

# **ATTICA INTERVIEW PROJECT**

## **REPRESSION, RESISTANCE, SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

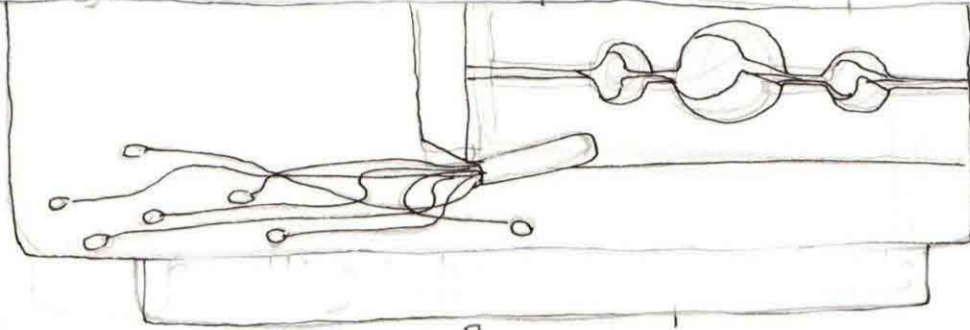
**A zine published September 2016  
on the 45th anniversary of the 1971 Attica Uprising**

***CRITICAL  
RESISTANCE*** 

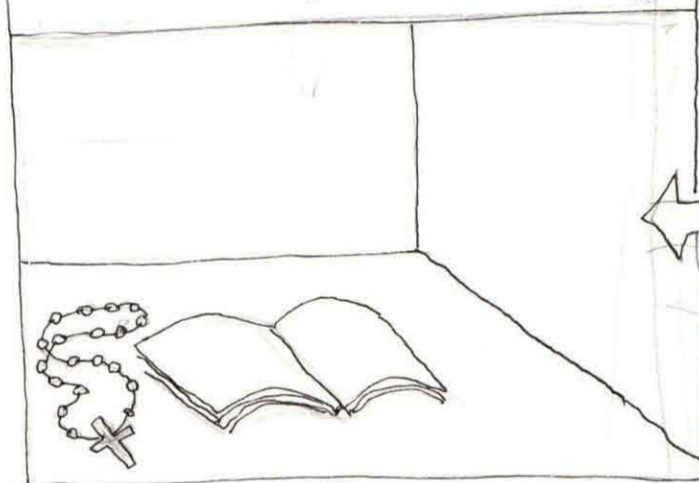
**A project of Critical Resistance - New York City  
Artwork by Anu Biswas**

Personal narratives in this zine are sourced from  
CR NYC's Attica Interview Project.

The US prison system developed out of reforms to push the state to move away from torture and spectacular corporal punishment; however, by design, the system continues to criminalize poor, black, brown, and queer people. The reform resulted in two initial prison models.

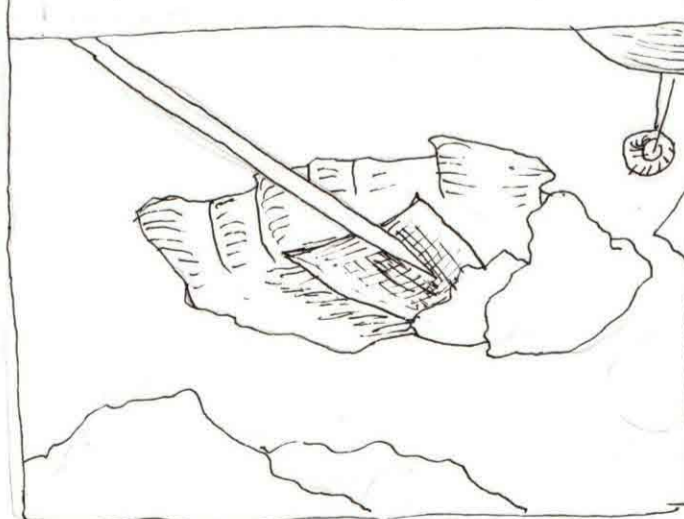


First, the Pennsylvania Penitentiary



The Penitentiary model used isolation, work, and religious study to promote "rehabilitation" for prisoners.

Then, the New York (Auburn) model



This model was a reform of the cruelty and isolation of the Penitentiary model. Auburn promoted collective hard labor alongside the discipline of silence.

However, because the prison system is inherently violent, the very practices these prisons were designed to reform crept back into the prisons. Solitary confinement and corporal punishment including water cure, sweat box, and whipping cure, all began to be used within prison walls. The torture of solitary confinement remains widely used today in prisons all across the US.

Prisoners at Auburn worked together during the day, and the profit from their labor was used for the maintenance and general reproduction of the prison under this "contract labor" system. Other states adopted this model called the "Auburn System."

