

The Thread: a podcast against mass incarceration Episode 2 Transcript
Guests: Maya Schenwar, Kinetik Justice



Matt Pillischer, The Thread: Today on *The Thread* we have Maya Schenwar, author of [Locked Down, Locked Out, Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better](#); and we have part 2 of our interview with Kinetik Justice, talking to us from his cell in solitary confinement for the leadership role he's played in Alabama prison organizing. [MUSIC STARTS]

Maya Schenwar: Prison started as a reform. When we think of reform in that context, as like something that is well meaning that can ultimately end up expanding the system, I think when we think of it that way we kind of get a better grasp of what we're up against.

Kinetik Justice: This is not really the truth about crime and punishment, and the question is not about truth, because this is an economic system, and its about the money and at the end of the day it's about the bottom line on the ballot sheet. [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 also see on our website with lots of activists and organizers across the country. Our amazing interns are Jordan McIntyre and Zach Sturiale, both of whom you'll hear later in the show. The theme music is from friends at the awesome Die Jim Crow project, check it out at diejimcrow.com. We welcome study groups that are listening to this and we look forward to your feedback. Today we'll explore with Maya Schenwar the hidden dangers that prison reform can bring if you don't have a long term vision for change, and if you don't include people directly impacted as drivers for that change; and we'll continue our conversation with Kinetik Justice about organizing behind the wall, the recent Alabama prison strike that he helped organize, and how he found politics inside prison.

Matt: Maya Schenwar is the Editor in Chief of TruthOut, at truth-out.org. She is the author of [Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better](#) and the editor of the new book from TruthOut and Haymarket Books [Who Do You Serve, Who Do You Protect: Police Violence and Resistance in the United States](#). Zach and I talked to Maya via Skype.

[INTERVIEW BEGINS]

Matt: I guess I wanted to start by digging into the whole idea of reform vs. revolution or total transformation of the system, and what really piqued my interest was the article you did in April that was talking about this very issue and looking at it through the lens of Alabama's recent proposed reforms and sort of the history of reforms in Alabama state prisons, which you would probably agree are often well-meaning, sometimes they're insidious, but a lot of well meaning

people want to provide reforms without either thinking long term how they'll actually roll out and have an impact on the people that it's meant to help, or even including those people as part of agency in the process and ideas for change. So can you just talk a little bit about that in general and maybe some examples and then I can ask some follow up questions in terms of the Alabama examples.

Maya: Yeah, absolutely. The proposals that are coming up, and this is on the federal level, on the state level, on the local level, meaning jails; a lot of the proposals that are coming up are for these kind of fine-tuning fixes—you know people talk about “fixing” the criminal justice system or getting “smart” on crime instead of “tough” on crime. This is very appealing when you're a politician, and it's a strange logic when you compare it to other abominable institutions that have existed throughout history, right, like “okay we have this putrid institution that was founded on white supremacy, that was founded on slavery” but the reform rhetoric talks about “okay well the system itself needs to be here, we need to have a prison system; so we need to fix all the things that are wrong with it.” As if you can have that system without those features, without racism, without classism, without homophobia and transphobia, and sexism and all those things. Also, it presumes that you can have a criminal punishment system, or what people call a criminal justice system without injustice. One of my favorite examples of reform efforts that actually expanded the system is in Illinois there's a program called The Moms and Babies Program. It's for women who give birth in minimum security prison and it allows them to remain with their babies after they give birth by actually incarcerating the babies as well, like keeping the babies with them in prison. So they have special cells so they can have their babies with them and there is additional features, additional programming to help them with parenting. So this program was partially funded through a federal grant and it's definitely been showcased all over the place as an example of a way to address a very serious and heartbreaking problem within the prison system. Of course, you look at what that's actually doing: it's expanding the system, it's increasing funding, it's actually putting more people in prison because babies are in prison as well. So, the assumption is “okay these people have been sentenced to be in prison, so even after they give birth they must be in prison,” that goes unquestioned, whereas you kind of take one step back from that logic and you say “okay, what is the purpose of them continuing to be in prison?” If you continue to follow that question you start to ask “Well is anything that they've done in the past indicative that they would actually harm society, or that this would harm society more than continuing this situation in which they're separated from their community and from the rest of their family with their baby in prison?” And of course a prison is not an ideal place to raise a baby so it brings up questions of whether this is actually having a positive effect on the child other than being with the mother in prison. So part of the things that I've tried to do around this reform is really challenge that assumption that these people who are qualifying for this program need to be in prison at all. My sister raised a really good point on this subject. So my sister was in and out of prison and jail for about a decade.

