organizations around the world, to bring them into their camp. So it was like pimping us.

CHERI: AND they offered me a sabbatical. A paid, sabbatical just for me to get out of the game right now. “Cheri, go spend some time, go write some books,”

MATT: “make it academic”

GALEN: “we’ll send somebody with you”

CHERI: That sounds sexy sometimes!

MATT: So, I’m right there with you, and the work that I do is largely unpaid, it’s trying to figure out a way to-

CHERI: Oh there’s nothing sexy about that.

MATT: So what do you tell people-what’s your model for fundraising and for operations, and for supporting your activities? People need to live, and eat, and pay rent, how do you-what is the model for people who want to stay genuine, grassroots, shake the system/change the system, but need to survive? I mean you’ve been doing this for a while.

CHERI: We stole the model from my spiritual ancestor Harriet Tubman, which is during slavery she knocked down the doors of people and asked them straight up to break the law in order to keep other people alive. So we are very much a part of an underground economy, and we totally stay away from anything having to do with drugs, because we know that they’re out to get us, and also because poor families have been so impacted by the drug economy. So leadership. You gotta be responsible, and people remind me all the time “you didn’t get that leadership

position because you [UNCLEAR], I help you play that particular role and you weren't accountable to the movement" See, I'm a part of a movement that isn't just worried about me and mine, I'm a part of a movement that whooped my ass and held me accountable if I don't share.

MATT: So, to push you a little bit further into the logistical aspects of the leadership, do you work in organizations that have like democratic decision making, is it more loose than kind of like people sitting around a table and raising their hand? Is it more consensus, is it more dictatorial for lack of a better word?

CHERI: So this is a war out here, and we can't use anything but war to describe what we're dealing with. So, in terms of leadership we are set up like a military. We've got our generals, and our soldiers in this process, and there's discipline, and no, we can't afford mental masturbation, we can't afford politically correct ideas that don't actually turn into anything, and we're very pragmatic.

MATT: I think I am in alignment with what you're saying, I've been able to travel the country with *Broken On All Sides*, and seen pockets of people organizing all over the country and part of what I really try and do with my work is connect those dots, connect those pockets of struggle and that's part of what the podcast is about. I think there is a sleeping giant, I think people are pushed so far that they are looking for ideas to change their fucking lives, but the right ideas need to be there for them to grasp. Would you agree that's part of why someone like Trump is becoming so popular, because it's an alternative; it's not what we would call the right alternative, that there are openings for both the extreme right and the extreme left in times like this?

CHERI: I wish it wasn't just the extreme right and left, but it's that nonprofit industrial complex. It's all those like "let me hold on to my little job here." It's the people that are policing their own people in the Warsaw Ghetto. It's all the people that are on the social media that are distorting the message and not telling the story because in this drama that's playing out, there's the real story. And that one is not being told. And that real story, if it's told, *it's done*. Because the majority of the people in this country are great people. If they only knew what the fuck was taking place, what was going on, that's it-it's done.

MATT: So when did you learn that the Democrats were not the answer to all our problems?

CHERI: Well I think I learned it the first day I met them, but I had to go through my own loss of innocence.

MATT: Can you talk about that?

CHERI: Yes. For my whole life, until about seven years ago, I was the go-to person for almost the country whenever the democrats came to me they said to me "Cheri, we need 2.3 people, we need to have this miserable thing happening in their life, and we need you to organize buses so that they can go to Congress or they can go to Harrisburg, or they can go wherever and tell their stories and get a free sandwich, and go back home on the bus," and things will stay the same for 30 years. And so that's what I did, come up with some new laws, let's put an end to some of these things. And then it never happened, and it never happened, and it never happened. Then they saw consciousness and leadership developing from this process. One time we marched on a necessity, we had an encampment on American Street. In Harrisburg

when we arrived they were having a bipartisan event this one particular time. When we were in there they had champagne and caviar in the rotunda, and one of the heads of the Democratic Party—I won't say—came over to me and said, "Cheri, oh my God we're having this gala tonight, like you can't be here with these families." So we just marched all the way from Philadelphia, blah blah blah, and they said "well we have boxed lunches, if you go to the end of the hallway we'll hook everybody up with boxed lunches." One of the homeless women said, "we didn't march for 7 days, 22 miles a day, for boxed lunches. We're not going anywhere." We lived there for six weeks inside the capitol. It was during that time I really learned that there was no difference between Pepsi and Coke. We had our real civics lesson, because we lived with our elected officials and leaders. "Cheri we hate to tell you this but starting today at 6pm we're going to have a closing time for the capitol." And they sent in like 200 state troopers, literally 6 of them on either side of me picked my ass up and put me out on the capitol stairs along with the other families. Then we lived there for about two weeks, and then we got notice that now the capitol stairs were gonna be closing, they're gonna have a closing time. So we slept there that night, on the stairs with all the blankets and Tom Ridge, in the middle of the night, at about 3am, it was like the coldest night in October, the governor ordered the removal of all the blankets. So, state troopers came in the middle of the night, removed blankets off of women and children, and I had to go down to Sheetz grocery store two blocks down and beg them for plastic and cardboard, or people would have gotten hypothermia. And the Democrats knew the whole thing taking place through this whole horrible process, and it was that night I was born. That was it. Because I learned that there's a crossing point, at some point basic things like humanity, and staying alive, and little kids, and you don't do something about it, you're just as responsible as the removal of the blankets. It became clear then, but then I stayed in the Democratic Party.

MATT: Okay let's discuss that.