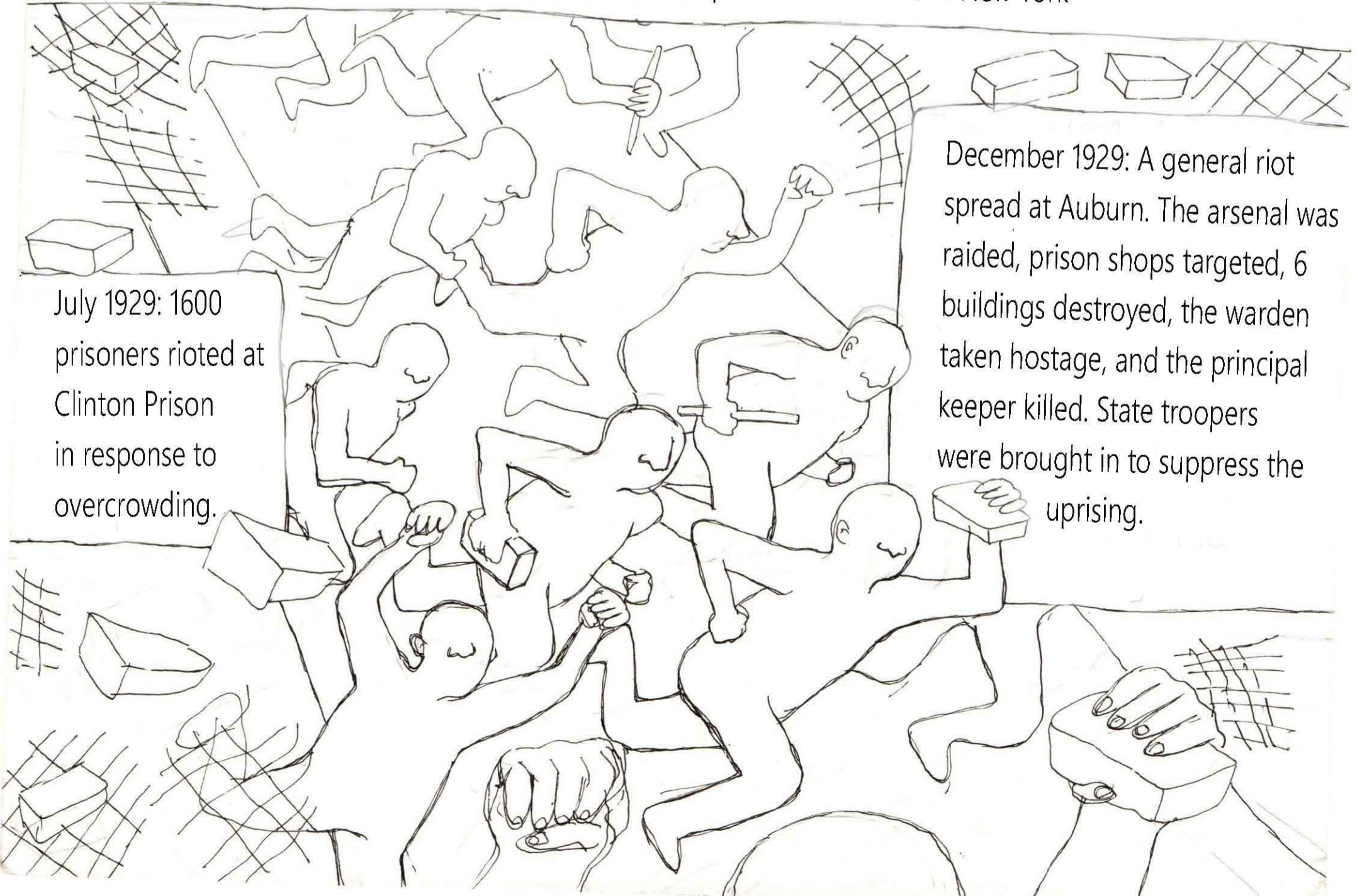


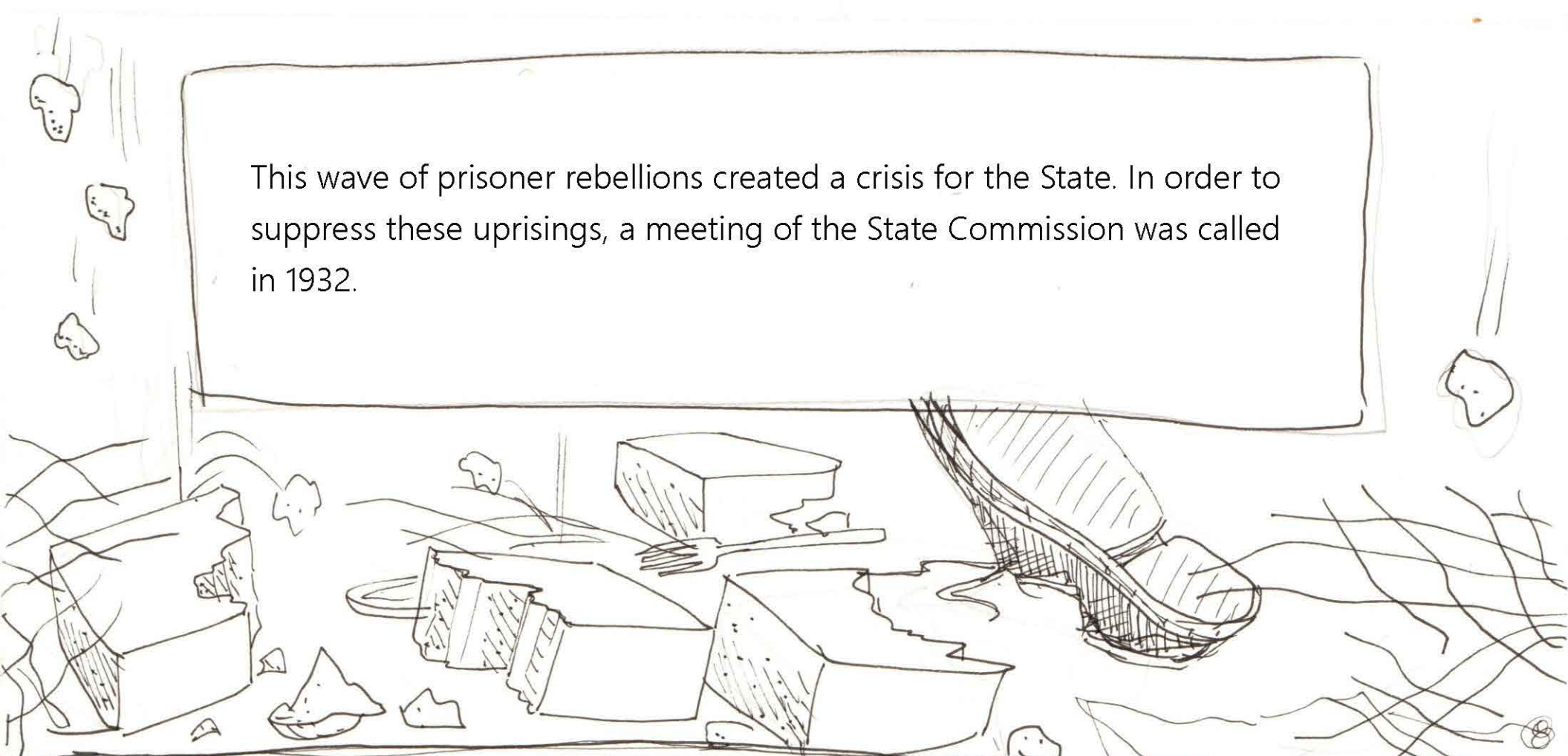
It took years of resistance from free and imprisoned workers across the state to abolish contract labor in New York in 1883. But as the prison system grew, tensions mounted within each prison--a response to the inhumane conditions of imprisonment.

The late 1920's witnessed a wave of prisoner rebellions in New York


July 1929: 1600 prisoners rioted at Clinton Prison in response to overcrowding.

December 1929: A general riot spread at Auburn. The arsenal was raided, prison shops targeted, 6 buildings destroyed, the warden taken hostage, and the principal keeper killed. State troopers were brought in to suppress the uprising.



A hand-drawn illustration showing a chaotic scene. In the center, a plate with a fork and knife lies on a surface, surrounded by several broken plates and a spilled drink. The background is filled with scribbled lines and small, scattered shapes, suggesting a state of disorder or aftermath.

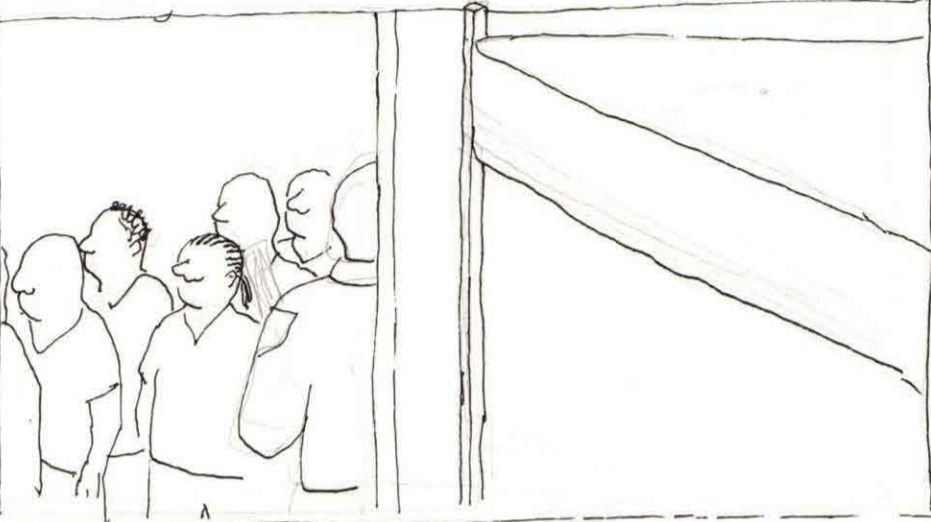
This wave of prisoner rebellions created a crisis for the State. In order to suppress these uprisings, a meeting of the State Commission was called in 1932.

A hand-drawn illustration of a meeting. Five men are seated around a large table. One man in the center is wearing a military-style cap. The men are dressed in suits. In the background, there is a window with curtains and a framed picture on the wall. The drawing style is simple and sketchy.

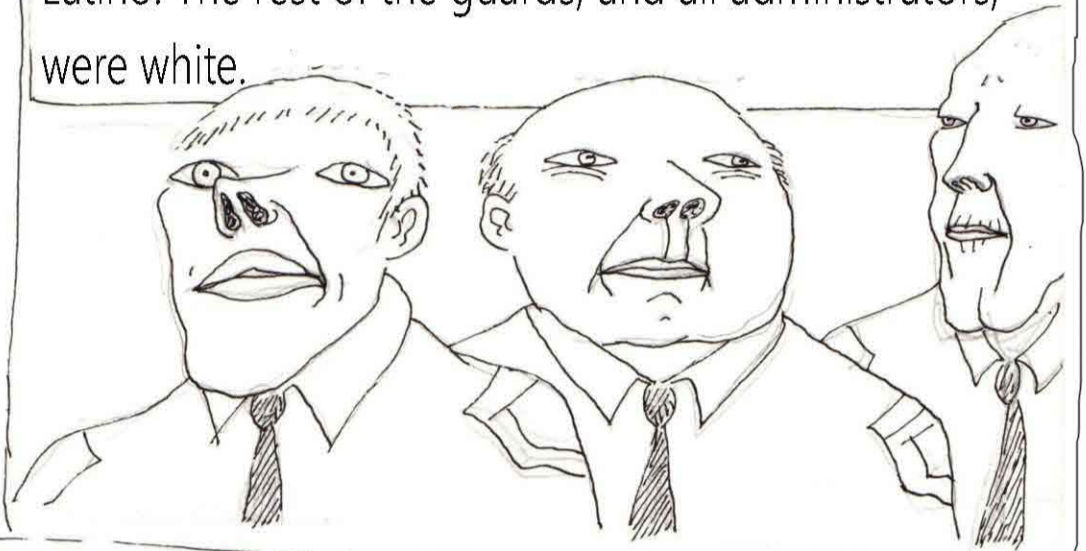
The State Commission proposed a new model--the reform prison at Attica. As with prior reforms, the construction of Attica, designed as a Super Maximum Security prison, was merely a perpetuation of the injustices of imprisonment.

Conditions at this reformed prison were inhumane and oppressive:

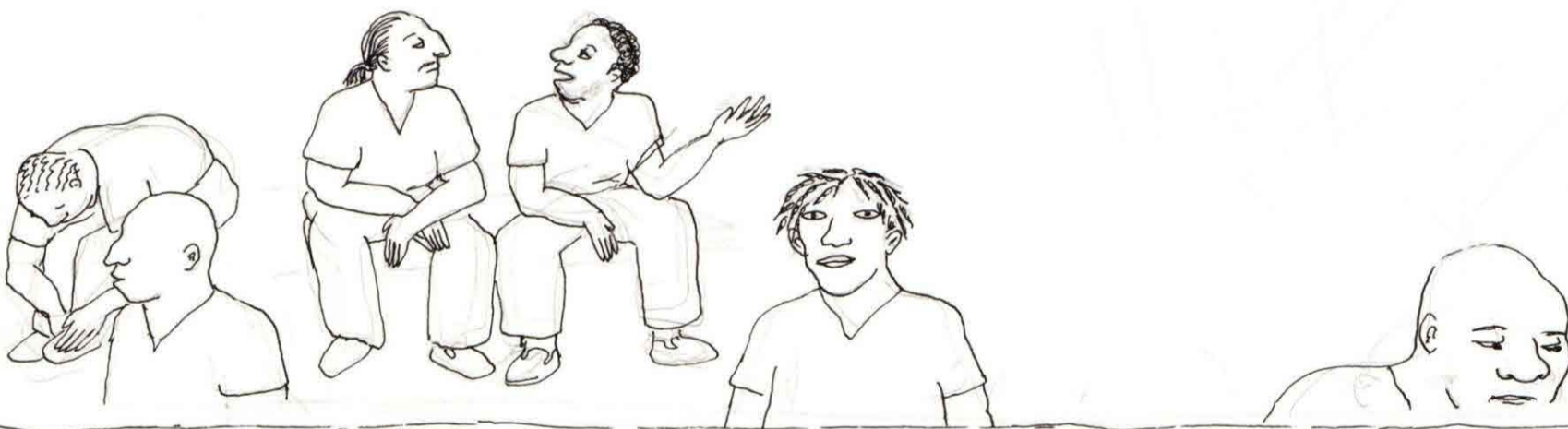
By 1973, there were over 2200 people locked up in a prison built for 1600.



At the time, just 1 out of 383 prison guards was Latino. The rest of the guards, and all administrators, were white.