Matt: And she gave birth behind bars, right?

Maya: Right, she had a baby while she was incarcerated in Illinois and she did not qualify for Moms and Babies program. And the reason for that is that in order to qualify for this program, you basically have to have such a spotless and practically completely clean record that it's questionable why you're in prison in the first place. My sister talked about it as it's usually first time nonviolent offenders who have a spotless record inside of prison—they're serving short sentences. So my sister didn't make the cut because she had previous offenses, and so she was asking “what would it take for the reform to be just not incarcerating them?” and “How much

less expensive would that be?” and ultimately “What would that do in terms of having a positive function for society, for people to be able to raise their children on the outside?” And, you know, that doesn’t mean you don’t support them at all, that doesn’t mean you just open the gates and say “okay here you go, have your baby.” Actually I would argue that some of the money that is being spent for this reform program to kind of create this wildly artificial environment that allows for babies to live inside of prison, spend some of that money on things like prenatal care and early childhood education/healthcare and all of these things that would actually support a mother in caring for her baby on the outside, and supporting a better life for both of them.

Matt: What came to mind when you were talking is that its a problem that actually people think this is a humane solution

Maya: Exactly. When prisons were introduced, you know the modern prison is 200 years old, when it was introduced it was introduced as a reform. Previously the main forms of punishment were corporal punishment and capital punishment. There were like 28 crimes that were punishable by death in the 18th century in the United States. There was the sense, particularly among progressive people, that there needed to be a mode of discipline and a mode of punishment that actually let people live. So prison was seen as a route to redemption and a route to rehabilitation. This was seen as something that allowed people to go and spend time by themselves with God.

Matt: We’re here in Philly, so the Quakers—just Monday night I was in Eastern State Penitentiary and sort of reminded every time that you go there the idea of penitence and what an advance they hoped it would be and just seeing that people were going nuts in solitary confinement.

Maya: Prison started as a reform. When we think of reform in that context, as like something that is well meaning that can ultimately end up expanding the system, I think when we think of it that way we kind of get a better grasp of what we’re up against.

Matt: I do a lot of work with the Quakers, so I know they do a lot of really good work but it’s one of these examples—and as a follow up question, obviously there have to be some reforms that the left fights for because there’s gotta be stepping stones from what we have now to abolition, for example, if you and I agree on that, and that the idea of moms being with their newborn babies we would both agree is really important, but we also know that there’s not going to be this instant shift of letting out new mothers. So, I guess to sort of push on that a little, do you think that involving people who are impacted themselves would have some help in deciding what reforms make sense and would be more livable with in the short term as we work towards more total transformation?

Maya: Definitely. And I think that that’s why any activism that’s happening around prison needs to involve people who are incarcerated and people who have formerly been incarcerated.

Matt: I really like how you talk about prison and the criminal justice system as isolation and confinement, and I guess I would add marginalization, because what you were just saying is like you don’t want to transform incarceration—like it’s not enough to decarcerate all those people then on house arrest, like you’ve said before, because it’s still isolation, confinement, and marginalization, and in some cases it’s actually worse because people can’t take care of themselves if they’re locked in their homes. So I think thinking of it in those terms as you’ve

described it, as isolation and confinement, and making sure any reform that we're advocating for doesn't just transform the way we're isolating and confining and marginalizing people, makes a lot of sense. I mean some of the examples that I had brought up was the ankle bracelets, was the house arrest. A lot of people are advocating for life without parole as a replacement for the death penalty, which is just death by incarceration. So all these things are not thinking about the underlying, I guess, real purpose of the system. [to Zach] Do you want to ask some questions?

