

CRITICAL RESISTANCE SOUTH

A REPORT FROM THE SOUTHERN CONFERENCE & STRATEGY SESSION
IN NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
APRIL 4TH - 6TH 2003

Critical Resistance South work group and organizing committee members

Paula Austin- NC Lambda Youth Network, Durham, NC
Miriam Isabel Barrios- New Orleans LA
Lindsay Bodack- Tulane University, New Orleans LA
Katie Booth- Juvenile Justice Project of LA, New Orleans LA
Rose Braz- Critical Resistance, Oakland CA
Aleysha Bryant- Xavier University, New Orleans LA
Xochitl Brevera- Grassroots Leadership, Atlanta GA
Melissa Burch- Critical Resistance, New Orleans LA
Art Carpenter- Greater New Orleans Green Party, New Orleans LA
Melvin Claverie- Xavier University, New Orleans LA
Kim Diehl- Critical Resistance, Durham NC
Sky Edeawo- Project Welcome Home, Savannah GA
Bob Elder- People's Tribunal, Valdosta GA
Jake Elliott- New Orleans LA
Althea Francois- National Coalition to Free the Angola 3, New Orleans LA
Margery Freeman- People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, New Orleans LA
Dan Horowitz de Garcia- Project South, Atlanta GA
Dana Green- New Orleans LA
Sabrina Hambel- New Orleans LA
Rachel Herzing- Critical Resistance, Oakland CA
Elizabeth Jeffers- National Coalition to Free the Angola 3, New Orleans LA
Chris Jones- Florida Institutional Legal Services, Gainesville FL
Amelia Kirby- Appalshop, Whitesburg KY
Lisa Kung- Southern Center for Human Rights, Atlanta GA
Theresa Meisz- Moratorium Campaign, New Orleans LA
Tamika Middleton- Xavier University, New Orleans LA
Efia Nwangaza- Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, Greenville SC
Lucia Penland- Alabama Prison Project, Montgomery AL
Romiltia Prince- Louisville KY
Ellen Reddy- Citizens for Quality Education, Lexington MS
Jamie Schweser- New Orleans LA
Micol Siegel- Emory University/University of Maryland, Atlanta GA
Courtney Smith- Xavier University, New Orleans LA
Emily Waszak- Nashville TN
Jane Wholey- Esopus Productions, New Orleans LA

Workshop at Craig Elementary School



CRITICAL RESISTANCE SOUTH CONFERENCE REPORT

by Melissa Burch
CR South Conference Coordinator,
April 2003

photos . Scott Braley
design . Shana Agid

the setting

IT WAS IMPORTANT

TO BE IN A COMMUNITY THAT WAS DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY THE ISSUE, AND TO HAVE THE SUPPORT OF THAT COMMUNITY”

KIM DIEHL, NC

The sun beat down into the heart of the historic New Orleans neighborhood known as Treme - one of the first neighborhoods built and inhabited by free people of color in the United States. It was only 8 a.m., and the temperature was already threatening to rise to 80 degrees on this long-awaited April morning. It was the opening day of Critical Resistance South, a gathering expected to draw hundreds of people from around the South, intent on coming together to envision and strategize an end to the Prison Industrial Complex.

via conference calls, face-to-face meetings and endless email discussions to make the vision of Critical Resistance South a reality.

The organizing committee for CR South identified 7 major goals for the conference at the original planning meeting held at the historic Highlander Center in Tennessee. All of the planning workgroups for the conference—Logistics, Outreach, Materials, Program and Media—worked with these goals at the front of their minds. Those goals were to:

- Draw attention to the issues
- Help to build a movement, expand existing networks and combat feelings of isolation
- Focus on communities most affected by the prison industrial complex
- Bring new people into the work and increase the level of organizing against the PIC in the South
- Inspire and motivate
- Focus on the South and create an event that was southern in content and style.

how the conference came to be

IT'S NOT THAT OFTEN

Critical Resistance South was a year and a half in the making. Through a collective process, coordinated by Critical

THAT YOU HAVE THAT MUCH ENERGY IN ONE PLACE FOR A PROACTIVE REASON.”