...while 54% of prisoners were black, 9% Puerto Rican, and 40% under the age of 30



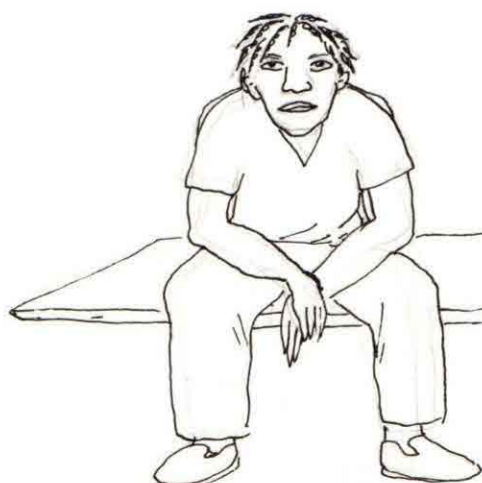
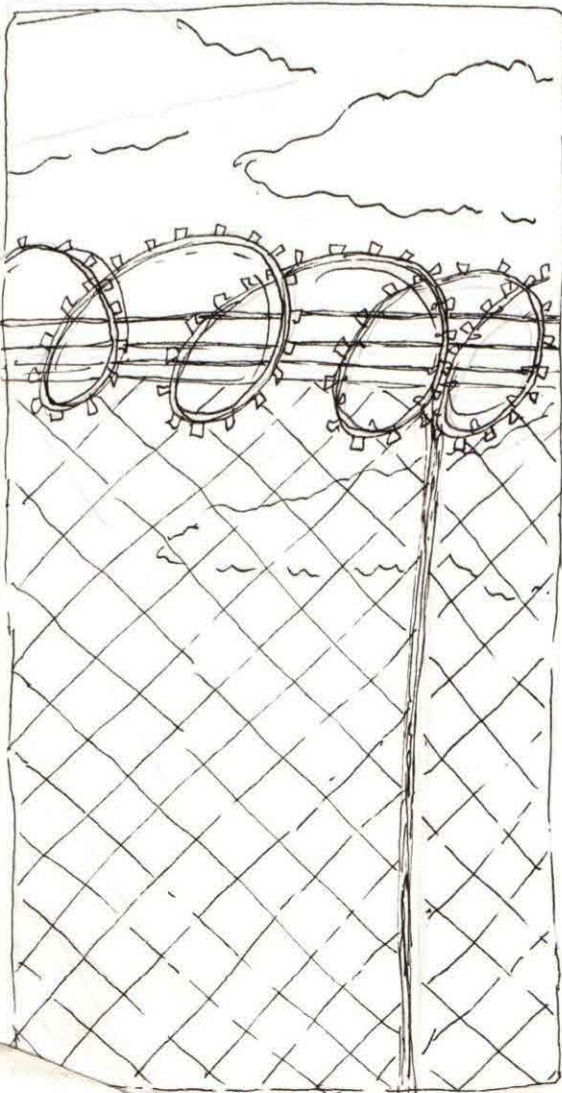
It cost \$8 million to run Attica in the year 1971-2

That amounted to \$8000 per prisoner.

most of this money was spent on Correctional Officer's salaries at 62%.

prisoners at Attica spent 14 to 16 hours a day in their 6x9 foot cells.

And they also worked about 5 hours a day. And were paid between 20c to \$1 for the day's work.



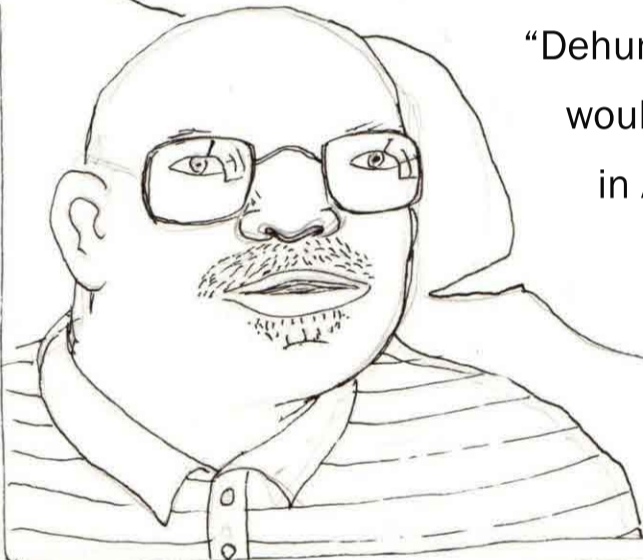
Attica, 1971

By 1971, the pressure in Attica was mounting.

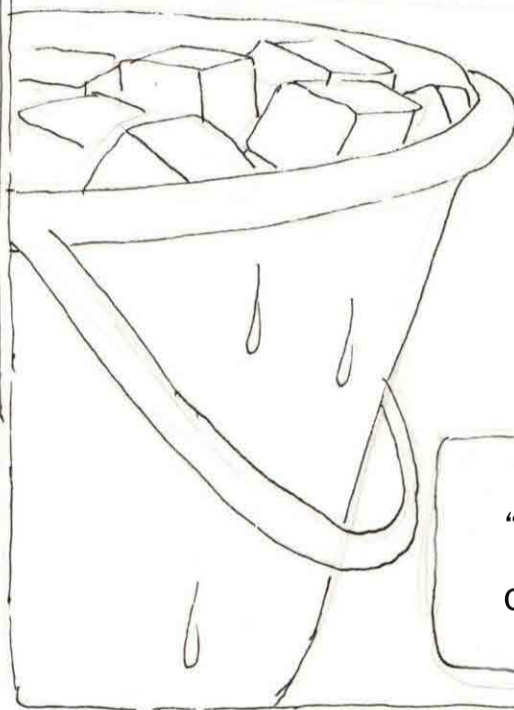
As prisoner Frank "Big Black" Smith offered:

Conditions in 1971 was bad--bad food, educational programs, low wages, what we called slave wages. One shower a week. They didn't have any kind of positive recreation for us,

"Dehumanizing," the word would be for conditions in Attica in 1971.



Attica was also segregated: from haircuts to resource distribution such as ice on the 4th of July.



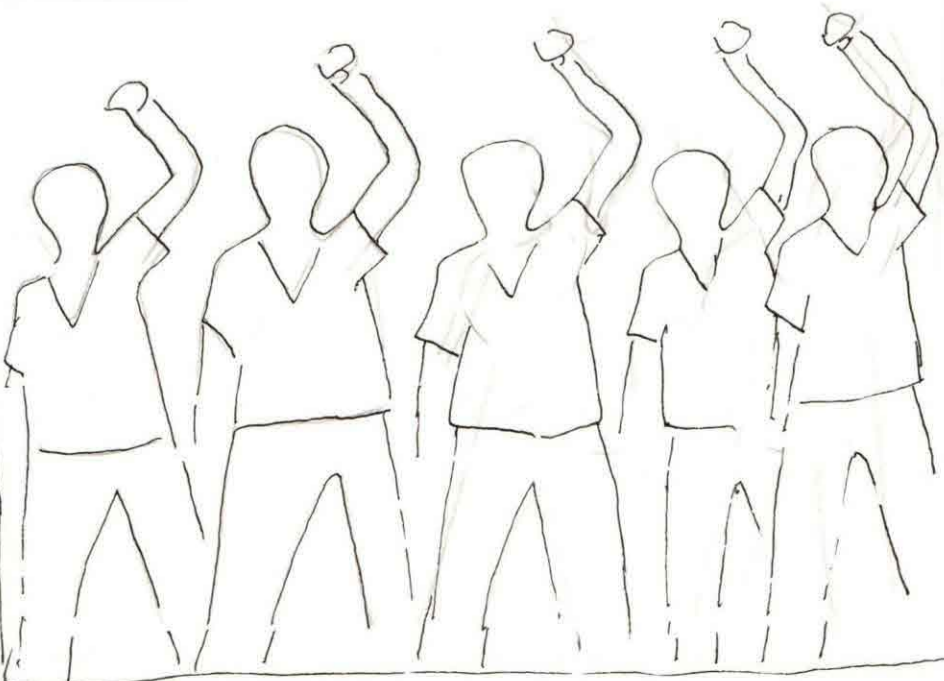
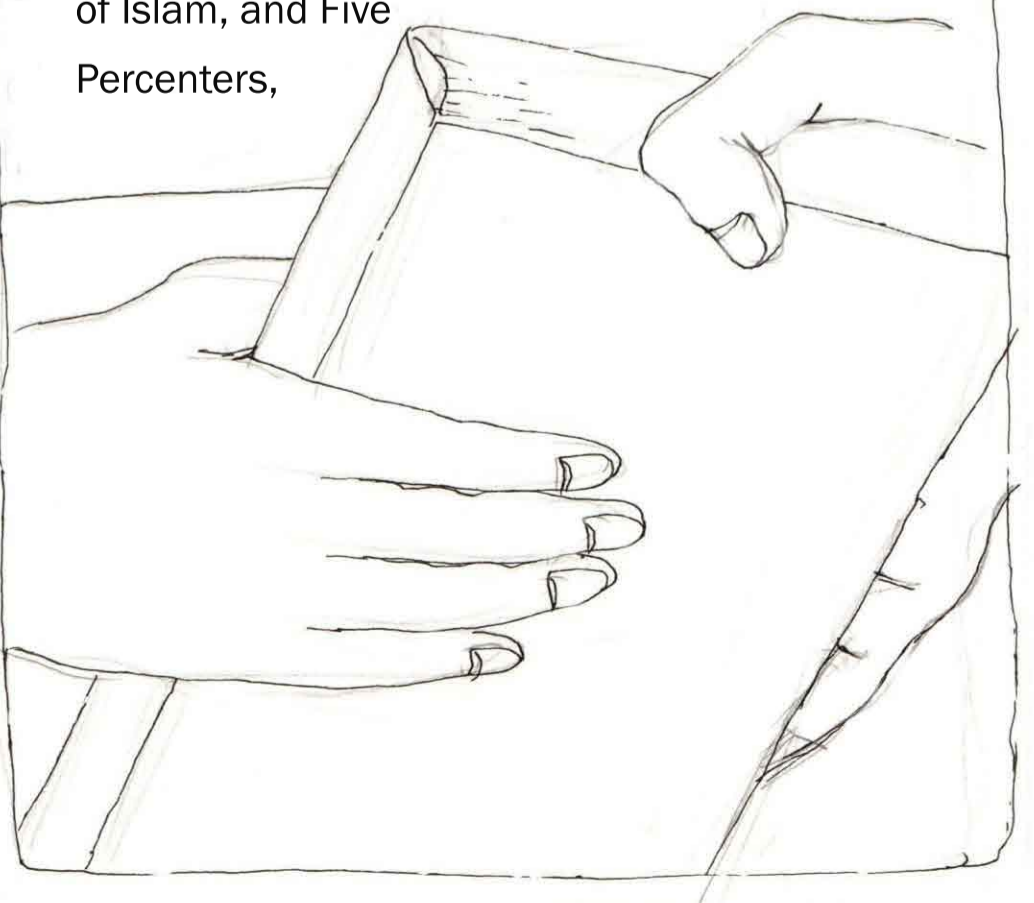
"White ice" reserved for white prisoners.

"Black ice" tossed out to the rest.

As conditions worsened, the culture of active resistance within the prison grew.

