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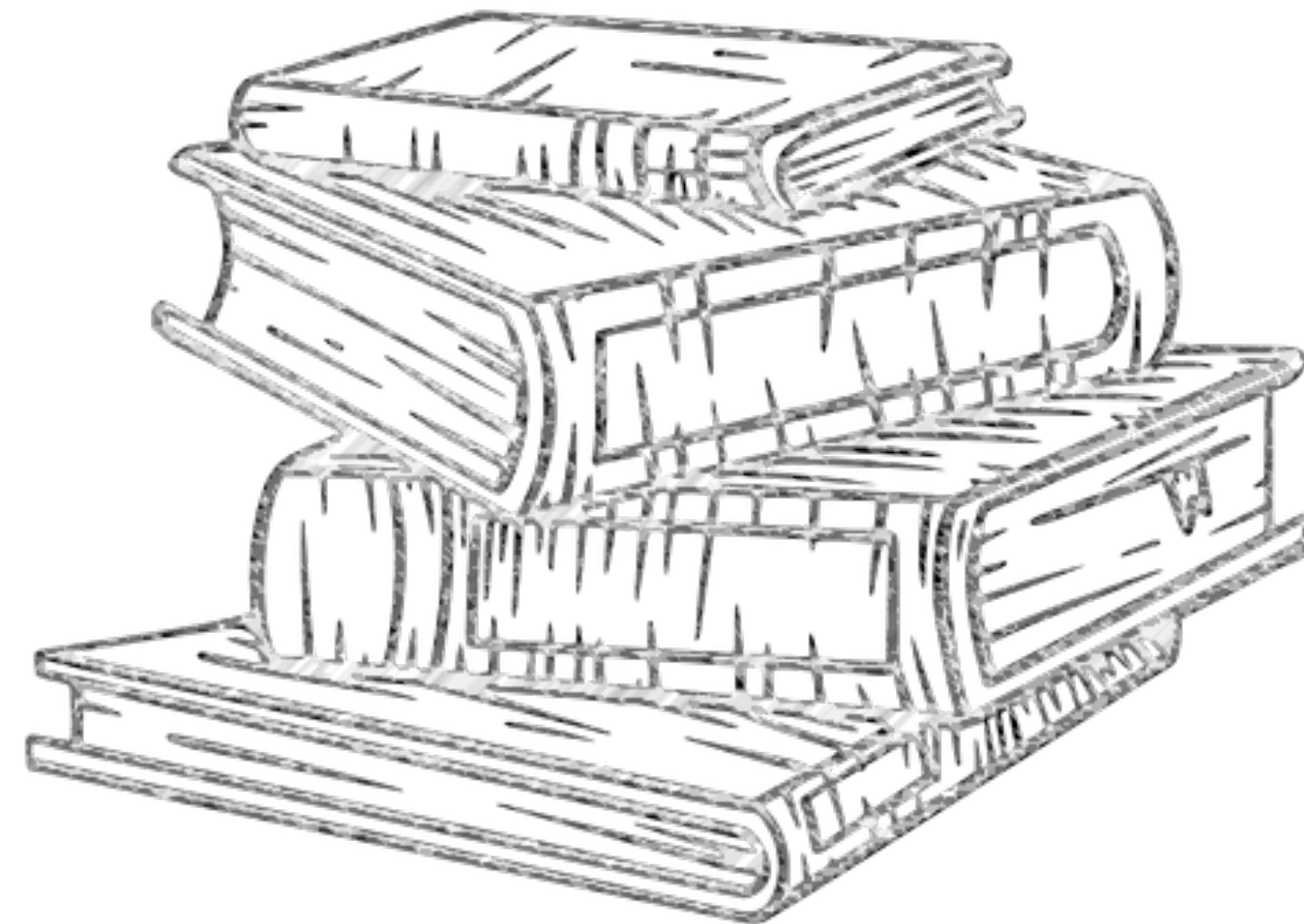
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# Don't Step Back, Fight Back!

*Proposals for a Coalition Against  
Prison Censorship and Book Banning*



other groups distributing literature to prisoners, prisoner rights groups, anti-racists, people who have family members in prison, anti-fascist tendencies, and others who are opposed to mass incarceration in the USA and the systematic denial of prisoners' constitutional and human rights. We need to be clear that we are all coming together to create a mass-based fightback, and together that is the only way we can win.

