

RESOLUTION ON THE CIVIL RIGHTS CHALLENGE OF THE DECADE: MASS INCARCERATION AS THE NEW JIM CROW

WHEREAS, as Michelle Alexander has shown in her 2011 book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, there has been an explosion in the size of the United States prison population between 1980 and 2006, from 350,000 to 2.3 million; and

WHEREAS, the United States ranks highest of all the countries in the world in the proportion of its population that it imprisons (730 per 100,000), higher than such countries as Russia (516 per 100,000), Ukraine (338 per 100,000), and Iran (333 per 100,000) (www.prisonstudies.org); and

WHEREAS, the United States imprisons a larger percentage of its Black population than South Africa at the height of apartheid, with one in three young African American men currently under the control of the criminal justice system; and

WHEREAS, the disproportionate rate of arrests and incarceration of poor communities of color is analogous to containment of the Black community under Jim Crow, as has been powerfully argued by Michelle Alexander and others following earlier work by Angela Davis; and

WHEREAS, the increasing imprisonment rates reflect changes in laws and policies rather than an increase in crime rates:

- convictions for non-violent and minor crimes, particularly the possession of drugs rather than their sale, which explain most of the increase in prison population over this 25-year period;
- long sentences mandated by the “War on Drugs” and various “three strikes” laws;
- some politicians’ use of the “War on Drugs” and “tough on crime” rhetoric as coded signals to stimulate interracial fear and hostility; and
- substantial financial incentives for local police departments to prioritize drug interdiction, ensuring the dramatic growth in drug arrests through federal funding and forfeiture laws;
- police interdiction efforts that have focused overwhelmingly on poor Black and Latino communities despite repeated studies that demonstrate that the rate of drug use among whites nationally is similar to or slightly higher than among Blacks; and

WHEREAS, the media and many public officials continue to inaccurately portray illegal drug use and drug crime as primarily a Black and brown issue; and

WHEREAS, the differential enforcement of federal drug laws and the severe penalties for crack possession as compared to cocaine possession are discriminatory by race and gender, with Black and Latino men as primary targets; and

WHEREAS, had the police chosen to wage the “War on Drugs” in predominantly white suburbs or college campuses rather than neighborhoods of people of color, the interdiction would have been stopped in short order; and

WHEREAS, decades of such selective enforcement of federal drug laws

have marginalized a significant number of Blacks and Latinos, keeping many under the control of the criminal justice system practically for life; and

WHEREAS, being convicted or pleading guilty to a youthful drug offense will likely preclude access to employment, public housing, education, and voting rights for one's entire life in some states; and

WHEREAS, persons convicted of felonies face considerable barriers to the restoration of their voting rights in 38 states, with ten states imposing permanent disenfranchisement in various ways and only two states (Maine and Vermont) allowing those convicted to maintain their voting rights (www.ncsl.org); and

WHEREAS, this massive disenfranchisement of poor people of color further undermines the Voting Rights Act and the fairness of national and statewide elections, as political partisans may try to gain political advantage by purchasing lists of persons convicted of felonies to prevent them or potentially anyone with a similar name from voting, especially in swing states; and

WHEREAS, in many states the huge expansion of the prison industry, with its absorption of state funds, has correlated directly with decades of under-funding of public higher education; and

WHEREAS, AFT has a strong record of support for civil rights and racial justice and a record of leadership of that struggle within organized labor:

RESOLVED, that AFT support legislation that ends the federal financial incentives that result in racist police practices of targeting and criminalizing poor communities of color; and

RESOLVED, that AFT support the restoration of full citizenship rights for non-violent drug offenders on probation or parole, including the right to vote, serve on a jury, and gain full access to government services, such as financial aid for education and housing and employment assistance; and

RESOLVED, that AFT educate its members about the true costs of racist mass incarceration for poor communities of color, educational stakeholders and for society as a whole.

Submitted by: Professional Staff Congress, Local 2334