Writing 4 Justice

An end of the year ‘newsletter’ for ER&M majors and other Yale students spotlighting specific community-based organizing efforts amidst the pandemic that foreground the collaborative roles that academic scholars, students, and researchers are playing to address the long-standing inequalities that are fueling this crisis. As the history of Ethnic Studies foregrounds community-based collaborations and collective praxis, these stories can help give majors and others interested in the field some sense of the ways that groups are organizing in the face of the pandemic.
Puya Gerami is the Education Director with the Service Employees International Union District 1199 New England. Becky Simonsen is a Lead Organizer with the union, representing all of the state employee members. SEIU 1199NE represents nearly 30,000 workers in Rhode Island and Connecticut across the healthcare industry, in both public and private sectors. 1199 members take care of people in hospitals, nursing homes, group homes, and state agencies, as well as in individual homes. As Connecticut faces one of the deadliest COVID-19 outbreaks in the nation, these workers are on the frontlines, “demonstrating an incredible commitment to providing care to the people who need it,” said Simonsen.

Yet, according to Gerami and Simonsen, the situation is grim for 1199 members working in the state’s nursing homes. Nursing homes are chronically understaffed and their staff underpaid, due to a long history of public disinvestment in long-term healthcare. Now, as COVID-19 devastates these facilities, 1199 members face dire conditions without proper protection or hazard pay.

Gerami said that is the result of a “historic devaluation of black and brown women’s essential labor and care work”—it is no coincidence that 80% of their 6,000 members who work in nursing homes are Black or Latinx, and 80% are women. 1,000 of these 1199 members have been infected with the coronavirus, and 10 have died.

Gerami and Simonsen emphasized that 1199 members have demonstrated tremendous courage in fighting for their protection, carrying on the historically-militant organizing methodology of the union since its founding. Following the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, there have been job actions at over half of the 80 nursing homes that the union represents in Connecticut. These members are demanding access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), improved safety protocols, and hazard pay—“everything you would think that the state government would want to give,” Simonsen said, “but workers are having to fight to the nail.”

In order to adhere to social distancing guidelines, Simonsen said, “we had to quickly get creative about actions on the job.” In these actions, rank-and-file members have organized to confront supervisors directly on the shop floor. This organizing, Simonsen emphasized, has translated into saving people’s lives: where 1199 members have collectively demanded greater safety measures, they have quickly received protective equipment, benefitting both workers and nursing home residents.

1199 is articulating visionary demands. “We need to be thinking about an expansive vision for what society looks like if you value the labor of these care workers,” Gerami said. According to Gerami and Simonsen, this means structuring federal, state, and local budgets differently—and
increasing taxes on the wealthy to “actually fund a people’s recovery.” Ultimately, “anyone who wants to see real progress in this country should make rebuilding the labor movement at the top of their list,” Gerami emphasized. The difference between union and non-union workplaces, Simonsen explained, “can be life and death.”

You can find the SEIU 1199NE action center here, which enables you to reach out to your elected officials regarding legislation that matters to the union. Find SEIU 1199NE on Twitter here.
Joseph Gaylin is a member of the Steering Committee of Stop Solitary Connecticut, an organization which “aims to end the use of solitary confinement statewide”. Stop Solitary CT believes firmly that solitary confinement is torture and adopts a more expansive definition of what its abolition would look like. To that end, the organisation is pushing for legislation which guarantees access to communication and programming for all people who are incarcerated.

With COVID-19 outbreaks sweeping through Connecticut prisons and jails, and the current legislative session cut short, Stop Solitary’s priorities have shifted. “People are dying,” Gaylin emphasizes. With Black people disproportionately incarcerated across America, the CT DOC’s disregard for human life is highly racialized. The state government is transferring every incarcerated person who tests positive to Northern Correctional Institute, a supermax facility “effectively designed to be solitary confinement. Everything about that prison is designed to torture and punish someone.” While Governor Ned Lamont largely keeps silent on the issue, people who are incarcerated are being denied access to communication, personal protective equipment, medical care, and any kind of humane living conditions.