If you want to defend Black literature and defeat the racist groups trying to drive Black books and authors underground, then contact Sage or Natalie at the NoName Book Club, the largest Black and radical distribution book agency in the country, as well as the Black Autonomy podcast, communications arm for a Black Anarchist activist group, Black Autonomy.

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supremacists, Trump conservatives and others on the right-wing political spectrum. They refute the historical facts that Black people were ever enslaved or oppressed by the white government or people of the USA. These White supremacists want to ban Black literature from libraries, bookstores, K-12 schools, colleges, universities, and prisons. They want to pretend Black people have no history or place in society.

This new fascist campaign is led by right-wing politicians and fake parent groups railing against “critical race theory,” the 1619 project, and the alleged “filth” and “perversion” in LGBTQ children’s books. If these conservative, pro-fascist groups have their way, only “pro-family,” Christian fascist, and white nationalist materials would be in the schools, libraries, and prisons. Young people would be prevented from accessing relevant cultural materials reflecting who they are.

Neo-fascists in America aim to make toxic masculinity and white nationalism the dominant viewpoint and turn back whatever social advances by Black people have been made in the last fifty years. By changing American society in this way, they will compel the entire society into obedience to the fascist line. Recently, they have begun carrying guns and a list of 400 books they want to ban into library board meetings. Soon it will be in schools and libraries all over the country. This is all extremely dangerous, and we must fight back...while we still can.

#### WHAT TYPE OF MOVEMENT DO WE NEED?

It is important that we build a united front against censorship and book banning. This united front must unite all opponents of political censorship and bans on “controversial” books. It should have as its core a prison-school-library anti-censorship protest movement component to combat the racist, homophobic and authoritarian campaign disguised as governmental or parental concern.

Most importantly, the U.S. prison system is the largest book banning agency in the country, so we must make prison book banning a part of the already existing fightback by Black students, LGBTQ, and children’s book authors, literary groups like PEN America, and the American Library Association. Indeed, the resources of these groups are an essential element in the fight against book banning in prisons.

This proposed united front must bring together prison support activists, especially many of those already in books through bars programs, radical book publishers, and

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# Don't Step Back, Fight Back!

By Lorenzo Komboa Ervin

Recently, I learned that my book *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* had been banned by the United States government from all of its prisons because of its “radical content” and “Black Anarchist activism.” I appealed the original rejection, and it was denied by higher level officials. New York State and Arizona prisons have also blocked the book.

It seems everyone in the political establishment is in fear of Anarchism, especially Black Anarchism. These days most prison censorship is against Black and LGBTQ authors. Not just in prison, but censorship in prison is the largest book banning in the United States of America and the world. So my book, which had already been seen as a classic, important political work for over 40 years, now sits as another banned book, along with some of the best written works in all literature.

I am, of course, going to fight back and feel confident in saying I/we are going to win. Martin Sostre, a Black Anarchist, had fought New York state penal authorities back in 1968-1969, and had won the first rights for prisoners to receive revolutionary literature taught me how. As a follower of Sostre, I also fought in court, and in every way possible to challenge the repressive logic of prison officials to justify censorship. They couldn't win back in the day, and we won in the courts and in the streets. Now, it appears that we must fight again. Only, this time I am not in prison, and people all over the world can participate in this campaign with me. But it is not just about me or my book, *there is prison book banning of hundreds of thousands of books in America's massive prison system*, and we have to build a new movement to fight back for prisoner's right to read radical and unorthodox writings and for authors to distribute their works in prison without interference by racist, homophobic, and transphobic authorities.

I am going to work with other prison rights activists, book distribution services and book thru bars groups, radical publishing houses, and others who believe in freedom of speech to create a major campaign against prison censorship by:

1. **Filing a major lawsuit** against the Federal Bureau of Prisons and various state prisons for banning my book and that of other radical authors.

# The Racist Attack on Black Literature and the Importance of Black Literature to Black People

By Lorenzo Komboa Ervin and JoNina Ervin

Since Black people were forcibly imported into America, through books we have managed to tell our story of slavery and oppression during chattel slavery. The slave narratives written by ex-slaves gave the most accurate depiction of what slavery was like, in almost total contrast to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written by a white author for whites.

In fact, the white slavemaster feared the literate slave, who could read, write, and speak. Anti-slavery activists Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass proved them right, Their narratives, because of their popularity, became national best sellers, and they became national Abolitionist leaders.

