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**PHONE**  
**RESISTANCE**

*Safear Ness*

**Free**  
**To**  
**Prisoners**

Abolition 2024





## About the author

**Safear Ness** is a formerly incarcerated abolitionist, recently released from Pennsylvania State Prison. His lineage is traced through Indigenous peoples (Apache Chiricahua), Spanish colonizers, and white settlers. He still organizes against the PIC with incarcerated comrades, Study and Struggle, and In The Belly. His writing has appeared in Jewish Currents, Utopix, and the Asian American Writers Workshop. These days he is reviving In The Mix, a prisoner podcast he helped create while incarcerated.

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Could you live without your cell phone? How would you function? Most people in the free world couldn't imagine life without it. Prisoners don't have that privilege. Cell phones are prohibited in Pennsylvania State Prison. But for those locked away, there are few things more precious than the phone. It's mounted on the wall, costs a dollar for 15 minutes, and is limited to 20 numbers that must be pre-approved by the prison. Despite its limitations, it's our lifeline to the free world. We live our lives through it. Some get married on it, others divorced. Parents raise children. Children care for parents. We laugh, scream, and cry through the receiver. In prison, a phone is much more than a phone.

The mission of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PA DOC) is to "reduce criminal behavior by providing individualized treatment and education to offenders, resulting in successful community reintegration through accountability and positive change." The emptiness of their words is crushed by the hypocrisy of their actions. Studies show that one of the most effective means of decreasing recidivism is a strong support system and building connections in the community. While the PA DOC seems to support this in speech, their policy often reflects differently.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in direct opposition to the mission of "successful community reintegration," the administration at SCI Fayette decided to limit incarcerated people to one 15 minute phone call per day. This essay is how a rainbow coalition of prisoners at Fayette fought the phone restriction policy. And how, despite the mountain of opposition, we won.

When the pandemic first started and prison officials restricted our movement, abolished the chow hall, canceled programming and confined us to our cells, we openly speculated that the prison would use this medical emergency to their advantage and continue these restrictions as a means of control.

As incarcerated people, our communication with the outside world mostly depended on phone calls and video visits. We struggled to maintain relationships with our loved ones on a limit of four 15 minute phone calls each day.

The administration at Fayette asked us to comply with COVID precautions to make the transition easy. Most of us were worried about catching the virus, so we complied. At that point violence among prisoners was almost non-existent. As time passed they told us to take the vaccine to open the prison back up. We were tired of being locked down so most of us complied with that too. Then they offered the booster. We took that too. After all that, the prison administration repaid us by implementing a new policy limiting us to just one 15 minute phone call per day.

When you find yourself in these spaces, step out of your comfort zone and extend yourself to meet new people. Instead of leading with a statement, throw a question out there. It could be as simple as, "Hey did you hear about such and such news? What do you think about that? Starting conversations for the phone resistance was usually as easy as, "Hey did you hear about the upcoming phone restriction? What do you think about that?" Even people that didn't use the phone often hated the idea of the administration taking more from us. Why? Because they keep taking shit from us and "no one stands up." Anticipate that response. Why is this time different?

Before the phone resistance we spent a lot of time building study groups, connecting incarcerated people with outside activists and increasing our political education collectively. These groups were integral to our resistance. If there are no study groups where you're at, start one right now. Grab a book, take it to the dayroom and start a conversation. It can be as simple as that.

The administration's plan to restrict the phone backfired in ways they couldn't have imagined. Instead of isolating us from the free world, they brought us together. And when we come together collectively, we win.

Our war was not decided in an epic battle. There were no victory celebrations. The administration announced no defeat. Instead they let the phone restriction quietly fade away. But we know what happened. We came together; We organized; We fought the phone restriction; We won. Despite everyone that said it would never work, we won.