From May to June 1971, five prisoners, all seasoned activists, joined to form the Attica Liberation Front

That summer, prisoners formed study and discussion groups led by peers with affiliations to the Black Panthers, Young Lords, Nation of Islam, and Five Percenters,



This activism led to a set of 27 demands put forward by prisoners:

"Adequate medical conditions"

"Legal representation during hearings"

"Adequate visiting conditions"

"An end to segregation"

"End political and racial discrimination"

"Employ prisoners as workers on scale wages"

"End the escalating practice of physical brutality upon New York State prisons"

"Allow the inmates to support their own families"

--These are just a few of the demands put forth by the prisoners.



Resistance: Jazz

From an Attica Interview Project interview with Joseph "Jazz" Hayden from Harlem who was imprisoned in Attica from 1970 to 1971, right before the rebellion:

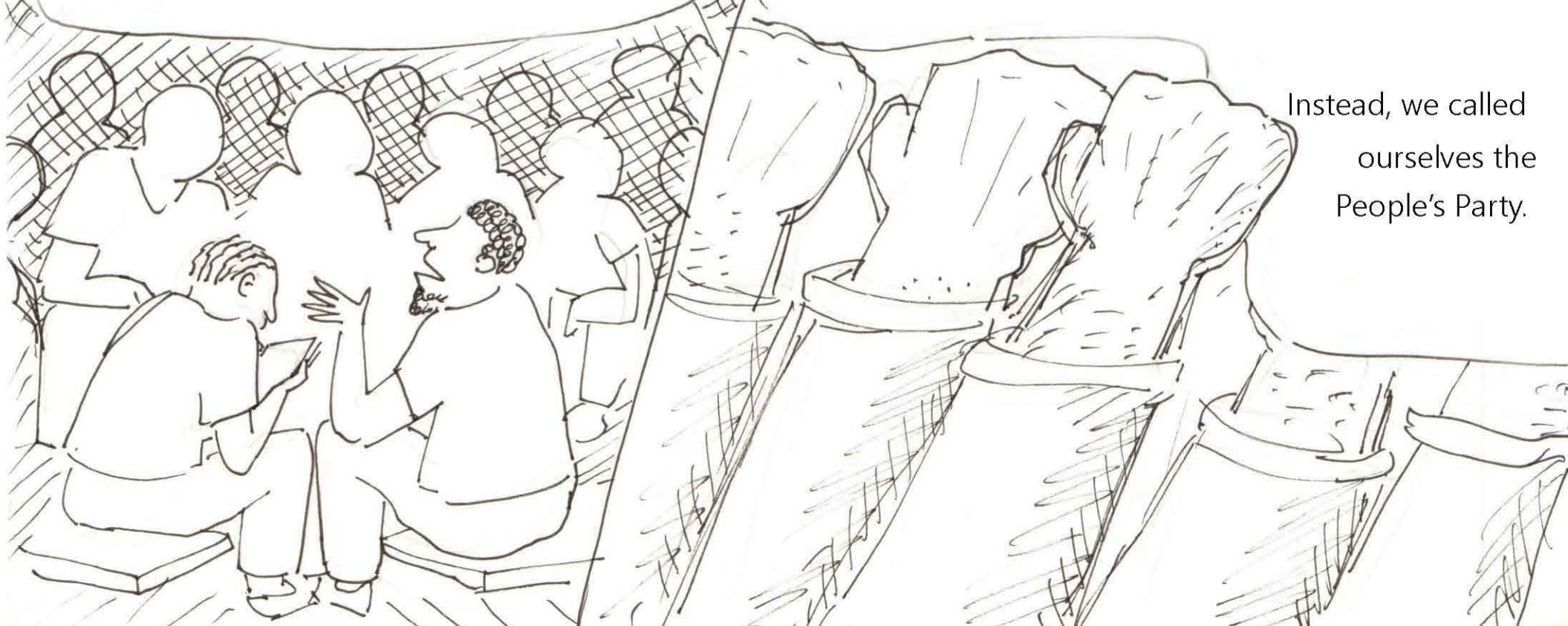
The Attica yard was like a university. With the population of activists and college students and then the so-called "criminal element," they all blended together and began whole classes in the yard.

Classes on everything, every struggle going on in the world. It was like a college campus, literally.

And we began to educate ourselves, we had study groups and group exercises, everything to build unity.

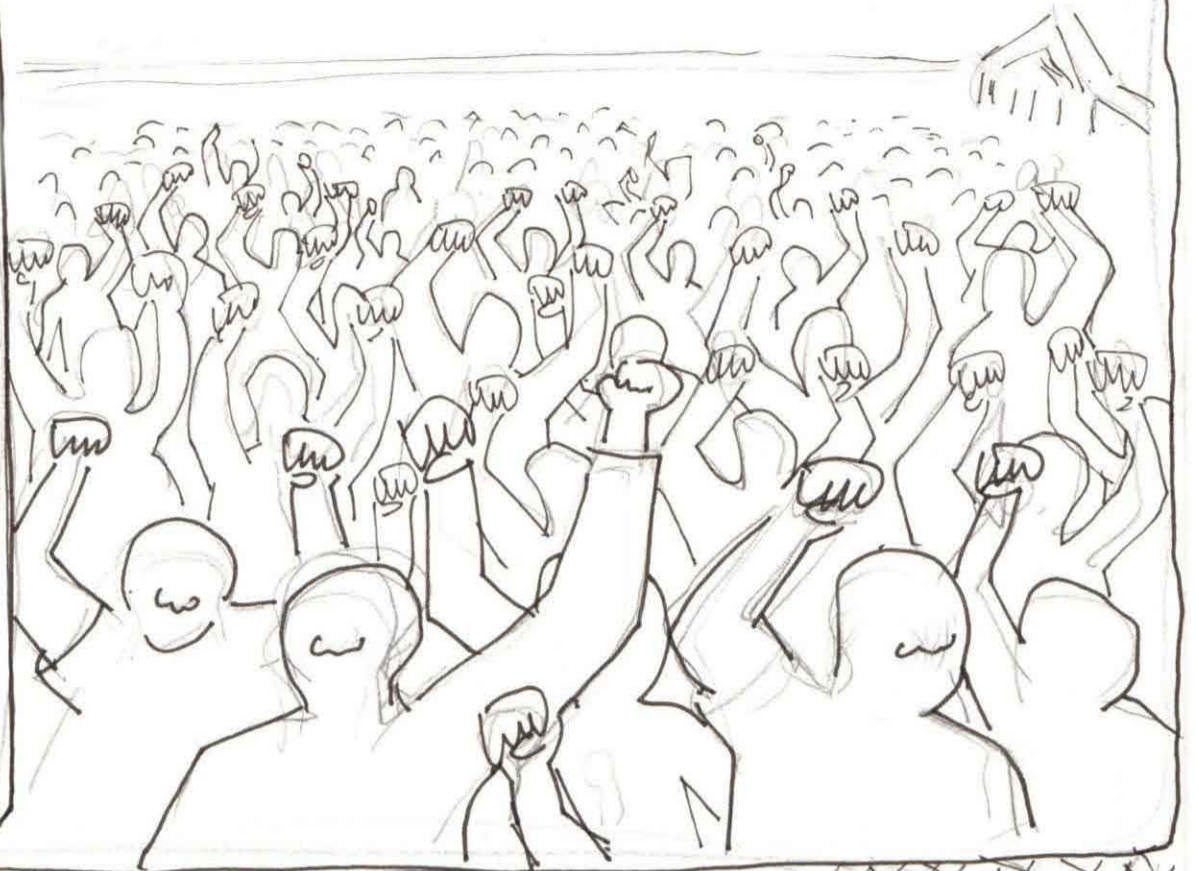
All the labels, the Weathermen, the SDS, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, all that was jettisoned.

Instead, we called ourselves the People's Party.



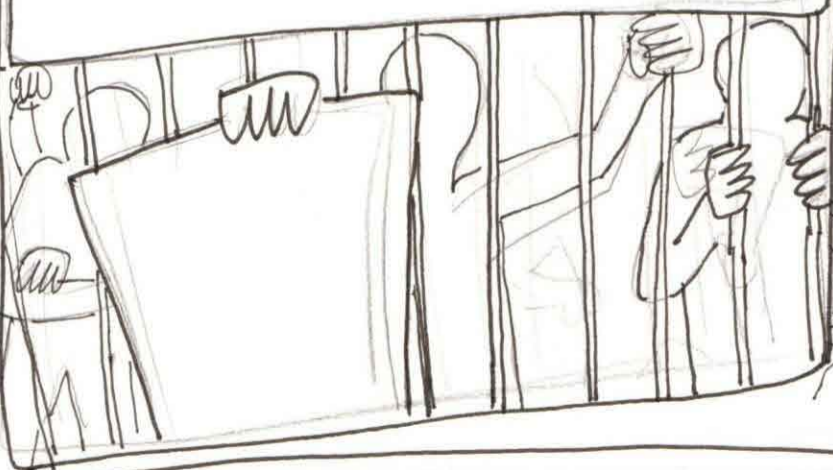
From September 9th to 13th 1971, prisoners took over Attica in what's known as the **Attica Rebellion**.

Prisoners united to take control of security, education, and general operations during the rebellion.

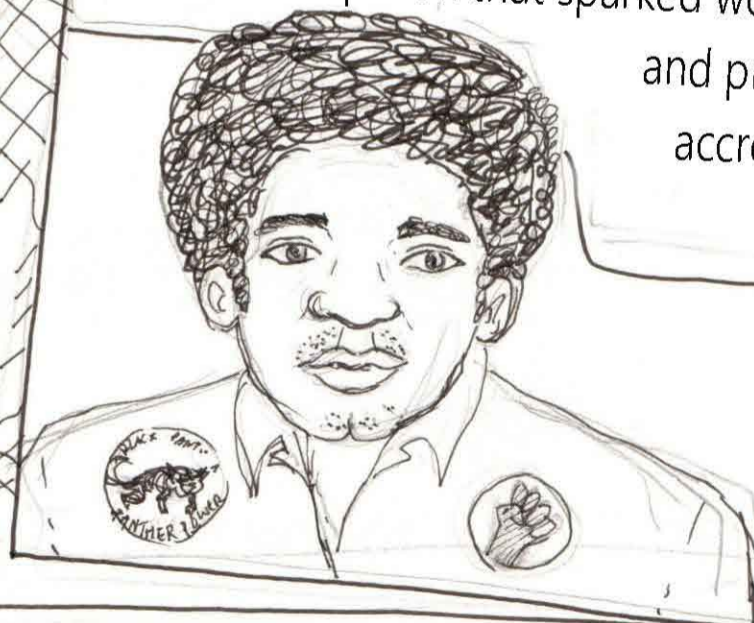


The Attica rebellion was immensely powerful, however, it was not an isolated or exceptional event.