In the 1920s and 1930s during the Harlem Renaissance, the cultural flowering of Black America flourished. Such writers as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Claude McKay, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison wrote pioneering novels, poetry, and non-fiction works which touched millions of Black people.

Then, in the 1960s and 1970s during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, authors such as Lorraine Hansberry, Haki Madhubuti, Amiri Baraka, Askia Muhammad, James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver, Toni Morrison, Glen Ford, Alice Walker, Audre Lord, Walter Mosley, Maya Angelou, and many others used their writing to celebrate Black life and culture and to push for civil and human rights. Since the 1980s, best-selling Black authors have included Octavia E. Butler, Gloria Naylor, Cornel West, Bell Hooks, Manning Marable, and Ta-Nehisi Coates.

As important as Black literature is to Black culture, self-esteem, inspiration, knowledge, and history, it is currently under attack by racist politicians, white

5. We want, at government expense, all prisoners to have re-entry programs for jobs, housing and all social programs to ensure that they are not forced back to prison because of lack of social resources or the ability to make an income.
6. Closing down non-productive prisons and replacing them with social programs to help provide poor people with jobs and dignity. Defund the prison system, and put such funding for social programs to end the use of prisons.
7. We want an end to solitary confinement and the closing down of all behavior modification programs in U.S. prisons.
8. We want the closing down of all immigration prisons, and the reuniting of all immigrant families. seeking protection from violence and persecution in their home countries.
9. We want an end to all prison censorship and political book banning.
10. The immediate release of all long term, elderly prisoners.

The Martin Sostre Organizing Committee,(MSOC) a part of the Martin Sostre Institute, is organizing this campaign against prison censorship and book banning. MSOC is the activist wing of MSI. While the MSI is charged with dealing with the Life and history of Martin Sostre, we (the MSOC) are following in the steps of Martin Sostre as an *activist*.

2. Create a **massive campaign** against prison censorship for the banning of my book and all books. This campaign by The Martin Sostre Institute, will unite prison abolitionists, civil libertarians, anti-racists, librarians, Black activists, Anarchists and many others who believe prisoners should have their rights to read controversial and other “radical” literature, protected under the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, and international law, and not be punished for their beliefs.

We hope you will join us in building the Coalition Against Prison Censorship and Book Banning. If you are part of a group that is already engaged in struggles against prison censorship and book banning, please reach out to join the campaign. **Contact information on the back of this pamphlet.**

Here is what I am asking my publishers at Pluto Press UK (and associated publishing houses) to do to help me and other radical authors, book thru bars groups, book clubs that distribute book to prisoners, and the prisoners themselves:

1. Contact the Radical Publishers Alliance, of which Pluto is a member) and rally them to help myself (and their own authors) to combat prison book banning. Only when we all come together will we even have a chance to beat back book banning programs which are blocking thousands of authors from distributing their books, and allow prison officials to ban hundreds of thousands of books based on racist and homophobic conservative political grounds. Bring together the RPA and other Left radical publishers to join Black and LGBTQ authors in building a mass movement led by the Martin Sostre Institute against prison censorship and fascist book banning. Radical publishers should create a monthly podcast forum so that radical book authors can talk about their work and denounce book banning. Part of book banning is about silencing the author as well as the prisoner, we need a way to speak out.

2. Help create an annual International Day of Action Against prison censorship and book banning to highlight the issue worldwide. This would be a protest campaign in the streets, in front of prisons, and at their administrative offices to fight mass imprisonment in the USA, as well as its censorship and book banning.

3. We need to make prison banned books part of the annual “Banned Books Week” held by the American Library Association, PenAmerica, and the UK Banned Books Week Coalition. We should contact these groups, who are already conducting massive anti-book banning campaigns against right-wing campaigns to remove books from libraries, schools and other institutions to support our own campaign against prison book banning. In fact, every champion of free speech, expression, and the right to read should be appealed to become part of this movement. It can only make us all stronger.

4. Legal support from the ACLU, National Lawyers Guild, Prison Legal News or other civil rights law firm, to bring an anti-censorship lawsuit against prison book banning. We need an injunction against prison officials for the systematic banning of thousands of books.