Zach Sturiale, The Thread: I was thinking about it earlier and you said you have to break through this whole divide and even the people who have good intentions who have like the power in politics to do things about it, their good intentions only go so far, and it stops with people who are still incarcerated and we have to give these people the terms, they don't think outside the box ever—and when they do think outside the box it's not great things... So one of my questions was—from reading one of your articles you were talking about the predictive policing, which is thinking outside the box, like “let's create these open-air prisons outside of prisons,” which especially around here, like in Camden, NJ, which is probably the most surveilled city in the United States- like 80% of the city is under watch by the police department at all times, and you were saying about body cameras too, and that was something I hadn't read and because body cameras seem like great things but you're always being watched by the police and we're living in like a police state. So, I was wondering if you had any suggestions for reforming policing in a way, in American communities, whether it's focusing on effectiveness, which people are always so focused on—especially after “broken windows” policing, or like harmony in the community, which seems like more of a goal you'd want.

Maya: Yeah absolutely. I think one of the things we need to be conscious of—I feel this so strongly in the realm of policing right now, because even more than prison reform, police reform has been kind of at the forefront of national conversations, particularly over the past almost two years now because of Black Lives Matter. I think that it's immensely valuable that this debate is happening and I feel like this movement has just really brought some issues into public consciousness that have always been around, but were just not talked about in mainstream circles, regarding the fact that policing is grounded in white supremacy, that policing—the way it happens in the United States—is fundamentally an anti-black practice. But of course a lot of the reforms that are being proposed are just kind of remaking the system in it's own image and I think the body cam is a really good example. When I first heard about that proposal I was like “oh yeah that makes sense—filming is good” and then I started talking to more activists about it, more people within the movement, and it was like “oh right, which direction are those cameras facing?” If those cameras are on, they're filming us. So I think we have to ask ourselves a few questions whenever we're thinking about police reform, and these for me are drawn from one of the activists I admire most on these issues, Mariame Kaba, who was until recently here in Chicago, she's an activist and abolitionist. She says that there are a few questions that you should ask yourself whenever police reform is proposed. Now, one of those questions is basically, “is this reform advocating for more police?” When you get beyond all the fancy language about community policing and people-conscious policing, and working with the community, is this reform actually adding more police? Another question is, “is this reform actually giving more money to police departments?” And that's a challenging thing—its the same thing as when we were talking earlier about prison reform, that sometimes you think “we need policing to be better,” and therefore it needs more funding. Anytime you are appropriating more money for the police, you're building it up, you're expanding it—just as we do with the prison industrial complex. Given that policing is a fundamentally flawed, and fundamentally racist practice in this country, that's something that we don't want to advocate for. I think another one,