ROBERT “KOOL BLACK” HORTON, LA

Resistance, work groups made up of community organizers from across the South joined together to organize everything from site logistics, to outreach, lead-up events, written materials, visuals, media trainings and a media strategy that was as an integral part of the other aspects of the organizing and of course, an incredible program.

Organizers from grassroots groups as diverse as Appalshop, a community based media organization in Kentucky, to Citizens for Quality Education, who push for radical education reform in Mississippi, to Project South which focuses on popular education and anti poverty work across the South, and Florida Prison Legal News providers of legal support for Prisoners and their families in Florida, came together



the news conference

“REALIZED

News reporters and conference attendees convened on the lawn of the Treme Community Center, the primary conference location, to participate in the opening news conference. To coincide with CR South, the Justice Policy Institute released a new Report entitled *Deep Impact: Quantifying the Effect of Prison Expansion in the South*, examining the impact of the Prison Industrial Complex on southern communities.

WE WEREN'T THE ONLY FAMILY THAT HAD BEEN DONE SOME INJUSTICE . . . IT GIVES YOU A LITTLE HOPE.”

CONNIE FRANKLIN, LA

The Craig Elementary School served as back-drop to the news conference. Its three story high brick walls bore 100 or so 4 by 6 foot banners, featuring paintings by Craig students depicting their family members and friends who are in prison. A photo of the school's facade appeared on the front page of the local section of the New Orleans Times Picayune. "To open this news conference, we have a question we need to ask of this country," demanded one speaker. "Why are so many people we love behind bars?"

As the weekend unfolded, the answer to this question—as well as proposals for how to collectively resist this nation's reliance on prisons, policing and other forms of surveillance—were explored and debated through over 100 workshops, caucuses, performances, films, exhibitions and informal discussions. The program was jam-packed, and was ambitiously scheduled throughout the Treme Community, in two community centers, three neighborhood churches, all three floors of the elementary school and the adjacent Louis Armstrong Park.



opening news conference, April 4th

for information-sharing, and beginning the preparation of 2000 hummus, peanut butter and turkey sandwiches—a group of 60 or so former prisoners from all over the country were already meeting at the Treme Center, beginning a conversation that would continue all weekend around the need for former prisoners to take leadership in the movement against the PIC through a new civil rights movement of former prisoners.

By 2 p.m. Friday afternoon, volunteers had set up 1000 folding chairs in the Treme Center gymnasium. It seemed hard to believe all the chairs would be filled with bodies only a few hours later. But, soon enough, fulfilling the dream of conference organizers, bus and vanloads of people began to roll up outside the community center from all across the South. Many more organized car-pools and vans to travel together to the conference

than can be named here, but to provide the reader with a flavor, around 3 in the afternoon, 50 Atlantans pulled up in a bus organized by members of Project South, Grassroots Leadership, Southern Center for Human Rights and Amnesty International. The bus was full with formerly imprisoned men and women from the National Coalition of Previous Prisoners, community organizers from Georgians for Equal Justice, Mothers Advocating Juvenile Justice, the Atlanta Labor Pool Workers' Union and young people from the Project South Youth Council. Shortly thereafter, a 15-passenger van arrived from the Smithville Neighborhood Freedom Center in Georgia.

Citizens for Quality Education pulled up with a bus full of 47 young people and parents from communities that have been deeply impacted by the growing Mississippi prison system and consequent drain of resources from public education and other social programs in the state. Also on the bus were young people from the Parent-Student group in Indianola, Mississippi. This group said the community-building experience of traveling together on the bus was an important part of their conference experience and they are planning to take a bus together more often to organizing events!

the crowds roll in

"IT UNFOLDED LIKE A POEM.

AND YOU COULD SENSE A FEELING OF 'CAN-DO-NESS', RIGHTEOUSNESS AND ENTITLEMENT THAT FOLKS DON'T USUALLY FEEL AROUND INCARCERATION ISSUES AND THE SKILL AND ABILITY TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT."