## CONCLUSION

Prison censorship includes the nation’s largest book ban, not just a few controversial or unorthodox books, but hundreds of thousands of classics, Black literature, LGBTQ contents, educational books and college textbooks, among many others. Prisoners are being denied many educational, mind opening, and entertaining volumes. Books unite us all, despite the racial, sexual orientation, or political beliefs of the authors. We cannot allow the Right-wing politicians, fake parent groups, or other bodies from acting as our censors. It isn’t just in prison that they are doing all this, they are doing it all over American society as well. They want ideological and political hegemony and conformity. Fighting book banning is a struggle against fascism. We need to stand up, not back down in the face of unjust authority, or would be dictators.

Now, in this period, we want to not only memorialize his name and activist history, but to create a mass movement of prison abolitionists all over the world to struggle against mass imprisonment, racist policing, and state slavery.

We will have to unite prisoners, their families and communities, along with abolitionist activists, to build a mass fightback movement on the outside, while we build a prisoners’ movement for political education, human rights, and organization on the inside.

### Our demands:

1. We want an end to mass imprisonment of Black, Latinx, and poor people in the USA. These prison systems are inherently racist and based on slavery by the state. The USA has the largest prison system in the world,(2.3 million), and confines more people now than in the entire history of the world. It uses prison as an instrument of punishment far more extensively than any country in the world, and has massive numbers of Black and other non-white people languishing in prison with more draconian sentences, which are destroying their families and communities.
2. We want repeal or other forms of eradication of the 13th amendment to the U.S. Constitution and all corresponding state statutes, which substitutes “crime” as a form of state slavery to replace plantation slavery. However, by itself this will not end all imprisonment or political repression; we must end capitalism, racism, social injustice, and the nature of punishment itself.
3. We want general amnesty for all prisoners in the United States penal system. Although the USA has the largest prison population, they hold prisoners far longer than any other country. We call for, and wish to organize, a general amnesty for all prisoners, and to shut down the entire prison system. Prison is just another form of slavery, and has no legitimate purpose.
4. We want recognition of the human rights of all prisoners while in prison, and upon their release from prison, obtaining their full civil rights to vote, non-discriminatory right to housing, and to enter jobs and professions.

4. Legal support from the ACLU, National Lawyers Guild, Prison Legal News or other civil rights law firms, to bring an anti-censorship lawsuit against prison book banning. We need an injunction against prison officials for the systematic banning of thousands of books. This has to be a class action rather than an individual claim.

5. Research: We need to submit Freedom of Information Act requests to every state about how many books they have banned, and obtain their list of banned books. If they refuse to provide the information, they should be sued to forcibly produce it.

6. Start anti-censorship affiliates in your city, state, and all over the country to politically educate and organize communities of color, students, religious groups, and others to oppose prison and political censorship. This means holding community forums, protests, and other local campaigns to recruit and mobilize people in your community. A movement starts with people who are committed to change, even if such change affects the rights of prisoners, the most disfavored class in the country.

### Martin Sostre Institute for the Abolition of Prisons

Written September 2021

Martin Sostre was the foremost activist prisoner in the USA during the 1960s, though almost unknown today. Yet, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Martin Sostre (1923-2015) was well known as a prison activist, revolutionary, and jailhouse lawyer, who almost single-handedly won democratic rights for prisoners to receive and read revolutionary literature, write books, worship alternative religious faiths, create Afrocentric and ethnic culture groups, and to obtain legal rights to have access to legal rights at disciplinary proceedings, and to not be held indefinitely in solitary confinement. He was the one responsible for prisoners being able to organize during the prison struggle, 1967-1974. These lawsuits changed prison conditions nationwide, yet prison systems in the USA have turned back the clock on most of these reforms. Now, it is necessary to dismantle the entire system.

## The struggle against censorship and book banning is a fight against fascism itself!

By Lorenzo Komboa Ervin

**This is political education on how book banning and political censorship is the road to fascism.** There will be a number of future articles to give my ideas on this, as we begin to fight in this period. My own book, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, published by Pluto Press UK, has been banned by a number of state and federal prisons. Why? Because of the racist ideology put forward against Black authors and Black literature like the 1619 Project or Critical Race Theory.

My book has not been banned by every prison in the USA, but that is not the point, collectively prison officials have banned over 200,000 books since 1999. The book banning process in the United States is the largest in the world. My book is just one of those banned for political reasons in the prison systems. For instance, the state officials in New York and Arizona claim that my book “preaches hatred of the white man” and “Black supremacy”, and certain federal prisons claim that the mere ideas of anti-capitalism, anti-racism, Black activism, and Black cultural views are “anti-white”, and should be prohibited in the federal prison system. This propaganda line of “racism in reverse” comes from years of fascist propaganda by white supremacist groups, which has been adopted by mainstream politicians. The Trump campaign of 2016 and 2020 used “white rights” and white victimization ideology to build a mass movement and propel himself to the presidency. But the issue is much deeper than him as an individual rightist politician; Trump, the Christian fascists, a pro-fascist wing of the capitalist class, and his millions of supporters plan to continue the fight for white nationalism, even an outright fascist regime.