and this ties in with the surveillance aspect of your question, is, “is technology involved in this reform?” I think that’s so tricky because it’s so easy and so appealing for us to reach for tech fixes. They sound so good. They sound so good partially because they’re often not real. So these are some of the questions that we need to be asking ourselves, but I think that there are reforms and there are incremental steps that we should be supporting. That’s something in TruthOut’s book that just came out, Who Do You Serve, Who Do You Protect, that we really emphasize. We do not want to say it’s “abolish police or nothing.” That’s not actually going to get us there in pragmatic terms. We want to advocate for, again, that simultaneous perspective of “okay we have this long term vision of moving beyond police, as well as we know them,” and at the same time we’re advocating for incremental steps towards less policing and more accountability. For example, one of the incremental steps that I love are proposals that advocate for reparations, for survivors of police violence. In Chicago we passed an amazing ordinance, a reparations ordinance for survivors of police torture under police commander Jon Burge over the course of a decade in Chicago. It was just a number of black men who were tortured by the Chicago Police, a number of which were kept under wraps and many of them were sent to prison for decades after they had been tortured. This very wide-ranging reparations package was passed after decades of activism. Really, it was transformative; it included incorporating the police torture into the educational curriculum for the kids in the Chicago public schools, so kind of changing the way history is taught, that’s a transformative step. It included not only providing monetary reparations for people who had suffered torture, but also establishing a psychological center specifically geared towards survivors of torture, where they would have a chance for healing and future generations would have a chance for healing, and that healing was prioritized. So a number of these steps. Also, free college education for the survivors and their families. So these types of steps are really hopeful. I think also just anything that’s de-funding, that’s reducing police budgets is something that we need to advocate for, not only because police are bad, but also because that funding is taking away so much money from other important things in city budgets. Cities are being defunded because of the police, like services who actually serve people. Such as roads that don’t work or medical centers that are being shut down, and schools that are being shut down, while police funding increases. So I think that we need to think of defunding the police as not only a step against policing, but also a step in favor of communities. I think another thing that we need to think about in terms of police reform is that idea of reinvestment, and I think this is more broad too, like this is also a step in terms of prison reform, and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights center in California calls this process “Truth and Reinvestment.” You tell the truth about what is happening in terms of the police, you make sure that’s known and that this is an issue that’s widely discussed in real terms, and from that you actually change the way money and resources are spent in a way that there’s an eye to long-term safety. Thinking about reform in incremental change in those terms can be really hopeful and really encouraging. There’s a project also in California, CURB, Californians United for a Responsible Budget, that is geared towards decarceration and simultaneously investing in priorities that build long-term safety and healing. In states that have actually decreased their prison population the most, I think it’s New Jersey, California, and New York, actually have seen a much larger decrease in crime than the national average. So they’ve simultaneously decreased prison populations and crime, and this actually shouldn’t surprise us very much because right now prison is at a level where a lot of experts and “social scientists” are saying that prison is crimenogenic, prison causes crime. Particularly at these high levels, some people say prison has become a factory for crime in certain ways so—

Matt: And certainly the collateral consequences that once you get out it’s just a recipe for crime.

Maya: Right, and definitely the economic effects of families and communities in prison and the high rate of incarceration drive crime. So I think that in a certain way, decreasing prison is harm-reduction for all of us. It's decreasing the harm to both people inside, and also people on the outside—the communities that are suffering as a result of prison.

Matt: To bring it back to Alabama, can you talk a bit about that reform that was proposed there because we had Kinetik Justice on the last show and we're going to have part two on this show, and he talked a bit about, the reason they launched a prison strike early was because of the bill that you brought up from your article in April that was proposing new replacement prisons in Alabama for the old, decrepit, crumbling prisons. I think this is one reform that people doing this work have to really grapple with because people who have been doing this work long enough and see the conditions know that things are falling apart, they're unsafe, they're crumbling, we should be living in safe conditions as long as they are there. But we also know that if we build it, they will fill it, and they often won't close the old ones. So can you talk a little bit about that and the bill in Alabama?