With now-limited ability to communicate with people inside, Stop Solitary has shifted towards amplifying the voices of families who have incarcerated loved ones. They’ve helped organize ongoing car protests outside the Governor’s mansion and rallies that make space for families to speak out. They’ve released a 5-page decarceration response plan that thoroughly outlines how carceral confinement is not the public health measure it’s framed to be. The Governor, however, has repeatedly cancelled meetings to discuss the plan.

Gaylin wants those looking to support Stop Solitary’s work to think carefully about the resources and skills they have at their disposal. Tweeting at Lamont, DOC commissioner Rollin Cook, and Criminal Justice Undersecretary Mark Pelka is a low-commitment way to get involved. Yale students should also “leverage their privilege” and think about what executive connections they may have and how they can “take the organizing work on themselves.” Gaylin says to contact him if you’re a writer who can help amplify voices, a statistician who wants to work with incarceration data, or someone with other skills to offer. It is imperative that we “call on [our] access to power to effect change.”

Sign Stop Solitary’s open letter to Governor Lamont here. Read their decarceration response plan here. Donate to support their work here. Email to find out how you can get involved here.
James Jeter, born and raised in New Haven, is the Tow Foundation Fellow for the Yale Prison Education Initiative (YPEI). YPEI has offered Yale courses to students who are incarcerated since 2018. He met Zelda Roland, founding director of YPEI, while serving a 30 year sentence and participating in Wesleyan’s prison education initiative. At 36, James finally got parole and began organizing as a policy analyst at the Hartford Community Loan Fund regarding housing and food disparity. He left the position to join Zelda as a fellow for YPEI and through his experience, help those incarcerated and/or returning home.

In a given semester, students have the opportunity to choose between 4-5 small seminar style courses offered at Yale, such as English 127 or Beginning Latin. YPEI also offers assistance in reentry processes and consistent advocacy for higher education in prisons. While YPEI classes are still ongoing under Covid-19, they are no longer in person requiring professors to shift their syllabi for (non-virtual) remote learning. Additionally, Jeter says professors and students alike must adjust to the prison mailroom’s additional wait times between outgoing student work and incoming professor feedback.

Aside from keeping classes and support running, YPEI has created a spreadsheet, consistently updated with what is/isn’t working along with reports on what is happening internally throughout the prison, links to Connecticut responses to Covid in prisons across the state, and information for those working within prisons. And while there have been many protests, the state has yet to release any incarcerated individuals due to high-risk or possible exposures. “So you ask yourself ‘what’s next?’ Do you repeatedly run into the wall?” James said as he explained that these times required organizers and activists to be more creative, to find new methods of organizing. To James, organizing right now should look more extreme because “the times might demand that.” His extreme vision entails revisiting organizing tactics from the past (such as picketing, redirecting, boycotting major companies) but also creating completely new tactics for a completely new world.

When I asked James for suggestions or advice on how we, as ER&M students, could contribute to YPEI and other efforts he responded by asking me: “How does change happen?” And while I gave my answer, I leave you with his: “change happens when we stop organizing how we’re
used to and start causing disruption.” He said “change happens when we all make phone calls to our local officials, look into the issues affecting our communities, and cause disruption.”

To find out more about YPEI’s work, get involved, or donate you can visit their website at: https://www.yaleprisoneducationinitiative.org/
Havenly Treats
Written by Ananya Kumar-Banerjee, YC’21

Havenly Treats was founded in 2018 as a job-training program for refugees. The programming takes the role of a 6-month fellowship for new refugee women, who are predominantly arabic-speaking. Over the course of the program, fellows are paid to work in the Havenly bakery while at the same time attending an “array of educational workshops” which they are paid to attend. “For most of the families we work with, it’s their only paycheck,” says Camila Guiza-Chavez, YC’19.

Guiza-Chavez is the Community Outreach Coordinator, but says her role extends far beyond that. She is responsible for planning and leading many of the classes that the fellows attend. “I feel like I am of the ER&M major, of the teachings [Professor] HoSang taught us,” says Guiza Chavez. “Everything I put into the program…flows from that place.” The programming gives fellows the unique opportunity to learn “the racial and historical politics of this country in an academic setting,” says Guiza-Chavez. The goal of providing fellows with this education is to provide them with a critical consciousness. “My aspiration,” says Guiza-Chavez, “is that they walk away feeling that they see themselves as having the potential to be organizers...to critique the world that they are stepping into, here in the United States and New Haven specifically.”