When will all understand that we need another kind of anti-fascist movement, starting with a fight back against mass imprisonment, political censorship and book banning in prisons, schools and libraries. At minimum, we must fight for prisoner’s

rights to read, write and discuss unorthodox and controversial issues, and not be punished for it. Supposedly, the First Amendment to the First Amendment, which guarantees free speech, is supposed to protect us all. But no rights are guaranteed by this government, we must fight to protect them ourselves. We have to unite all opponents of censorship and banning of “controversial” books, in order to effectively combat the racist, homophobic, and authoritarian campaign by the Right.

Right now, in the United States of America, we are on the verge of the imposition of a fascist state, if we do nothing to address the danger. The struggle against today’s ideological battles to stop censorship and book bannings in the prisons, schools and libraries is just the beginning fight against mass fascist ideology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How could this possibly be the case you might ask?

Look at history and learn. In 1933, the German National Socialist Party (Nazis), organized systematic book banning of “objectional literature” by Nazi party officials all over Germany. These books were in colleges and universities, libraries, schools and many other spaces. Books by Jews, liberal intellectuals, Left dissidents, and other social critics were seized by the hundreds of thousands, and were delivered to waiting mobs to then be burned in public squares by gleeful Nazi sympathizers.

Literally, tons of priceless literature was burned, while Nazi hooligans and their allies celebrated and danced around the flames. Nobody did, or could, speak out against them. If so, those people would have been severely beaten by the Brown Shirts, Hitler’s paramilitary goon squad. Maybe their bodies would have even been thrown upon the flames.

All this did not happen by accident, it happened because of years of anti-Semitic and anti-communist propaganda by fascist agitators. There had been a massive pro-Nazi ideological and propaganda offensive to condition the German public against “liberal and communist counter-revolutionary writings and books” during 1928-1933. When Hitler was appointed Chancellor of the German Republic, it opened the door to authoritarian censorship on a massive scale. As a result, on Hitler’s books or pro-Nazi literature was deemed worthy of publishing or book distribution.

The book burnings in 1933 Germany open the door to other fascist atrocities, such as the Nuremberg race laws, Kristolnacht, enemies list and mass arrests by the Gestapo, concentration camps and genocide, Holocaust, and World War 2.

campaign, and that together, rather than individual lawsuits, is the only way we can win

First, we need to begin contacting each other, hold online strategy discussions, and then begin a fightback. We need to listen to what each one of us has to say in order to build a broad based campaign. That is why this needs to be a united front, and not just a small group or individual activists. The main thing for us now is to get organized.

1. Contact the Radical Publishers Alliance (RPA) and rally them to help myself (and their own authors) to combat prison book banning. Only when we all come together will we even have a chance to beat back book banning programs which are blocking thousands of authors from distributing their books, and allow prison officials to ban hundreds of thousands of books, based on racist and homophobic conservative political grounds. Bring together the RPA and other Left radical publishers to join Black and LGBTQ authors in building a mass movement led by the Martin Sostre Institute against prison censorship and fascist book banning. Radical publishers should create a monthly podcast forum so that radical book authors can talk about their work and denounce book banning. Part of book banning is about silencing authors as well as the prisoners. We need a way to speak out.

2. Help create an annual International Day of Action Against prison censorship and book banning to highlight the issue worldwide. This would be a protest campaign in the streets, in front of prisons, and at their administrative offices to fight mass imprisonment in the USA, as well as its censorship and book banning.

3. We need to make prison banned books part of the annual “Banned Books Week” held by the American Library Association, PenAmerica, and the UK Banned Books Week Coalition. We should contact these groups, who are already conducting massive anti-book banning campaigns against right-wing campaigns to remove books from libraries, schools and other institutions, to support our own campaign against prison book banning. In fact, every champion of free speech, expression, and the right to read should be appealed to become part of this movement. It can only make us all stronger.