Maya: So when I first started hearing about the fact that there was a plan to build new prisons in Alabama part of me definitely understood why because the conditions in those prisons were so sordidly bad, and like you said, it's like when you get to the point that the prisons are crumbling and there's a situation in place in which people are suffering in the immediate sense, you have to think that obviously some changes need to happen even if they are some changes that you would need to call reform because there's no way they're going to let everyone out tomorrow. So even as you can definitely use that type of thing as an opportunity to push for more decarceration, and push to reduce the numbers of people in prison, you also can't turn it in to an ideological debate when people are suffering. So, for me, what really needed to be critiqued about this bill was the fact that the plan that the government was proposing and that almost passed would've left Alabama with 3000 more prison beds. Within the women's prison it also would have expanded it, so that was this prison, Tutwiler, that's been in the news for years, just how horrible it's been. So a lot of activists really supported building a new women's prison, without noting that there would be an expansion in the number of beds. I think that this is the type of thing that flies under the radar and expands the prison system in spite of ourselves, is kind of these reforms that are proposed in the face of a crisis—in the face of a serious humanitarian situation—and incidentally it becomes an opportunity for the prison business and for construction but also for other kinds of business that are associated with prison expansion to jump in and make money off this type of thing. Part of what I wanted to do in writing about it was just ring that alarm bell and say, "hey this is an expansion." This is not just a plan that's going to cost a lot of money, because that was sort of what was being really criticized and debated among lawmakers in Alabama, was "oh it has an \$800million price tag, and that's bad." But the problem isn't just the money it's that this is actually a pretty substantial expansion, but then you look at what were the major problems at Tutwiler, the women's prison. Well the major problem that was getting so much attention was sexual violence perpetrated by guards. So how will constructing a new prison address that? Now there definitely needs to be infrastructure changes—who knows, maybe they need to tear down the prison and build a new one for other reasons, as long as they're still going to have people incarcerated there. But that solution of building a new prison is certainly not going to address sexual violence and I feel like sometimes it actually gets used as a distraction when this project happens in whatever form it happens. Because it will go through in Alabama in one form or another, it might not be the grand \$800million overhaul, but there will be prison construction of one kind or another. I'm concerned particularly when it comes to the women's prison, so when this new prison is constructed, what are the

fundamental differences that are going to be in place that are actually going to address the sexual violence that's been happening. This is something we need to take into consideration as abolitionists: is sexual violence just something that's inherently part of prison? It's occurred everywhere prison has occurred at higher rates than it happens on the outside. So is that something that we need to confront both in terms of conditions and in terms of challenging the existence of prison itself. So it's a tough situation, since we know we're not completely abolishing prisons tomorrow, we always have to be taking this dual and simultaneous stance. [INTERVIEW ENDS] [MUSIC PLAYS]

Matt: Thanks for speaking to us, Maya. Find links to her books and articles in Episode 2's show notes. Kinetik Justice is one of the founders of the Free Alabama Movement. I had the pleasure to speak with him last month for several hours over two days, and we're airing a portion of this in part two of his interview here. Thank you, Kinetik, for your amazing and inspiring work from behind the wall.

[INTERVIEW BEGINS]

Matt: Hello.

Kinetik: Hey, how you doing there Matt?

Matt: Good, good to hear your you again, how are you doing?

Kinetik: I'm pretty good, I'm getting a little fresh air this morning so I'm doing pretty good.

Matt: Oh okay, I was going to ask, I was curious about that. Are you in the cell?

Kinetik: Today was the first day we've been outside in a month.

Matt: In a month?

Kinetik: In a month.

Matt: Wow, how often are you supposed to get out, or is there any regulation?

Kinetik: We're usually supposed to go every morning, but due to staff shortages, as usual... We have to take the short end of every stick, and they have one or two people who call in sick who are not here, so we take the short end of the stick.

Matt: So, let me pick up where we left off, just talking a little bit more about Free Alabama Movement, and some of the organizing and then I want to talk to you a little bit about some of your political organizing history—sort of where you learned organizing and political theory. It sounds like a major impetus for the strike was the new proposed super prisons, and you wanted to get the word out that changes need to happen now and that you were against the building of new prisons, right?

Kinetik: They actually killed the bill the third day of the strike, the bill was killed. Now they're back to square one on how to deal with this mass overcrowding in the prison system.

Matt: You said of course the facilities are horrible and they should be redone in some way as long as they exist but I think my experience here in Philly with the overcrowding just in our jail system is we have all these ancient prisons that they closed at one point when they built new ones, but they never tear them down, so when we got to the point of massive overcrowding in new prisons, they open up these old ones again that are deteriorating, the ceiling falling down. So what's to stop them from filling all these new super prisons and if it just keeps piling up with more and more people, you see people back where you are again.

