

## Session Three: What's wrong with reform? What are non-reformist reforms?

### Readings:

1. 'What Abolitionists Do' in *Jacobin Magazine*  
Dan Berger, Mariame Kaba and David Stein (2017)

Available from:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/08/prison-abolition-reform-mass-incarceration> [5 pages]

2. 'Naomi Murakawa & #BlackLivesMatter: Liberals, Guns and the Roots of the U.S. Prison Explosion' on *The Laura Flanders Show*  
2015

Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyHeroT6uv4> 0:28-14:25 [14 minutes]

\*Note: For the purpose of the abolition versus reform discussion, the first 14 minutes are key, but if you have time, the first 21 minutes are recommended.

3. 'The Tension Between Abolition and Reform' in *The End of Prisons: Reflections from the Decarceration Movement*.  
Liat Ben-Moshe (2013)

Available from:

[http://www.academia.edu/3483590/The\\_tension\\_between\\_abolition\\_and\\_reform](http://www.academia.edu/3483590/The_tension_between_abolition_and_reform) [11 pages] Note: If you can't download from the above link, try [this one](#).

4. 'Police "Reforms" You Should Always Oppose' in *Truth-Out*  
Mariame Kaba (2014)

Available from:

<http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/27852-police-reforms-you-should-always-oppose> [1 page]



## Why these readings?

The first piece 'What abolitionists do' was written to address the common assumption that abolitionists are overly idealist and impractical. It also explains the concept of 'non-reformist reforms' as a strategy for moving towards abolition.

The video with Naomi Murakawa challenges the assumption that conservatives have driven prison expansion and instead explains how well intentioned 'liberal' reforms have often led to prison expansion and entrenchment.

The Ben-Moshe piece was chosen as it teases out some of the tensions and nuances in figuring out where reform ends and abolition begins, by looking towards the example of the deinstitutionalization of disabled people as a place we can learn lessons from.

The last two pieces give practical examples of how to distinguish between reformist reforms and non-reformist reforms.

### Questions to discuss:

1. What are some of the problems with traditional reforms identified in the readings?
2. Who tends to benefit from reforms and who doesn't?
3. The first piece (by Berger, Kaba and Stein) defines non-reformist reforms as 'those measures that reduce the power of an oppressive system while illuminating the system's inability to solve the crises it creates'. How can we distinguish between a non reformist reform and a traditional reform?
4. Can you think of some examples of criminal justice reforms in recent years? Do you think these reforms have strengthened the criminal justice system or could any be characterised as non-reformist reforms?
5. Do you have any ideas for non-reformist reforms that abolitionists could campaign for? Once you have an idea, think about the potential risks of pushing for this reform.

*We suggest picking two or three of these questions to focus on.*