CHERI: I stayed in the Democratic Party until one day, I just did what a lot of people did, I just became anti-political. That's it. Fuck the Democrats, fuck the Republicans, fuck electoral politics. That's basically the point I got to. Then there was these crazy people that knocked on the door. I was at my office. Two sets of crazy people. One was a very powerful Democrat, probably the most powerful Democrat in the state of Pennsylvania, I won't say his name. He's still...

MATT: I think I know who you're talking about.

CHERI: You probably know. The most powerful, okay? He said, "Cheri, make a list of everything you want." He was like, "wouldn't you like a new office?" all these kinds of things, okay. So then two days later, this other group of people came into the room and then said, "Cheri, hi I'm from the Green Party, and we have this great idea. We think that you should run for office!" I said, "Oh really, well what office?" and they said "well, we were thinking that if you ran for sheriff, we could take the foreclosure issue and bring it to the national arena, and we know that you're passionate about homelessness and foreclosure and stuff like that." And I looked at them and laughed and said "obviously you didn't vet me very good, like I have over 200 arrests." And I said "you know what? This happened for a reason." And so I got myself a horse from some of the drug dealers in the neighborhood, I got myself a hat, and I rode through Kensington and announced that I'm the new sheriff in town, and that if people vote for me, not only would I halt all home foreclosures, I'm not gonna evict you either, until there's some changes that happen in the city and that people have access to affordable housing. So I literally had entire crews of like bikers and every group of people that you could possibly imagine, all the bars around here and

that kind of stuff were all working on my campaign. So we're all still starving, we all still need money.

MATT: I know, and you ran for Vice President of the United States.

CHERI: Oh! I forgot that part.

MATT: Yeah, it's easy to forget...

CHERI: The short version is that running for political office is similar to having a semi truck come and run you over, and then they back up and run you over again.

MATT: You two were arrested trying to get into one of the debates, one of the presidential debates, it was one of the more famous parts of that campaign.

CHERI: Jill and I were then taken ten miles away in a paddy wagon, into a warehouse, in a room full of metal chairs, and both Jill and I were met with about 30 Secret Service officers, and myself and Jill were put on the metal chairs and handcuffed sideways for nine hours.

MATT: So you survived.

CHERI: So we survived and now Jill and I are suing the ten corporations that make decisions on who gets to be a part of the presidential debates. So that's things like United Airlines, I think IBM, I can't remember all the particular corporations, but it's ten corporations that control the debates. So we're suing the ten corporations while she's running for President.

CHERI: So the March for Our Lives is gonna happen on opening day of the Democratic National Convention, July 25, at 3pm. We are going to march up Broad Street in Philadelphia, and so our fight is to get the idea out there, that we don't have to live like this and we can truly have another party in this country, and it doesn't have to be funded by corporations. We are going to march to the doors of the Democratic National Convention, at the end we are going to be joining Dr. Jill Stein in a massive tent across the street, and she is going to have a power rally. Immortal Technique, rapper Mic Crenshaw, Ethel Long-Scott, lots of amazing leaders from across the country will be speaking at the power rally, and everything will just go smooth and great. The happy part of the story is that I've begun to get emails and calls from people that have decided that they're done and that they want to register Green. There's actually entire unions that I'm in conversation with. That's the other hopeful thing—these secret conversations that are happening with all kinds of city workers and stuff that are *done*.

MATT: Any audience members of this podcast, there will be some people listening to this who are in prison, who will get to listen to this or will get a transcript of it, and...

CHERI: I'll write you if you write me!

MATT: That's a very nice offer! Do you have any special messages for them?

CHERI: You know, hold on to hope. There's good people that are out here on the outside, and we're trying to figure out how to have the rest of you join us out here to make a better world.

MATT: Fabulous, thank you so much. That was a wonderful conversation.

CHERI: Wonderful. Thank you I'm so glad you're doing this! That's awesome!

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JORDAN MCINTYRE, *The Thread*: Check out *The Thread's* "Working Principles" on our website. We encourage groups and individuals in agreement with our working principles to start study groups around the podcast, provide feedback to the show that we can incorporate into our future podcasts, and to send in movement announcements for events related to defeating mass incarceration. We'll read those at the end of each show in this announcement section. For now, check out The March For Our Lives, taking place in Philadelphia on July 25th. Find info at defeatmassincarceration.com.

MATT: Thanks, Jordan. That's one of our interns here. We will be at Philadelphia Fights Prison Healthcare and Re-Entry Summit networking on June 15th, and also Chicago's Socialism Conference for 4 days July 1-4 of jam-packed revolutionary organizing and education so I hope to see you there. Please send us feedback, announcements, and suggestions through the website. Email us at brokenonallsides@gmail.com or write to us at 419 Johnson Street, Suite 102. Jenkintown, PA 19046. If you have a loved one in prison, or a friend, you can print out a transcript of the show and send it to them. Look for transcripts on our website, defeatmassincarceration.com. If you're looking for more info on some of the topics in today's interviews, there will be show notes with links below each show, this week's is Episode 1, on the website, defeatmassincarceration.com. If you like this podcast, pass it on to other activists and organizers, or people just getting involved; and please make a donation through the website. We do this out of our own pockets and we need help continuing this work. You can also book me for a speaking engagement, guest lecture, or presentation of *Broken On All Sides*, my documentary about mass incarceration to support this work. We do this show because after great work has been done to educate and agitate, successfully raising public consciousness over the last several years, we must now prioritize organization over agitation to be most effective in furthering the struggle. That's one our Working Principles. For a full list of our Working Principles, go to defeatmassincarceration.com. The next show will have part two of our interview with Kinetik Justice, and much more so tune back in July 1st. My name is Matt Pillischer, this is *The Thread: A Podcast Against Mass Incarceration*. The struggle continues.