Kinetik: Exactly and that's what we knew. This new unit of theirs, as long as the laws are in place that created this prison, you can build a bigger building and you'll have the same problem in 3-5 years.

Matt: Yeah. I heard about this strike even before it was going to happen. I remember I was in Austin, Texas about a month ago doing a screening of my movie *Broken On All Sides*, and there were some actions going on in Texas and I know you have some connections to that, and it was at that point in the air that some stuff was going to go on in Alabama prisons as well.

Kinetik: Across the board, a lot of the issues that we're facing in Alabama are systematic. They're systematic in Mississippi, they're systematic in Georgia, they're systematic in Texas, they're systematic across this country. There's 2.5million of us who are suffering under the same oppression, the same reason; the same pretense, that we're being rehabilitated, that we're being corrected. None of that is actually taking place. In fact the only thing that is actually taking place is that we're being warehoused and worked for free, or for slave wages, and the state, as well as the federal government, are reaping the benefits of labor. Billions of billions of dollars of labor—I think the prison industrial complex amounts to \$500billion per year. So you're talking about a system they put \$80billion into and they reap \$500billion out of us, so it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that this is not really true to our crime and punishment. The question is not about truth and justice, because this is an economic system, and its about the money and at the end of the day it's about the bottom line on the ballot sheet.

Matt: The other thing I think about mass incarceration is there was a massive shift in the economy; not only was mass incarceration a response to the Civil Rights Movement as Michelle Alexander really detailed in [The New Jim Crow](#), there was also such a shift in the economy with jobs evaporating from cities, good paying jobs in black communities, and at the same time the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement is going on, people are demanding their rights and rebelling in the cities, they were also losing their good paying jobs to the non-union South, or the country or the suburbs, or other countries. To me, mass incarceration also seems to be a massive jobs program in a really twisted way, where they've taken the urban poor and Black communities and cities and warehoused them in cages in countries with largely white guards, paying them to guard them. Those same white people would have lost jobs as well in this economy but now they're wrapped in with this criminal justice system, the prison industrial complex.

Kinetik: Exactly. The word that we use is mass unemployment. People have to eat, and people have to live. People choose whatever method they choose to try and support themselves and their families, which is usually some type of crime. Because of their jobs being shipped out of the community, the work force is shifting into the prison system. They brought the jobs *back* from the third-world countries, and placed them inside the correctional facilities. It seemed like it was a step in the beginning to take all the jobs out and when you have mass unemployment,

you're going to have high rates of crime. In response to that they had already drafted up laws with these extended sentences like they were planning for something coming.

Matt: Can you tell me a bit about your background and how you became political? Like, were you an organizer before you came into prison?

Kinetik: Oh, no.

Matt: Okay! So can you talk a little bit about you and sort of your journey to political organizing?

Kinetik: Well, actually, I was wrongfully convicted when I was 20 years old. I was wrongfully convicted and given life without parole, to die in prison.

Matt: How old are you now?

Kinetik: I'm 42 now. As a matter of fact I just had my 42nd birthday was last week, May 5th.

Matt: Oh, happy birthday. Cinco de Mayo.

Kinetik: I appreciate it. But at 20, in fact a month and a half after I turned 20, I was locked up. Needless to say I was angry. I had a lot of anger, a lot of frustration built up. I was destined to implode, to destroy myself, because I just didn't understand how this could happen. However when I first came to prison, my first day in prison, I was placed in solitary confinement as is a requirement when you get given life without parole in the prison system, you're automatically placed in solitary confinement for a 90 day observation. To my benefit, one of the brothers who was in the segregation unit was a politically-conscious brother. One day he asked me if I had something to read, and I said "no I don't ain't got nothin to read but the Bible" so—I'll never forget he sent me a Revolutionary Worker and he sent me a copy of the autobiography of Malcolm X. Those were the first two things that I had in prison to read, and I read over and over and over, a few times; and me and him began to walk and talk on our exercise walks in the morning. But after the 90 days I was shipped to Holman, and I guess it was just in the cards that Alabama had one political prison that they acknowledged in the state: Richard Mafundi Lake. I don't know if you've ever heard of Richard Mafundi Lake but there are books and documents and articles on the work that he was doing in the 60's and 70's in the south. But he had been framed for a rape in Birmingham and he was kangaroo court-ed into the prison system. However, he slept beside me in the first place they sent me in Holman, in the bed that I slept on I slept right beside Richard Mafundi Lake.