Incarcerated people are not only separated from the free world, we are separated from each other. Prison erects both physical and interpersonal walls. More modern prisons favor smaller blocks and smaller yards to keep social interaction to a minimum. If the heart of organizing is relationship building, then how do you organize if you don't have the opportunity to socialize? Incarcerated people must be creative in overcoming these barriers. Prison prescribed-programming can become subversive bases. The law library, school rooms, and religious spaces can become gatherings for organizing. With more time and opportunity we could have utilized these "legitimate" prison spaces to spread word about the phone boycott.

News of the phone restriction first came from a video recording posted on a television channel the prison hosts. An administrator announced the new policy in a condescending tone. He claimed that he previously warned us that if we couldn't work out the phone situation ourselves that they would do it for us. He said they were still getting complaints. Now they were taking it into their own hands.

The policy was to implement a phone sign up sheet. Each prisoner would be limited to sign up for one 15 minute slot during their recreational time each day. If there was time left, discretion would be left to the block sergeant to allow further use of the phone. There was no guarantee we could make more than one call. But it was the administration that created the stressful phone environment in the first place. They split the block into cohorts, only allowing a limited amount of time for everyone to get on the phone. There were too many people, not enough phones, and not enough time. Instead of extending our time out, or adding more phones to the block, they decided to punish us for a situation they created.

I was heated. My comrades were furious. Everyone that used the phone, which is almost every prisoner, hated the idea of the upcoming restriction. We had already

done the best we could to make the phone situation as safe as possible. We created our own phone lines. I was on three different blocks during the lockdown. On each block the lines would be long, and sometimes we couldn't get on at the exact time that we wanted, but everyone eventually had time to get on the phone more than once. To us, the administration was flexing their power. But what, if anything, could be done? Would we take this sitting down? Or would the people finally say enough is enough and stand up to fight?

Prison twitter was ablaze with speculation. A group of us understood that a revolution needs organizers. We had the anger of the people. Now we just needed to channel it. But we had to work fast. The administration announced that the restrictions would be implemented in about a week. First stage: planning.

On the second day, they came around with the phone list at night again. Only one person signed the list. You know who. The next day the phones ran as normal. The third night was the last time they tried the list. After that there was never a list again. We were surprised no one got locked up. They didn't lock us down either. Perhaps the administration couldn't identify the organizers. Maybe our outside accomplices kept them in check. It could be that their superiors at central office told them to stand down. It's hard to say for sure.

Many of them confine themselves to the block, never going to the yard where prisoners congregate. What's more concerning is that most of them are buddy-buddy with the COs and staff. It's almost as if they relate more to the administration than the people they are locked up with. This dynamic deserves a more substantial analysis, but at the very least I can say that the administration uses their job as leverage over them. They resemble the petty bourgeois in the free world. Rarely do any of them support collective liberation. They sold their revolutionary impulse for some soups and cookies.

Our outside accomplices continued to call the administration. I don't know what response they received. For us, it was enough that the prison knew we were supported, that they couldn't hide behind their veil of secrecy as they normally do. Some outside organizers might see social media posts asking them to call prison administrators and think it isn't important: what can my call do? They are wrong. Inside organizing is strengthened by outside support.

The planning began with a small group of us housed together on the same block. We came from various social groups in the prison: Muslim, Christian, Black nationalist, white, and "gang" affiliated. Using our networks we checked the pulse of the people. Not a single person wanted the restriction. Most were ready to take a stand. There was a hurdle to overcome, however. Even amongst those ready, many expressed doubt of whether other people would ride or if they fold when the pressure came.

Our group quickly developed a plan of action. The public action itself was pretty straightforward: We would boycott the phone list and refuse to sign. We anticipated that the prison may counter by preventing us from using the phone so we decided we would boycott the phone altogether. If the restriction continued we would then increase our resistance with a food boycott and send our trays back to the kitchen.

Most social groups have a leader or leaders that they look to for guidance. Some are explicitly labeled a leader, others act in that capacity without the title. Regardless, to be as effective as possible we targeted leaders of the various groups throughout the prison. Once we got them active in the resistance, they influenced others.