COVID-19 has significantly impacted Havenly programming, forcing them to move classes online. It has also halted the usual schedule of production for the baked goods. Right before the pandemic began, they were in the middle of programming for their second cohort. At the same time, they were moving into a new storefront in downtown New Haven. But the program has taken the moment in stride, changing energies to focus almost entirely on food relief. “We decided to leverage the resources we had to address outstanding [needs] in the community,” says Guiza-Chavez. She says they plan to continue delivering meals to families in New Haven until at least mid-June and longer, if necessary.

Guiza-Chavez says that the COVID-19 moment has allowed for new connections to be formed between Havenly and the larger immigrant community in New Haven. “The need for food connects these communities...it's acute right now, but it's always been an issue.” Ultimately, says Guiza-Chavez, “[the coronavirus pandemic] is making us more aware of each other, more aware of the struggles between different groups.” She says those interested can help out by donating to Havenly or, for those involved with local government efforts around COVID-19, “keeping the arabic-speakng population in mind when creating services, keeping in mind the different languages that are spoken in new haven that might bar people from accessing essential services.” You can read more about Havenly’s COVID-19 relief work here.
Connecticut Bail Fund
Written by Ananya Kumar-Banerjee, YC’21

Brett Davidson and Ana María Rivera-Forastieri are the co-directors of the Connecticut Bail Fund. Typically, the CT Bail Fund works on participatory defense work, fighting for universal representation for individuals in deportation proceedings, and bailing people out of pre-trial jail, among other things. The bail fund was organized to support existing abolitionist organizing across the state.

Like many bail funds that were established around the same time, the CT bail fund emphasizes the importance of horizontal or bottom-up structure in its work. Initially, Brett and Ana María say that they saw the bail fund as a harm reduction tool. But over time, they’ve come to see it as a tool useful to organizers engaged in longer movements.

The COVID-19 crisis has placed a new burden on the bail fund. Pilar Weiss said that prisons are the state’s constructed “tinderboxes of death.” People who are incarcerated are unable to socially distance and do not have adequate access to healthcare. Jails and prisons, structurally, were not made to preserve life. Instead, they are prime examples of the state’s invocation of its biopower. People who are incarcerated, who are disproportionately Black, are left to die. The COVID-19 crisis has renewed people’s collected consciousness about the institutionalized violence of the “justice system”, says Brett. “People are coming to understand policing, jails, prisons, and surveillance for what they are: systems of mass killing.”

Ana María says her first instinct, when the public health crisis began, was to “get out as many people as possible as fast as we can”. Since then, they’ve changed energies. As courts are closed, many pre-trial individuals are being held indefinitely, with no hope on the horizon. The crisis has forced the bail fund to find “new ways of communicating with people”; they’ve recently placed new emphasis on public messaging and a new hotline for families. Ana María specifically highlighted the importance of making demands for mass releases at this moment.

Jails and prisons are uniquely opaque at this moment. No one – not even family members– are being allowed inside. Last week, someone died in prison, but the state didn’t tell anyone. Organizers like Brett and Ana María had no way to know either. “All of sudden we’re just thinking about these people who are being disappeared...no one knows what is happening,” says Brett.

Brett and Ana María say that it’s key to keep their “eyes on the big picture”. While organizers struggle to make sense of the new, highly online reality, they’re also trying to keep in touch with people who are incarcerated. Many of these people are engaged in massive hunger strikes and protests, hoping to force the state to release people. “This is happening as the same time as the
state is tightening it’s grip on violence, turning to solitary confinement (a form of torture), to enforce social distancing. “New possibilities [are] emerging,” says Brett. COVID-19 has given them the time to “[focus] more on the whole system”. Ultimately, Brett says, “The bail fund is not a movement. We’re an organization that supports movement work.” At this moment what’s increasingly clear is that organizations like the CT Bail Fund is that they’re “…in solidarity with people inside. The most important thing about that is building a shared path toward a better future.”