Matt: Well they really fucked up, huh?

Kinetik: [Laughs] Yeah. Words can't describe—I couldn't even think of a word to identify him because he had so many books. He had boxes of books on his bed—he had all kinds of literature and this was foreign to me. You know it's my first time in prison and I don't know where I'm at, I've never been here and I don't know nobody here, so I'm kind of disoriented, trying to figure out where I'm at and what's going on and how to survive, and I heard so many rumors and stories about the infamous slaughterhouse of Holman, and they done sent me here, and I came here and Holman maybe in August of 1995, and up until maybe April or March of 1996, I slept beside Mr. Mafundi. The conversations and listening to him he made me reach different groups, made me read things, and we would sit down and talk about it. And a lot of my political

orientation—the vast majority of it—my understanding of politics and the system and the struggle against it comes from Mr. Madundi. A few years after that, after I had been in prison maybe 3 or 4 years I had met a brother named Jesse Morrison, who had come off death row. He had started a Lifer's group, and I became a part of the Lifer's group with Jesse. That further educated me about the politics of the system: what goes on in prison, what's really going on with the system, and what it's all about. Maybe after 6-7 months, brother Jesse was transferred to another institution. I had become a little more aware of what was going on so I began working on my own case in the law library and I had been trying to figure out what was going on and reading books and so forth. Really just going around in circles reading books and copying passages from books and trying to understand the law. Another blessing fell into my lap. Throughout the Alabama Prison System, there's a brother by the name of James McConico, and everybody in the Alabama Prison System knows James McConico. He's a jailhouse lawyer, but he's inclined with the law outside and inside prison. He got himself out of prison back in the 80's. He ran business in society before he came to prison, so when he came back to prison, he created an actual law program where he had a whole curriculum, we had practical applications where when we learned the Constitution and the Amendments—that's the way that you got in the class was you had to learn the Constitution and be able to recite it. Then we got into the curriculum of learning the rules of criminal procedures. Then we actually went through arrest warrants—we would do mock warrants and hold mock hearings. We would do all of the actual paperwork instead of just reading a book, we would actually put it into practical application and our requirements for teaching us this was that we give it back freely. As a result of that we began doing the legal work for people in the prisons. After we went through the first segment of the law class, we went off into journalism. Myself and Melvin (another founder of the Free Alabama Movement) and another brother, we created a GED program and we learned the basics of being able to articulate the things that we had learn. We became more proficient in our legal endeavors in writing and understanding the law, and so forth. We did that for probably 15 years before we came to the format of the Freedom Bill. But over the course of that happening there was something unique about these brothers at Holman and getting things done.

Matt: And I think any revolutionary or radical organizer will say it doesn't matter how much you read about revolution, how much you read about reform, you're not actually doing anything until you're actually organizing. And actual organizing is messy and you learn a lot from the practice of it and I can say that I've learned more from organizing or talking to people like you than from reading books to tell me about theory and practice. So it sounds like you've learned quite a lot by doing the actual work of talking to people, figuring out how to motivate them, how to connect, how to build solidarity, how to face challenges and losses, how to pick up and reorganize.