The Attica demands were inspired by the **Folsom Prison Manifesto** written in 1970, accompanied by a strike of 2400 prisoners.



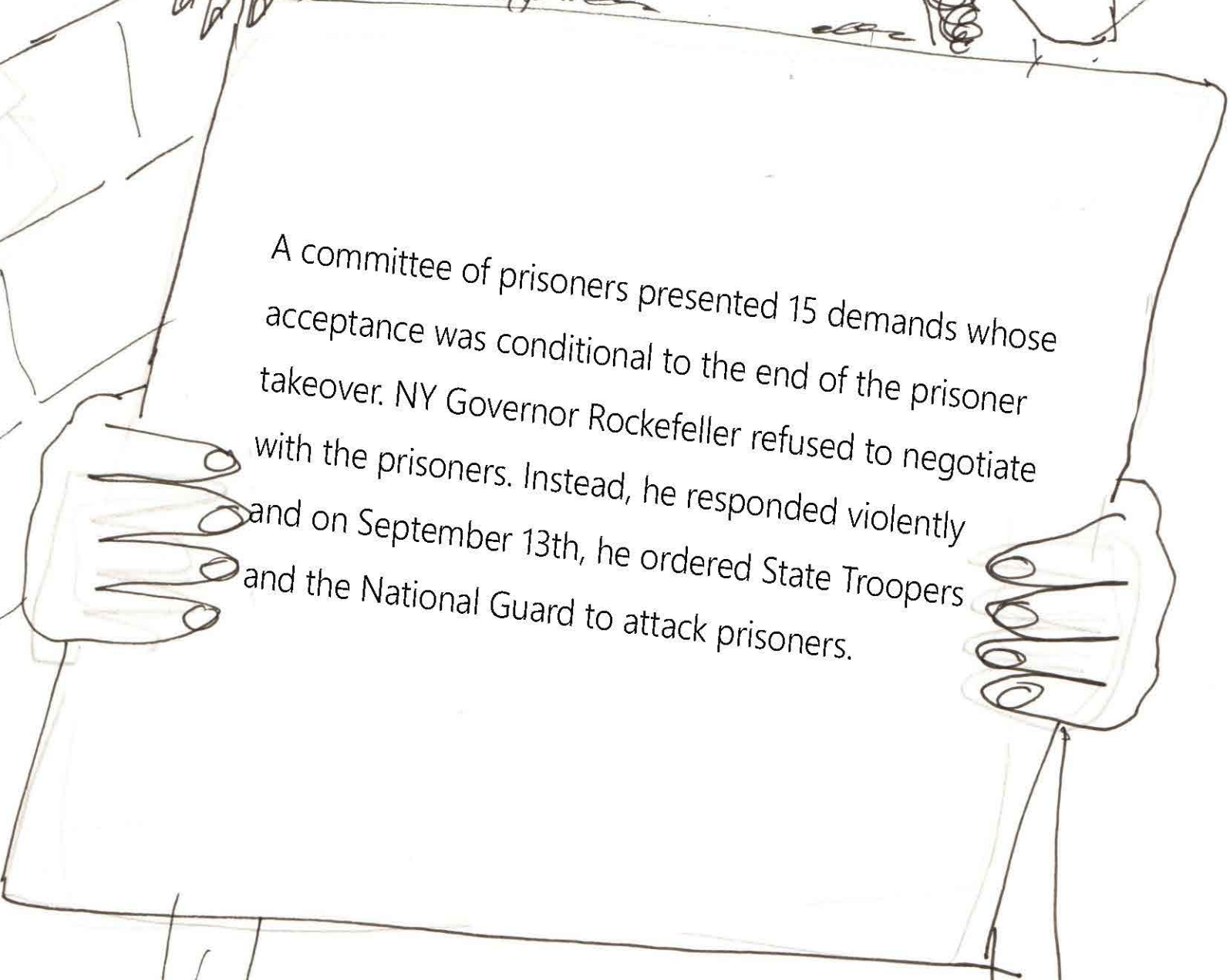
The rebellion also followed the political assassination of George Jackson in the San Quentin prison that sparked work stoppages and protests in prisons across the country.



These events of 1970-1971 are some of the many that made up a wave of resistance to the Prison Industrial Complex from within the system itself, and an international context of revolutionary demands being made inside and outside prisons for liberation, and for racial and economic justice



On September 9, 1971, prisoners took over D yard and then the whole of Attica.

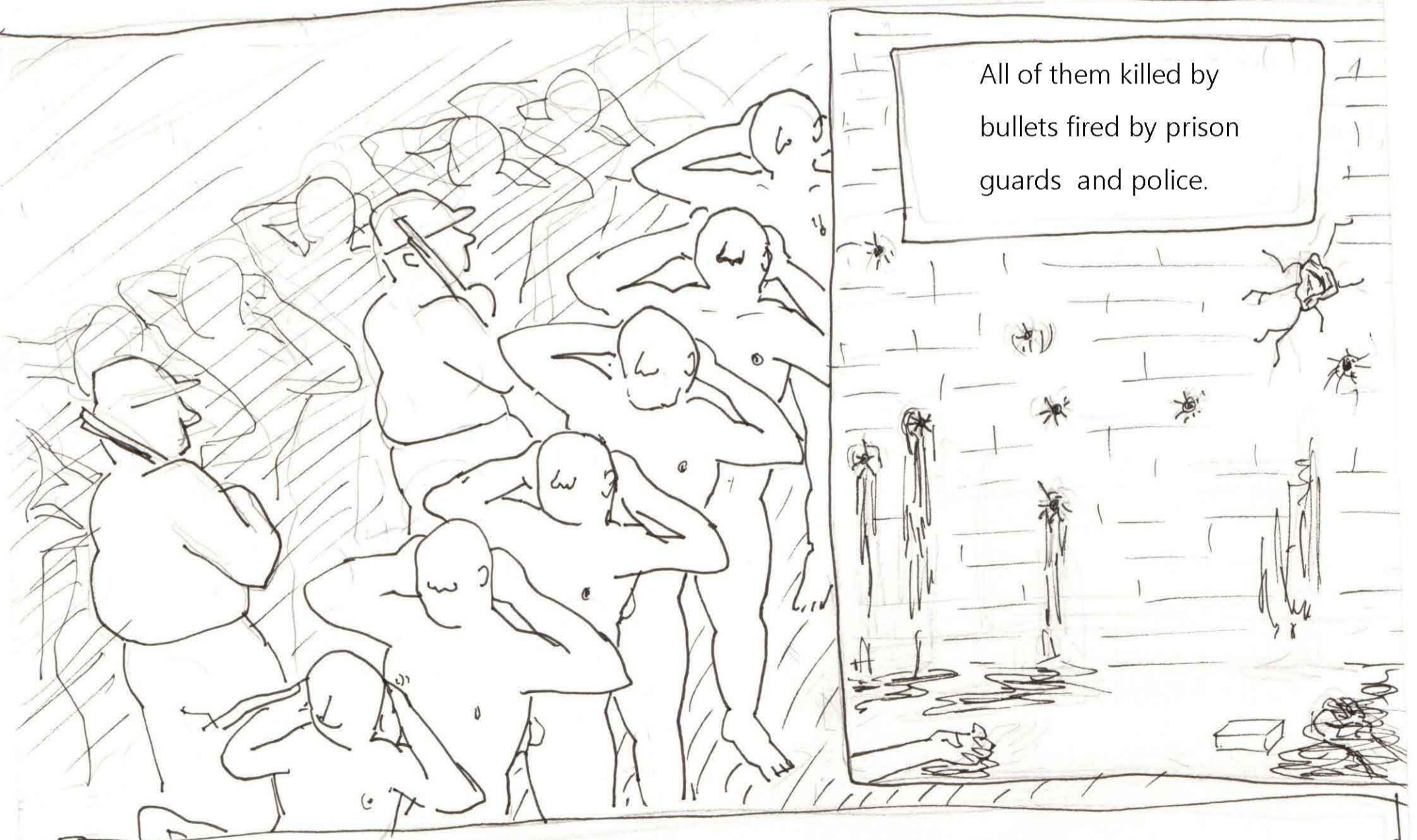


A committee of prisoners presented 15 demands whose acceptance was conditional to the end of the prisoner takeover. NY Governor Rockefeller refused to negotiate with the prisoners. Instead, he responded violently and on September 13th, he ordered State Troopers and the National Guard to attack prisoners.