Spreading our message as a group to those with influence over large numbers of people allowed us to share some of the risk. Now there was an army of organizers. That made it much more difficult for the administration to identify the initial organizers. And even if they did by sending us to solitary confinement it wouldn't neutralize the resistance. It's not that we were leaderless. Instead, our leaders were embedded with the people, taking direction from the people, and directly accountable to them. This is called building a hydra. When you chop a dragon's head off, it dies. A hydra has multiple heads and when you chop one off, two more grow in its place.

Out of everyone on the block, there was one person who refused to join the resistance. He was a known bootlicker and suspected informant. His block worker job made him feel like he ran the block *with* the COs. He found more joy in conversing with them than us. It wasn't a surprise that he continued to sign the list. Some suggested we get him out the way. But the situation didn't really call for that. We advised the people to abandon him. He didn't have any influence so it was safer to just leave him.

Not every block participated in the boycott. For example, one block with low participation houses the majority of workers in the Correction Industries (CI) shop. They are the highest paid positions in the prison, averaging \$150 a month. These are mostly older men who have come to cherish the money. Many of them are white. This privilege affects their unity with other prisoners.

They made an announcement, "If you want to use the phone tomorrow, sign the sheet in the dayroom." Everyone's eyes darted around the block. Who would make the first move? A few comrades and I walked over to the table. There was a memo next to the sign up explaining the policy. We sat near the table and kept watch.

The people were hype about the unity we were witnessing. At one point someone walked over to the desk and signed the list. Before he had a chance to walk away a comrade approached him and explained that we weren't signing the list, that we were protesting the policy. How is it, he explained, that the mission of the DOC is supposed to be rehabilitation and making prisoners productive members of society, but they do nothing to actually make that happen? Studies show that building community support is one of the most important factors to reduce recidivism, yet the administration wants to block our connection to the street. Ain't that fucked up? We were tired of them oppressing us. This time we were standing up. The person agreed and immediately scratched his name off the list.

A debate occurred over whether we should write a pamphlet to distribute. The writing would be a reminder to the people of all the things the prison had taken from us over the years, their plans for the phone restriction, and our plan to fight back with help from outside accomplices. It would serve as an encouragement to stand up to our oppressors. Some people felt that a pamphlet would make it back to the administration. If that happened, they argued, someone may go to the hole. Others felt like the administration was going to hear about our plans through their informants anyway. Besides, this group said, we want the administration to feel the pressure; we want them to know we don't plan on taking this lightly. Everyone understood that, pamphlet or not, some of us may end up in the hole. In the end it was decided to go forward with distributing it to select organizers who would show it to other people, but take it back when they were done reading it.

Some of us had been developing friendships with free world abolitionists. We knew that if we wanted to pull this off we would need people attacking from the outside in as well. Our outside accomplices were delegated two tasks. First, a phone campaign would be developed on social media. An inside comrade wrote a short description of the restriction and asked anyone concerned to call the prison and complain. And of course we were advising all incarcerated people to contact their families and inform them of the phone restriction. This would let the administration know we were not alone inside. We relayed this information over a video visit. At the time video visits were less than the phone. And because we were on a time crunch, we couldn't use snail mail. If you have the time, the safest method is snail mail and having a person who is not under surveillance mail it out.

Second, our outside accomplices set up a smart communications account, perhaps multiple accounts, to communicate with prisoners throughout the prison. A prisoner managed to get a list of the names and numbers of incarcerated people throughout the compound. Over 100 prisoners located on different blocks received a message about the upcoming phone restriction and our planned resistance to it. There were some security concerns about taking this step. We didn't want the administration to think they were responsible for organizing on their block. However we determined that since COVID restrictions might prevent some people being informed, the benefits outweighed the risk. We advised that they send a message back saying that they would not be able to participate in the phone boycott because it was against the rules and to block the sender. That way they would be able to use that as evidence if they ever received a misconduct. War is deception. This method was only used by necessity and should be avoided if you can.