Kinetik: Definitely, and I tell people I look at it like a chessboard and I'm still kind of in my feeling about the move of the Department of Corrections because I didn't anticipate that move on the chessboard. We had already factored in that it would be too expensive for them to bring free-world workers in at minimum wage to do any of the work in prison. We didn't see the potential of—well at first I didn't think that other people that were incarcerated would go against the grain and work with the department of correction, and undermine it, something that benefits them. So I guess you have to understand what motivates people in different situations. Like I said yesterday, I don't know what they promise these people, if they threaten them...if we don't take those lessons and apply them, we're subject to repeat those same mistakes. So we'll step down, step back, and accept the victory of defeating the prison bill, and forcing the issue for them to deal with us more fairly and equally. And while they're trying to figure out ways to get

around this, I'm gonna be figuring out ways to put more pressure on to make them do what they're supposed to do.

Matt: This one was built and much bigger than the one in 2014 and I think the threat is still there for the administration.

Kinetik: Well, I think administration is still shaken about their ability to organize across lines, different institutions because they promote a divide and conquer type of mentality, an individualistic. "What are you doing here, that ain't got nothing to do with you, this is none of your business," if you came to prison by yourself, they promote "I-ism" and "I-sim" and the individuality so to see people put that individuality aside and to unify completely shook them.

Matt: So, I know you said you were originally planning for the strike to happen September 9th in conjunction with the anniversary of the Attica uprising, but it seemed like the bill proposing new prisons being built, with that looming and also the conditions being so horrible inside you decided to launch it early. What about the plans for September 9th, are you still planning further actions?

Kinetik: Oh, yes. We're definitely still pushing that agenda.

Matt: Right, great. And it sounds like that's really going to be a national effort across many states.

Kinetik: That is our goal, and it is our hope, and it's our vision that over the next few months the IWOC and all other affiliations that we deal with on the outside will get as much information into these different prison system across the country. Well it's been ongoing for maybe 6 months now, of the education process of trying to get information out there to different groups in organizations to get on board, let the people that you know that are incarcerated, let the family members involved know. Any way possible to just get the word out, you don't have to make any great sacrifices or pay any money, you don't have to do nothin violent, you don't have to do anything strange or outrageous. All you have to do is simply stop. Or as the article we have says, "*Let the crops rot in the field.*" So that's what we're pushing, the crops in the field and they're waiting on us to harvest them. So they can make their profit. But we're promoting that: the crops are in the field and *we gonna leave em out there.* Let em rot in the field!
[interview ends] [MUSIC PLAYS]

Jordan McIntyre, The Thread: That's our show for this month. Last month's episode featured Cheri Honkala, of Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, and part one of our interview with Kinetik Justice. Check out The Threads's Working Principles on our website. We encourage groups and individuals in agreement with the working principles to start study groups around the podcast, provide feedback around the show that we can incorporate into 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 July 25th; The Socialism Conference in Chicago July 1-4th, and screenings of Matt's film, *Broken On All Sides*, in Yellow Springs, OH on July 11th, and Columbus, OH, on July 12th. Find details at defeatmassincarceration.com. Please send us feedback, announcements, and suggestions either through the website or email brokenonallsides@gmail.com, or write to us at 419 Johnson

Street, Jenkintown, PA 19046. If you have a loved one or friend inside prison, you can print out a transcript of the show from our website to send them, or contact us to send to them directly.
[MUSIC CONTINUES]

Matt: If you like this podcast pass it on to other activists and organizers, or people looking to learn more about mass incarceration. Please make a donation through the website. We do this out of our own pockets and need help continuing to do this work. You can also book me, Matt Pillischer, for a speaking engagement or presentation of my documentary, *Broken On All Sides*, to support this work. We do this show because *we must identify and argue against ideas that would divide or weaken our movement*. That's one of our Working Principles. For a full list of Working Principles, go to defeatmassincarceration.com. Upcoming shows will feature interviews with Lynn Burke from North Carolina, Theresa Shoatz from Philadelphia, Five Mualimm-ak from New York City, and Mike Huggins from Philly. The struggle continues...

[MUSIC CONTINUES AND THEN FADES]

[END]