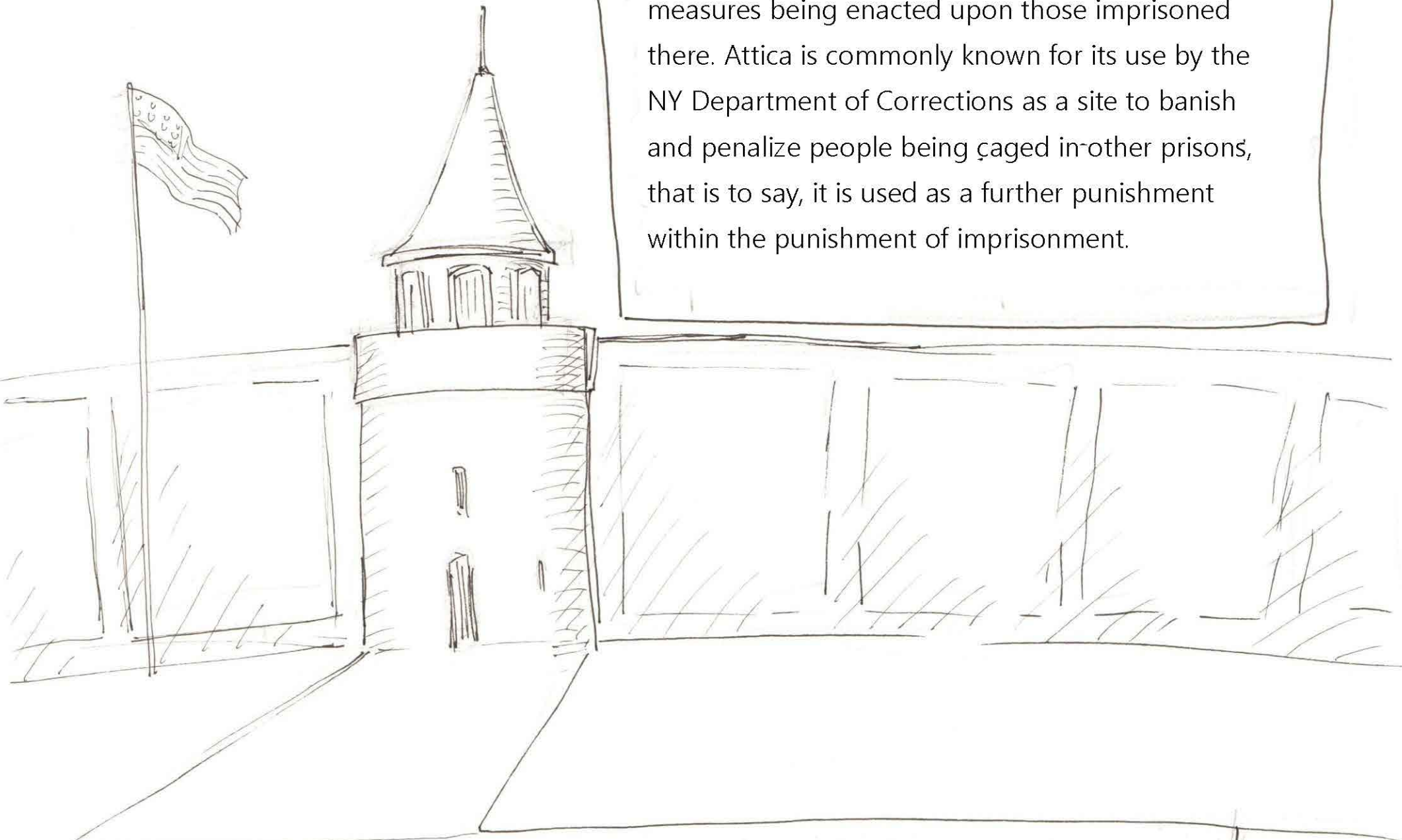
Hundreds of unarmed prisoners were shot in this attack. Those deemed leaders of the rebellion were specifically targeted for assassination. 39 prisoners and hostages died on "Bloody Monday."



All of them killed by bullets fired by prison guards and police.



The Attica rebellion remains a symbol of both state repression and struggle for liberation. In the years that followed the rebellion, its legacy was invoked and organized around by activists and intellectuals inside prisons, struggling for freedom, and by state officials struggling to maintain and expand the prison industrial complex in New York.



Attica has remained open, with even more repressive measures being enacted upon those imprisoned there. Attica is commonly known for its use by the NY Department of Corrections as a site to banish and penalize people being caged in other prisons, that is to say, it is used as a further punishment within the punishment of imprisonment.

The Attica Interview Project includes the experiences of those imprisoned at Attica post-rebellion. Their stories have been woven into the narrative of this story already, and we now highlight:



Repression

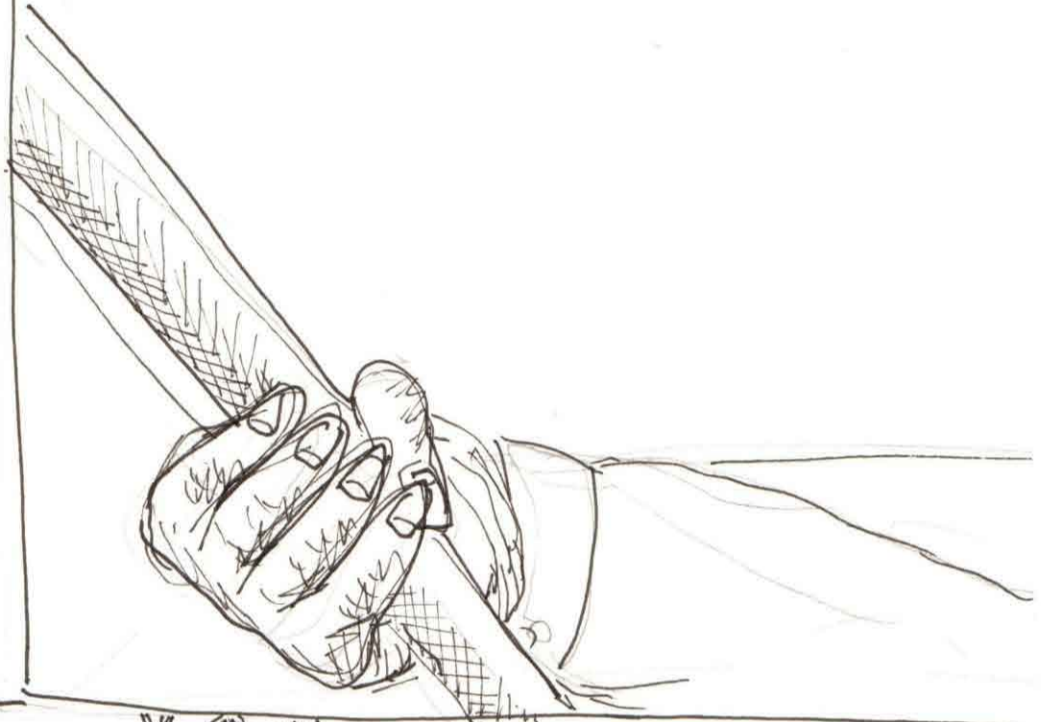
Resistance

Social Transformation

Between 2013-2014, the Attica Interview Project interviewed several people formerly imprisoned at Attica. What follows are accounts of their lives in prison, and their experiences of repression, resistance and social transformation. Here is an account from a person known as S.

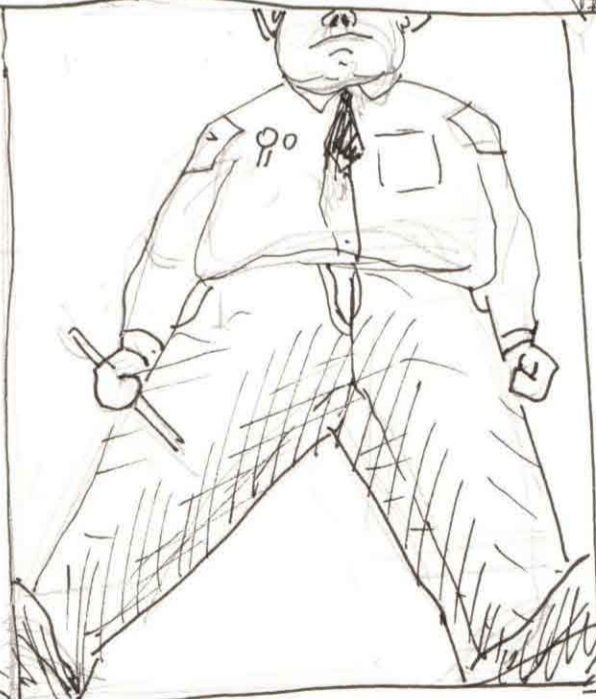
They stand in a group with their batons, holding them like rifles. Just looking at you with a really intimidating look, up close. Praying for a reason to just pull you over, put you on a row...

Repression: S.



...wait til everyone disappears...

...And then just beat the hell out of you and send you out to a box. With a new charge and all kinds of injuries.



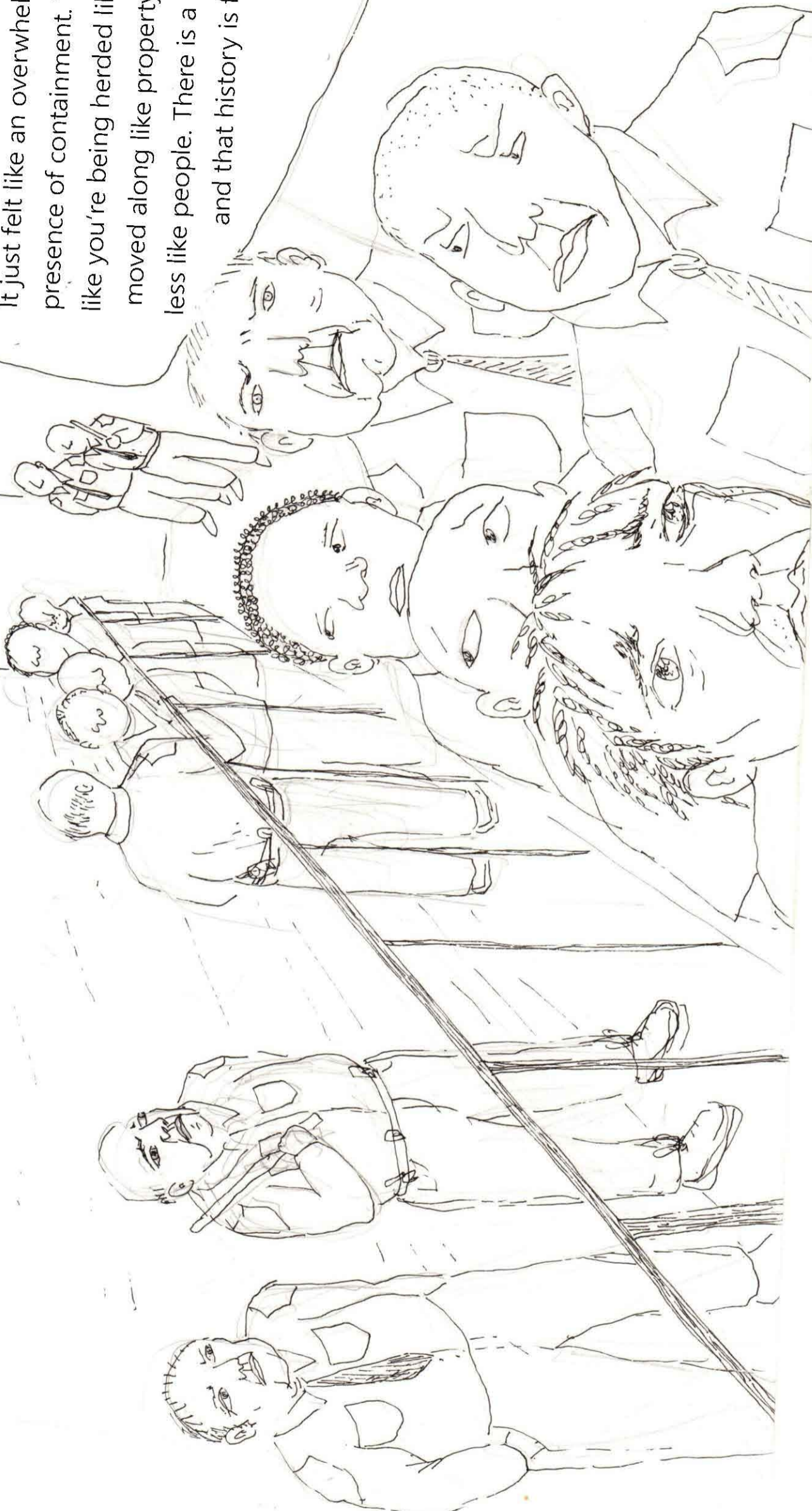
They always wait for everyone to leave so there are no witnesses.