You can donate to the Connecticut Bail Fund here. You can email them about volunteering here. You can find your local bail fund here. What they’re looking for specifically in volunteers: “We’re looking for volunteers to think about what they have to offer and bring that to the table. People with money, or with access to moneyed networks, can bring fundraising help. People with knowledge of the legal and prison system can help with participatory defense and powering our prison support hotline. People with research skills can help expose histories and realities of criminalization in Connecticut. Artists can help with graphics, zine-making, creating art-objects for fundraising, and more. Everyone has a unique set of skills and resources to bring to the table.”
As the pandemic has inflamed pre-existing crises, it has intensified the necessity of mobilizing for survival: people detained in detention centers across the continent have organized 400 strikes since the pandemic took shape in the US. “The activism inside has been so intense because they really see that their detention is about their disposability … and people are desperate to live,” Chandan Reddy told me. He is a professor of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington and a member of La Resistencia, a Seattle-based group of multi-racial, multi-status, multi-gender organizers who support mobilizations in detention centers through direct action.

La Resistencia coalesced in support of a 2014 hunger strike inside the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC) in Tacoma, Washington. On receiving word that a small number of people had initiated a hunger strike in protest of the deportation of an activist, organizers involved in anti-detention work on the outside coordinated a disruption in solidarity. At 4 a.m. on February 24, nine people chained themselves across the NWDC driveway, where they remained throughout the day as police forces arrived and sawed off their chains. The clamor could be heard from within the detention center. The sign of external support kindled the largest strike in a detention in modern times, according to Professor Reddy: beginning March 7, 1, 200 detained people refused food for 56 days, demanding “improved detention conditions and an end to deportations.”

Since then, La Resistencia has offered support to and engaged alongside detained people looking to organize. They never instigate, but listen to be called. Unlike some groups that offer services on an individual basis, they use direct action to advocate for freedom on a collective, abolitionist basis, without differentiating between people with and without criminal records.

The organization has witnessed a groundswell of mobilizations within detention centers over the course of its six-year existence, Professor Reddy said. On the outside, too, organizing has grown in scale. A regional coalition of liberal and left organizations came together last fall, each with disparate principles and strategies but all with the common goal of shutting down the NWDC—including, Professor Reddy said, “groups that, before, were ambivalent about an abolitionist position on immigration.” Abolition entails an end to all deportations, including at the border and for people with criminal convictions.

Now, at this critical juncture, people detained at the NWDC have gone on hunger strike thrice in a three-week interval. Meanwhile, La Resistencia is precluded from using its usual strategies: “We can’t seize the public sphere.” Instead, on March 30 and 31, supporters encircled the detention center with a chain of cars and filled the public space with the sound of car horns.
(Iterations of this action are emerging across the continent.) They’ve also mounted a “Free Them All” banner in front of the Tacoma Pierce County Health Department. But they have yet to draw significant media coverage to the unmitigated spread of COVID-19 in detention centers.

Professor Reddy said reporters cited the indifference of their editors: “The media was telling us, ‘Look, none of our editors care, all they want is coronavirus for citizens.’”

Professor Reddy noted that COVID-19 has been constructed as a “citizen disease”—that is, a disease whose victims include citizens and that therefore warrants media attention and resources, though its non-citizen victims remain beyond the pale of care. He lived and organized through a non-citizen epidemic: AIDS, which mainly affected gay, Black, and Latino communities. He pointed out how we are “experiencing this epidemic through previous epidemics … The infrastructure for this disease, both discursively and materially—the health infrastructure, the CDC, all those things—are literally coming out of the medical-political system that was created through struggles of HIV,” he said, adding, “How we relate to disease determines significantly the kinds of social formation we develop.”

During the AIDS pandemic, people formed non-citizen intimacies and met one another’s needs as a form of organizing: “what it meant to be in relation to this disease was to create accompaniment.” Now, too, mutual aid groups proliferate: La Resistencia has created a mutual aid group for redistributing stimulus checks to undocumented people. “We’ve also been trying to use those mutual aid relationships to make political bonds with families,” Professor Reddy said. “It’s not just finding aid and giving it to families, but using mutual aid as a way to build the conversation of a political project for addressing the conditions of their loved ones, and what an alternative political project could yield.” Grace Lee Boggs said every crisis is an opportunity—the work organizers are doing now is the basis of lasting social formations to come.

To support La Resistencia, you can sign up for email updates, donate, and get attuned to events, campaigns, and actions on their Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. If you’re in the area and have capacity to do volunteer work, you can email them at resistenciasolidarity@gmail.com.