# What Should We Do to End Censorship and Build a New Prison Abolition Movement?

By Lorenzo Komboa Ervin

This is the final section of political education for those interested in fighting censorship and building a new movement against mass imprisonment. The Martin Sostre Organizing Committee is organizing this campaign against prison censorship and book banning.

Over two million prisoners in the USA today face some of the harshest censorship and crushing confinement since the rise of the Prisoner's Rights Movement of the 1960's and '70's. Despite that, we can build a new movement now which can beat back censorship and book banning, which totals over 200,000 banned books, and we can end censorship in all American prisons.

Books in prison are weapons against fascism, illiteracy, self-hatred, and lack of self-esteem. Books unite us all to end censorship. Censorship is just social control by those in power. It does not protect anything for the people. It just keeps us more ignorant and able to be manipulated. Prison officials everywhere know this is true. It may seem this is a minor or secondary thing, but to keep you from such "radical" thoughts as Anarchism, Socialism, Feminism, Queer liberation, as well as knowledge of your rights and how to assert them against authority figures, is one of the few ways to fight back against their abuse. Knowledge is power!

We want to unite prisoners, their friends and families, and communities of color must be enlisted in this fight. This is why the Martin Sostre Institute, (MSI) named after 1960's activist prisoner Martin Sostre, is a new movement leading this fight against censorship and book banning in the prisons today.

More about the MSI later on within this text, First, we must talk about the things we can do to fight censorship and build a new radical prison abolitionist movement. We need to be clear that we are all coming together to create a mass based fightback

Even though all this happened in Germany, many in America don't want to believe it can ever happen in the USA, but the seeds for a fascist movement to take power is happening right now. The attempted fascist coup of January 6, 2021 should be a wakeup call to everyone that fascism is a clear and present danger. The fascists have not given up, and they are studying where they failed. Their next attempt will be far more professional and dangerous. It will have much larger loss of life, be supported by elements of the military, Wall Street, or Congress, and put many of us in danger of mass murder, even racial genocide.

Fascist populism is that danger. Instead of just a military-style coup, this is instead an attempt to subvert existing institutions like electoral regulations or reforms into a fascist regime. We saw the beginning of this with the subversion of the 2020 presidential election contest to keep Trump in power, but now there is the new campaign to try to suppress votes in local, state, and national elections in almost every state. The Trump fascist party is seeking to take over local governments, school boards, and libraries. They are waging an ideological war by engaging in political censorship, passing reactionary legislation, and using political intimidation to ban books they don't like. This is fascist populism, even in the prisons, because they want to turn ordinary prisons into outright concentration camps, even death camps for their radical critics or dissidents.

This new fascist ideological campaign is led by Right-wing politicians, fake parent groups, and Christian fascist tendencies, railing against "critical race theory", the 1619 Project, or other Black content, as well as the alleged "filth and perversion" inside LGBTQ-tinged children's books. If the conservative pro-fascist groups have their way, only "pro-family", Christian fascist, and white nationalist materials would be in the bookstores, schools, libraries and prisons. Young people would continue to be prevented from accessing relevant cultural materials reflecting who they are and where they come from. They would continue to be told that they're just slaves, sexual perverts, unpatriotic, or troublemaking criminals.

The fascist conservatives aim to make white nationalism the dominant viewpoint, and turn back whatever social advances have been made since the 1960's when Black civil rights, Black Power, radical feminism, Queer liberation, the New Left, and other movements of the day won democratic rights for everyone. By changing American society in this way, they will compel the entire society into obedience, and to submit to the fascist party line. This is extremely dangerous, and we must fight back...while we still can!

It is important that we build a radical coalition against prison censorship and book banning. This coalition must unite all opponents of political censorship and any bans on “radical” books. It should have as its core, a prison-school-libraries anti-censorship protest component to combat the racist, homophobic/transphobic and authoritarian campaigns by the Right-wing, disguised as governmental or parental “concerns” over certain books. Truth is, they want to ban them all.

We are fighting fascism and the denial of the human rights of prisoners and the people at-large. We should always understand this. This proposed united front, however, must bring together prison support activists, especially, especially many of those already books through bars programs, radical publishing houses, prisoner rights groups, anti-racists, Black rights movements, LGBTQ groups, families of people who have relatives in prison, anti-fascist tendencies, and many other groups who are opposed to mass incarceration in the USA.