Repression: Five

Attica has a system of ticketing and violations and every movement seems watched, limited, and pressured; so it seems like a smaller prison in some sense. They don't let you walk without stopping. There's always a guard escorting you. They direct you and poke you in your face and tap you.

It just felt like an overwhelming presence of containment. You feel like you're being herded like cattle, moved along like property more, less like people. There is a history and that history is felt.



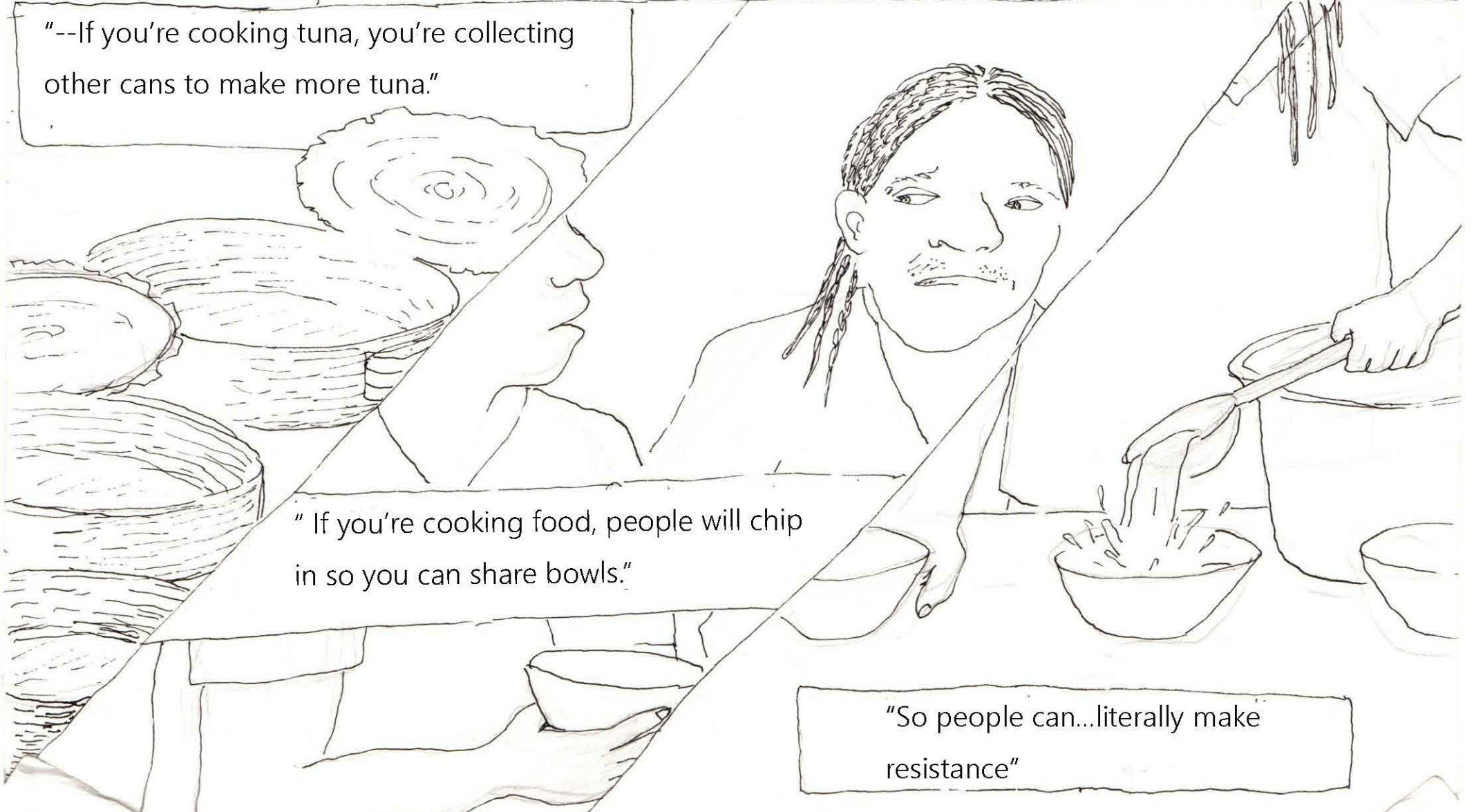
Resistance: Five



"There was a ritual. Every year, people would share their food. This was in remembrance of The Attica riot. And we'd try to have silent memorials. Whereas people go into the mess hall, pick up their fork, put it down, sit down. And it makes a statement. We've been trying to keep that up continually every year. You have people supporting other people on a tier with food so that they can do the protest. And so each tier works together on those days--".

Five Muallim-ak is a human rights advocate. Having returned directly from isolation and incarceration at Attica, he now works to support those who return to society from solitary confinement/incarceration. Five has founded the Incarcerated Nation Corp., which provides resources to incarcerated individuals and their families.

"--If you're cooking tuna, you're collecting other cans to make more tuna."



"If you're cooking food, people will chip in so you can share bowls."

"So people can...literally make resistance"



Resistance: Miss Major

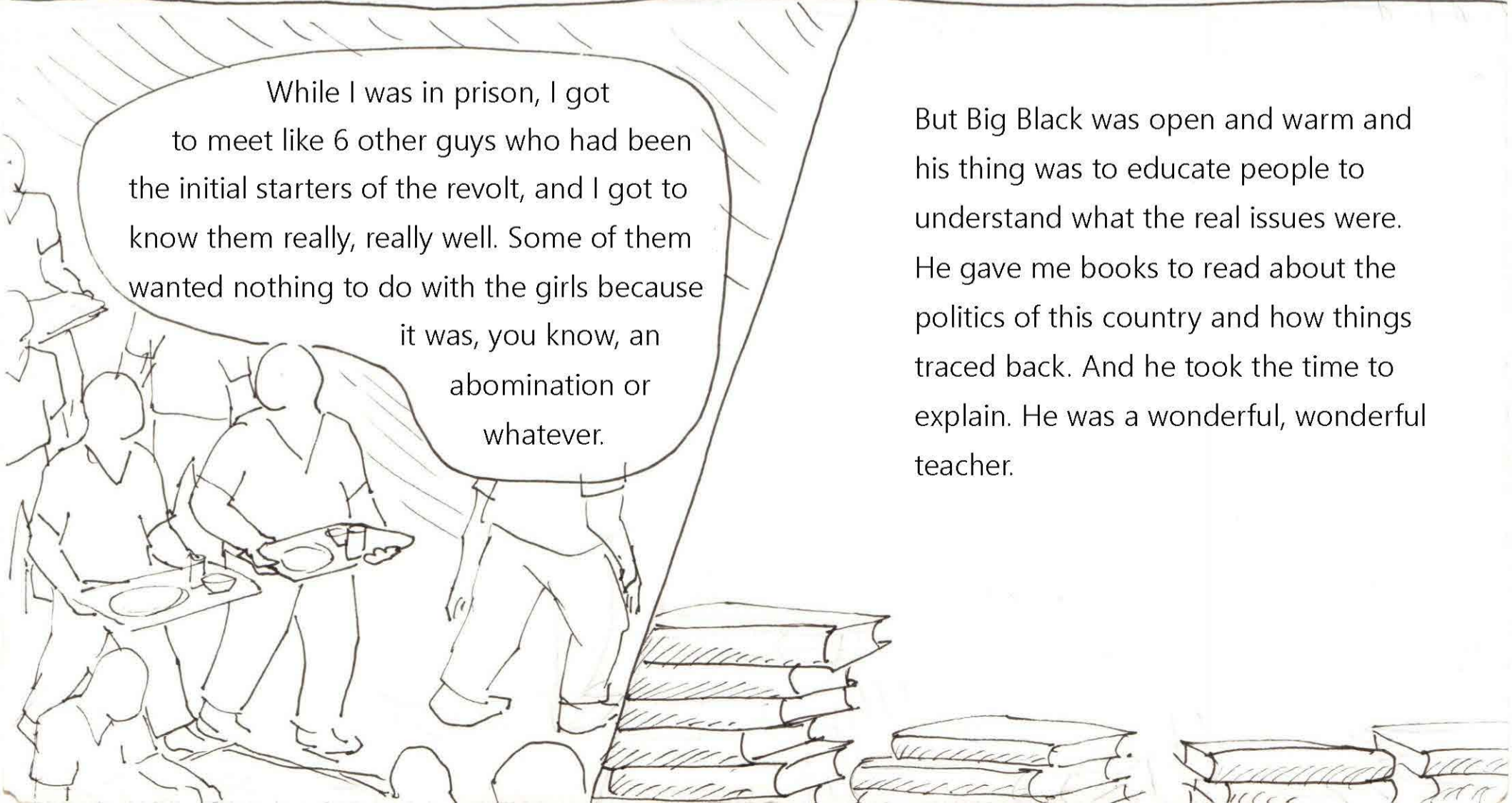
In June 2015, the Attica Interview Project interviewed legendary activist Miss Major Griffin-Gracy. A beloved elder in the transgender community, Miss Major has been a longtime advocate of transgender rights, particularly in context of incarceration and state violence.

Miss Major participated in the 1969 Stonewall uprising and was imprisoned at both Attica and Clinton prisons. At Clinton, she met the original leaders of the Attica rebellion who were transferred there in the wake of the uprising, including Frank "Big Black" Smith.



