

## SF Jail Labor Analysis

Dear allies in the labor movement,

When we read the news that San Francisco says it doesn't have money for union workers' jobs, benefits, and pensions, we don't believe it because they apparently have millions to spend building a new jail. We want to see our taxpayer money invested in good, quality jobs that serve the needs of our communities and support safe, cost-effective, community- and public health-based alternatives to incarceration. We applaud AFL-CIO's 2013 [Resolution 17](#) opposing Mass Incarceration and we believe it applies in San Francisco as much as anywhere. We are asking San Francisco labor unions to pass resolutions opposing jail construction as part of the Hall of Justice replacement project.

We are a coalition of community organizations in San Francisco opposed to the construction of a new jail intended to replace the Hall of Justice. Members of the coalition include the Coalition on Homelessness, San Francisco Human Services Network, People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER), National Lawyers Guild, Community United Against Violence, W. Haywood Burns Institute, and other groups. We support the replacement of the other components of the Hall of Justice – public employees deserve seismically safe, modern workplaces — but building jail space will be a costly venture that will maintain a high incarceration rate in our City/County for decades to come, with no (and likely adverse) public safety benefits, and will foreclose the possibility of other improvements in community safety and public health. A massive jail system is an indication of a flawed and failing society beset with safety and health problems; the demolition of the Hall of Justice is a unique opportunity for San Francisco to invest in community based strategies that can improve safety and health. We think that your labor unions should be aware of what the jail will and won't do for San Francisco, and we hope that after you consider the issue, you will join with us (as United Educators of San Francisco already has) in urging our local government to find alternatives to the jail project.

### **No need for the jail**

First of all, you should recognize that, as Sheriff Mirkarimi recently put it, San Francisco has one of the most “under crowded” jail systems in California, if not the entire United States. District Attorney Gascon has said that he intends to continue reducing prosecution of non-threatening drug crimes, and insists that the jail population will continue to shrink. Of the seven county jails in San Francisco, #3 (within the current Hall of Justice) and #6 (at San Bruno) are closed, and #4 (also within the Hall of Justice) is at a fraction of capacity. San Francisco has an average daily jail population of around 1,150 people; if the City/County would invest in alternatives to imprisonment to keep just 100 more people out of jail, there would be no mathematical need for the jail. Yet the proposal to spend up to \$290 Million (up to \$600 Million with financing, and over 90% from local funds) is still advancing.

It is true that the current of Hall of Justice is considered seismically unsafe and should be replaced. We agree with this assessment and we are not asking your unions to oppose the Hall of Justice replacement overall – only the jail component. Cancelling the jail project will allow the replacement of the rest of the Hall of Justice to move ahead faster; it will not reduce the total budget for capital projects in the City; and it may even allow for funding of additional projects that would serve as alternatives to incarceration

such as construction of new supportive housing, mental health crisis beds, and residential drug treatment centers.

### **Impact on jobs**

The choice here is not about the quantity of jobs available in San Francisco, but about what kind of jobs San Francisco's public sector provides. If San Francisco is to avoid building the jail project – as we propose – it will be made feasible by increased investment in community-based and public-health services in areas such as drug treatment, mental health, and crisis intervention. Expanding these services can create as many construction jobs as building jail cells, while actually serving more people, since it is cheaper to build a square foot of community service space than a square foot of jail space. Staffing for some alternative facilities may be with public sector jobs or with City contractors. Already, the Sheriff's department is attempting to get their staff certified to perform the same functions at SF General Hospital as social workers with the Department of Public Health. Social workers are best equipped to do social work, not sheriffs. We see no reason, however, why our social workers cannot continue to be unionized and receive living wages and the benefits needed to live a good life in San Francisco.

Jobs are also impacted by jail funding. City leaders know that San Francisco voters will not approve bonds for construction of a new jail, so they plan to fund it through issuing Certificates of Participation. COPs are paid from General Fund revenues but have a higher interest rate than voter-approved bonds, so the jail project will take money from salaries to pay additional interest to bond-holders for years.

### **Racial disparity**

AFL-CIO's 2013 [Resolution 17](#) on Mass Incarceration noted, "The rise in the rate of incarceration has had a disproportionate impact on individuals and communities of color." In San Francisco we are seeing significant displacement of Black families, despite progressive politics in some spheres, those racial disparities exist here as well: African-Americans are about 6% of San Francisco's population and over 60% of SF's jail population. One of the best ways to reduce the impact of incarceration on African-Americans is to incarcerate fewer people overall.

### **Jail is largely pre-trial**

Resolution 17 resolved, "The AFL-CIO will support reforms...that accelerate the justice process and eliminate unnecessary pre-trial detention time." The jail population in San Francisco is over 81% people awaiting trial – who have not been sentenced to jail time, but are too poor to make bail. Increasingly, bail systems are being criticized for their unfair treatment of poor people as opposed to the wealthy. One powerful way to reduce unnecessary pre-trial detention is to make space in jail a scarce resource, so that public authorities must carefully consider whom to keep there. With a surplus of space jailing people becomes an easier choice than conducting a detailed interview, background check, and community outreach for each person facing charges.

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### **Impact on communities**

Workers in San Francisco are part of our community, and many workers in the Sheriff's department and in San Francisco's social services departments are low- or middle-income workers. We live in the communities that are directly impacted by the crime and violence that decades of being "tough on crime" have failed to solve. We recognize that the "war on drugs" and the "war on crime" are often – if not always – wars on the poor and on workers. Our massive jails and prisons are a key piece of infrastructure for this war that keeps workers and poor people down. Our communities deserve as much public safety as wealthy American communities, but it's usually the case that the more cops are in your neighborhoods and the more of your neighbors are in jail, the less safe you are. We need a new approach to public safety, one that starts with investment in our communities in terms of health, education, and employment. We believe that your labor unions share this fundamental belief with us. As AFL-CIO put it in Resolution 17:

The impact of mass incarceration can be felt on neighborhoods, families and individuals. The majority of people in the system live in a subset of neighborhoods in the major cities of each state. When people, who have been in prison or jail, or on parole or probation, return to civil life, they return to these same neighborhoods. As a result of mass incarceration, these already impoverished neighborhoods have lost thousands of working-age men. For families, relationships are strained, income earners are lost and parents and children are separated. Those who have been released from the correctional system face institutionalized discrimination, unable to break free of the stigma. Various state and local laws and policies institutionalize unfairness, preventing those reintegrated into society from voting, serving on juries, obtaining student loans, and receiving public benefits and other services. Returning to neighborhoods long suffering from economic divestment, high unemployment, poor infrastructure and isolation, those re-entering civil society also have few opportunities for advanced education and good jobs.

RESOLVED ... The AFL-CIO will support the effective use and full funding of training, education, probation and parole strategies that assist in reintegrating people who have served their time into our communities.

In closing, we respectfully request that San Francisco labor unions consider and adopt resolutions calling on the City of San Francisco to terminate its planning for a Replacement Jail project and to invest its resources into alternatives to incarceration.

The Coalition Against the San Francisco Jail

<http://j.mp/nosfjail>