Even while we are building a radical fightback to prison book censorship generally, we must make prison book banning a part of the overall existing fightback by Black, student, and children’s book authors, literary groups like PEN America, the American Library Association, and others. They have a much larger following and presence at this point. We must get them to help us against the largest book banning of all such programs: the American prison system.

well. We realized that together as prisoners, we could do a great many things to resist prison abuse. Books and the free thinking brought by them opened our eyes and cleared our minds to the possibilities of liberation. None of this would have happened without the courageous example of Martin Sostre. He is an example of resistance and radical belief.

In the 1960s and 1970’s, the heyday of the American Prisoners’ Rights Movement, a movement not unlike the major civil rights and radical protest movements of the period, surfaced and fought for and won human rights for the hundreds of thousands of prisoners in the American prison system. Of course, Ronald Reagan and Right-wing conservatives took over the government, and they reversed most of the gains and muted the voices of prisoner-organizers which had arisen in that earlier period. They virtually have now destroyed almost any ability of prisoners alone to contest their oppressive living conditions from the inside. This is why prisoners and abolitionists must start anew. We must build a movement between prisoners and prison abolitionists on the outside.

This is why I believe today that we can win against the reimposed censorship regulations. Simply stated, we have done it before and can do it again.

grievances and other mistreatment. These civilians were further jolted “into reality” when they saw the state of New York’s murderous armed counterattack caused by the governor’s hard line stance against further negotiations. Prisoners at Attica were literally slaughtered live on television.

Because of their revulsion, overnight, it seemed, millions of people would now understand the degree of racism, degradation, and repression that the prisoners were forced to live with. Unlike the usually vacuous and escapist TV shows that the American public watched, now they were forced to see the prisoners tortured to death while all looked on.

At the end there was a bloodbath, which was supposed to silence a nation of prisoners, the Black poor, political radicals, anti-war activists, civil right protesters, students, and many others. But we did not give up in fear or resignation. Protests broke out all over the nation, urban ghettos, college campuses, churches, barrios, and so many other places to express outrage at this fascist assault. The cry of “Attica, Attica, Attica” was everywhere. Everyone knew what it meant. Tens of thousands of prisoners created a strike wave in prisons all over the USA and the world. Further, ordinary people on the outside volunteered to help prisoners, and began to speak out against racism and prison guard brutality. Law students and their professors filed lawsuits over prison conditions; pastors and divinity leaders talked about prison abolition and the “sin of racism” from the pulpit; Black community and civil rights activists began to denounce racism and the oppression of Black people in prisons by white racist society and government. It seemed everyone was expressing their outrage over the bloody repression of Attica.

More important is that a new prison abolitionist movement was created. This included Anarchists with a traditional abolitionist stance, related to anti-statism, the New Left radical tendencies, traditional civil rights groups, radical feminist tendencies and Queer liberation, and the Black Panther Party on the Black Left. This new prisoner support movement was an active civil rights movement, which supported the actual rise of a Prisoners’ Rights movement, affiliated with or inspired by radical and Black student movements like Black Power, other groups like the New Left, Vietnam anti-war movement, and many others in that period.

In his successful fight against censorship and the banning of Black and radical literature, Sostre opened the door for all this to happen. The idea that one man in solitary confinement had the nerve to fight back caused many of us to speak up as

## Martin Sostre and the Destruction of Censorship Regulations in the 1960’s and 1970’s.

By Lorenzo Komboa Ervin

**This article is continued political education for the building of a new movement against prison and political censorship in this period.** Although the prison regulations and outside social conditions are not the same as they were in the 1960’s, when the Prisoner’s Rights Movement was founded, alongside the civil rights and radical protest movements of that time, we are still forced to fight what is now political censorship used in the streets, schools and prisons by the same authorities and institutions.

An important activist prisoner, in what became the Prisoners’ Rights Movement back in the day, was Martin Sostre, an Afro-Latinx political prisoner, who had been framed for the Black rebellion in Buffalo, New York, after opening and operating the Afro-Asian bookstore in the Black community in 1967. Many Black youth, college students, and white radical activists met frequently at the bookstore before and during the rebellion. In truth, the rebellion was an anti-cop protest brought on by years of racial persecution and police terror. Sostre and a fellow worker at the bookstore, Geraldine Robinson, were publicly vilified as “provokers” of the riot, racial agitators, and communists, then framed in the racist court system. He was given 41 years in prison, while his alleged co-defendant was given two years in prison. This was all covered up with a false charge that they were using the bookstore for narcotics and other alleged criminal acts. There is no question that they were being persecuted by the state for their political views and organization.