While I was in prison, I got to meet like 6 other guys who had been the initial starters of the revolt, and I got to know them really, really well. Some of them wanted nothing to do with the girls because it was, you know, an abomination or whatever.

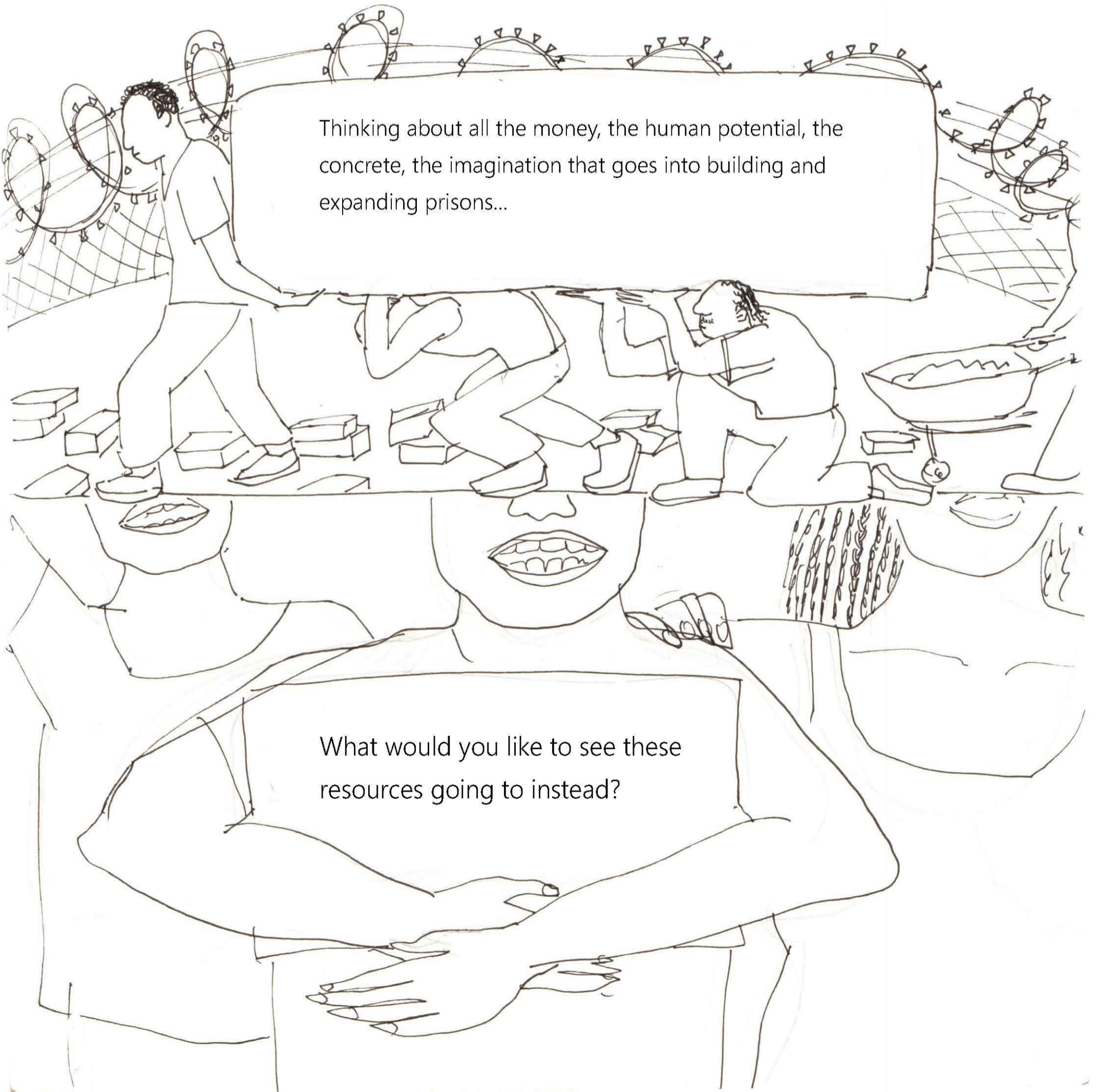
But Big Black was open and warm and his thing was to educate people to understand what the real issues were. He gave me books to read about the politics of this country and how things traced back. And he took the time to explain. He was a wonderful, wonderful teacher.



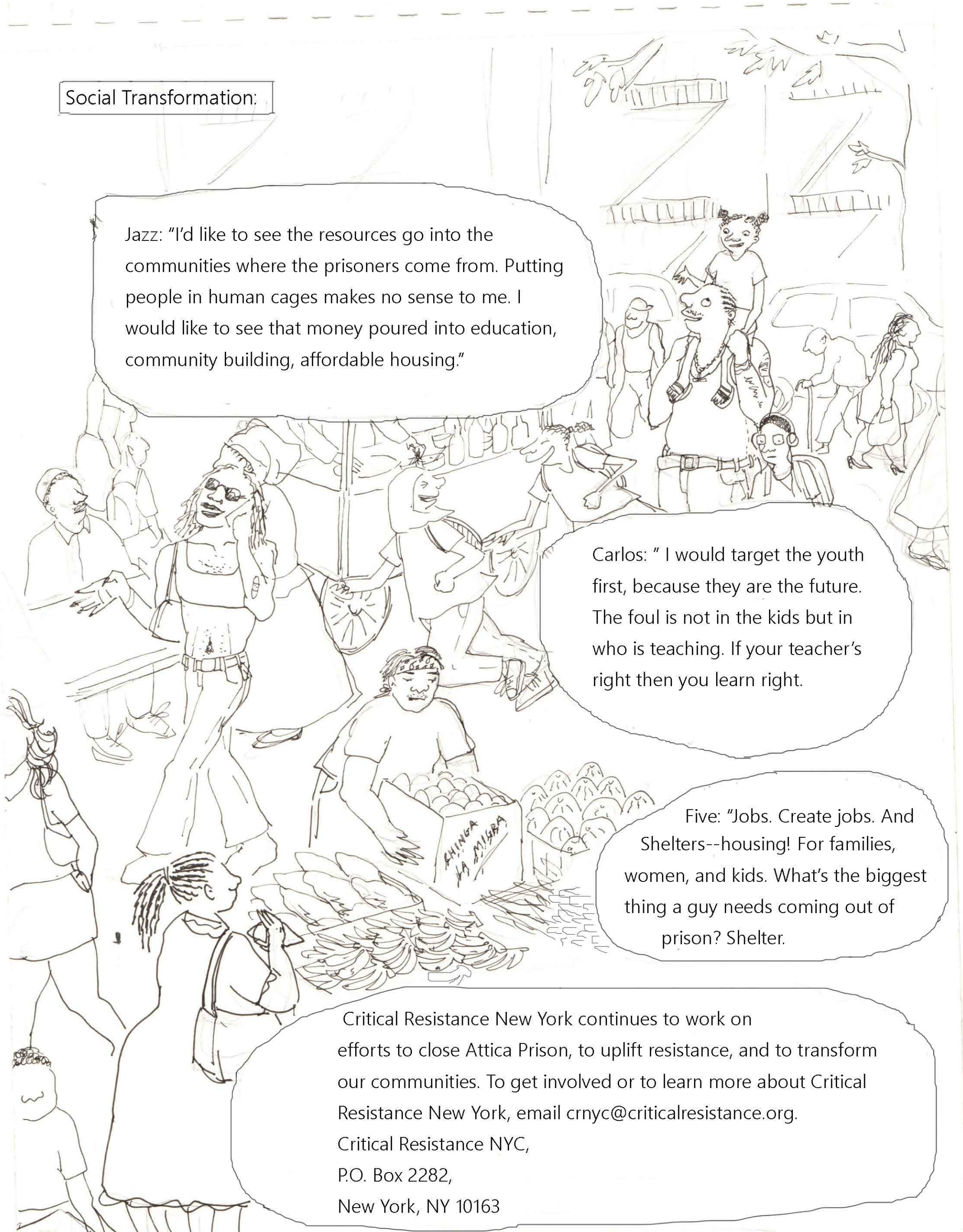
The last question the Attica Interview Project asked each person they interviewed was:

Thinking about all the money, the human potential, the concrete, the imagination that goes into building and expanding prisons...

What would you like to see these resources going to instead?



Social Transformation:



Jazz: "I'd like to see the resources go into the communities where the prisoners come from. Putting people in human cages makes no sense to me. I would like to see that money poured into education, community building, affordable housing."

Carlos: "I would target the youth first, because they are the future. The foul is not in the kids but in who is teaching. If your teacher's right then you learn right."

Five: "Jobs. Create jobs. And Shelters--housing! For families, women, and kids. What's the biggest thing a guy needs coming out of prison? Shelter."

Critical Resistance New York continues to work on efforts to close Attica Prison, to uplift resistance, and to transform our communities. To get involved or to learn more about Critical Resistance New York, email [crnyc@criticalresistance.org](mailto:crnyc@criticalresistance.org).

Critical Resistance NYC,  
P.O. Box 2282,  
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# **CRITICAL RESISTANCE**



Critical Resistance (CR) seeks to build an international movement to end the Prison Industrial Complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe. We believe that basic necessities such as food, shelter, and freedom are what really make our communities secure. As such, our work is part of global struggles against inequality and powerlessness. The success of the movement requires that it reflect communities most affected by the PIC. Because we seek to abolish the PIC, we cannot support any work that extends its life or scope.

Critical Resistance New York City (CR NYC) has been working on the Attica Interview Project since 2013, and was initiated to support prison closure organizing in New York. Through oral history and organizing we seek to document the continued legacy of repression, survival, and resistance at Attica. By producing media as a resource for building movement, we strive to highlight the experiences of formerly imprisoned people and their visions for transformation.

CR NYC hosts a monthly prisoner correspondence volunteer night to help us maintain connections with people imprisoned in New York and Pennsylvania, share information and resources, and develop abolitionist vision and strategy beyond prison walls. Join us on the third Tuesday of every month to volunteer and learn more about our work in New York and nationally. Get in touch to get involved.

CR NYC is also a strong organizational participant in the Beyond Attica Coalition, working to close Attica Prison, depopulate NY's prison system, end the violence of imprisonment, and build up alternative resources to strengthen New York's communities. Visit [www.criticalresistance.org/chapters/cr-new-york-city](http://www.criticalresistance.org/chapters/cr-new-york-city) to learn more.