I met Martin Sostre in 1969, when he and I were both confined at the Federal House of Detention in New York City. I had just been brought back to the country from East Germany, my last place of asylum, after I had hijacked a plane to Cuba earlier that year.

I had hijacked a commercial airline at gunpoint in Atlanta, Georgia, running from racist “Southern justice” and the FBI. I was on the run for most of that year. In hijacking a plane and forcing it to land in Cuba, I faced grave legal dangers. This was a time when hijacking a plane meant that you faced the death penalty or life in prison without possibility of parole. When arrested by U.S. authorities, they knew I was a “Black militant” and communist, so there would be no leniency, especially from an all-white jury in the South, in a racist klan hovel called Newnan, Georgia.

Martin always told me the truth about what could happen to me, that it would be deadly and that he did not know how I would come out. Yet, he always told me to have no fear and to never give up, no matter what I faced down South. He knew a “legal lynching” in Georgia could end my life; he just didn’t want me to surrender and beg those racists for mercy. He knew I wouldn’t get any mercy from those racists anyway.

He also knew first-hand what the racist legal and prison systems in America were all about. In New York state prisons, Sostre had suffered immeasurably. He had faced many long years of physical and mental torture; both in his first prison sentence, as well as the “riot” and drugs frame-up case at his Black radical bookstore in Buffalo, N.Y. Yet years of racism, solitary confinement, and an environment of fear, degradation, and intimidation did not break him, It made him stronger and more determined in his resistance.

So, his advice to a 20-year-old “kid”, who had never even been to prison before, was to “keep your head up and keep fighting.” Which from him was not just optimistic, but focused on resistance. He had always followed his own advice. Earlier in his prison term in the 1960’s at Attica, Martin had filed a number of lawsuits against New York state prison officials: against discrimination towards adherents of the Nation of Islam; to require a fair administrative hearing before disciplinary punishment could be imposed; lawsuits against the NYS Board of Parole, and many claims that conditions of solitary confinement were unconstitutional, and a number of other issues, But it was his lawsuit against prison censorship which ultimately overturned prison censorship, and changed overall conditions for hundreds of thousands of prisoners nationwide, and created a mass prisoners’ fightback movement. It showed that self-help legal rights for prisoners was the central issue laying the foundation for prisoners’ rights by challenging conditions of confinement and inhuman treatment.

Truthfully, I was just one of those prisoners who followed his instructions to bring lawsuits against prison officials in the areas of the country where their prisons were located, in order to give the New York federal anti-censorship case and its order in Sostre v. Otis, a national application to all prison systems. This would give teeth to all prison censorship struggles and a model for judges everywhere to issue similar rulings.

Shortly before I was transferred to Georgia, he told me in minute detail how to fight my criminal case in court in Georgia, but even also wrote out the blank lawsuit and other documents so that I could repeat his prisoners’ civil rights lawsuit in the federal prison court system, and other states. I did exactly as instructed, and then used the prisoner underground to get these legal anti-censorship materials into other prisons.

When I first went to federal prison in 1970, the Christian bible was the only book that prisoners were allowed to own. Everything else was confiscated by prison officials as “contraband.” Thus, all the literature I had received in the Fulton County Jail in Atlanta was immediately confiscated.

Then, I worked with other federal and state prisoners to file lawsuits all over the country. The simultaneous pressure of these lawsuits literally “burst open the doors” of both state and federal prisons everywhere. In no time, it seemed, prisons that previously had prison censorship rules so stringent as to only allow the King James bible, now were forced to allow Anarchist, Marxist, Black Nationalist, and all manner of controversial or “radical” materials.

This allowed prisoners to receive “Muhammad Speaks, the Black Panther Party Intercommunal Newspaper, the Guardian, and so many others never seen in prisons. Out of this came political discussions or organizing that never happened before, and it quickly led to prisoner lending libraries, Black and ethnic cultural studies programs, and many other basic rights for prisoners, even in my traditionally racist and conservative prison at Terre Haute, Indiana, federal prison.

Seeing this, many old school repressive prison guards and wardens began to quit their jobs and complained about the alleged “coddling” of prisoners. This happened through the 1970’s, but especially after the Attica New York state prison rebellion in September 1971. Although the Attica rebellion cost the lives of over 40 prisoners and guards, and the torture of hundreds more, while it lasted it educated millions of people on their televisions, when they listened to the prisoner leaders describe their