EFIA NWANGAZA, SC

While conference organizers buzzed around the site—putting up signs to direct people to workshops, parking and registration, setting up dozens of tables

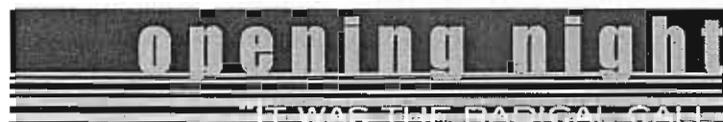
The entire staff of the Women's Project—the multi-issue organization that addresses the concerns of women and children in Arkansas—arrived in two vans, having made a commitment months earlier to bring one formerly incarcerated community member to the conference for every staff member that would attend.

A group of organizers from the Progressive Network coalition in South Carolina also traveled to New Orleans together.

From North Carolina, Grassroots Leadership organized one big bus, plus 2 vans, which brought students from Duke University & University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, a group of youth from high schools in the Greensboro area and a ministry there, plus folks from CURE NC and the NC Lambda Youth Network, as well as their staff.

21st Century Youth Project in Selma, Alabama also brought a van full of young people from counties all over Alabama.

By 4 p.m., the registration area was packed with people, and by 6 p.m., the lines stretched down the hallways in all directions. "It's really happening!" the electric sentiment in the air seemed to call out.



Thirty teenaged members of the Lawless High School Choir broke into an energetic rendition of Down by the Riverside. "Ain't gonna study war no more!" they sang at the top of their lungs. It was opening night of Critical Resistance South and speakers and performers had been asked by conference organizers to use this night to help set the tone for the conference.

THAT WAS KEY TO THE CONFERENCE. PEOPLE ARE SO DISCOURAGED BY THE SLOW PACE OF THE MOVEMENT THAT WHEN WE ACTUALLY PUT OUT A RADICAL CALL, PEOPLE RESPOND."

CURTIS MUHAMMAD, LA

Reverend Goat Carson, a First Nations New Orleanian who had been asked to bless the site, took this tone-setting mission head on. While organizers of the conference program half expected the Reverend to lead us in a somber prayer, his invocation headed straight for the heart of the spirit of resistance. "Let's laugh in the face of oppression" he cried, "WE ARE STILL HERE!" The crowd was instantly on their feet and the invitation for audience participation and spir-

ited call and response did not let up throughout the rest of the evening.

Next to take the stage was Patrick Banks, a young man from Florida who

Lawless High School Choir



opening night, Friday April 4th



spent several years of his youth behind bars. Patrick called the audience to action, careful to emphasize that the abuse and neglect that he had endured in the Florida prison system was still happening to thousands of others.

Dorothy Gaines, Alabama survivor of the War on Drugs, spoke to the impact of the "war on drugs" on communities of color and to her own experience behind bars.

Robert King Wilkerson, thus far the only member of the "Angola 3" to have gained his freedom, read a statement of solidarity written by Albert Woodfox, one of his two comrades who remain behind bars, in their 3rd decade of solitary confinement. "The reliance on incarceration to eliminate the poor, com-

munities of color, and those who resist and challenge this racist, sexist, and capitalist state must be stopped," wrote Woodfox. "We cannot be fooled to believe that locking folks up will make our communities safer! Let the South be the catalyst for a meaningful, well-organized anti-prison industrial complex movement!"

Angela Davis was next to address the heated room. "Any movement to stop the militarization and lock-down of our communities here at home must be linked to an international movement to stop U.S. military aggression abroad," emphasized Davis. "We must demand options for our communities that are other than joining the military or going to prison."

Davis also focused her remarks on the abolitionist vision of an end to the PIC, cautioning that although many reforms are important, they must not take center stage in our movement.

Accompanied by 3 young musicians from the neighborhood, Jerome Smith, Treme community activist and unofficial Director of the Treme Community Center, closed out the evening with an enlivened call to the centrality of culture in building a movement. The choir broke into song as the gymnasium emptied for the night. "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes."

day two

TREME ENJOYED

THE ENDLESS NETWORKING POTENTIAL THE CR SOUTH CONFERENCE PRESENTED TO ME. THE WORKSHOPS WERE TOP-NOTCH AND IT WAS GREAT MEETING THE MANY PERSONALITIES IN ACTIVISM AROUND ME. I AM FAIRLY NEW TO THE GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING SCENE— I COULDN'T HAVE ASKED FOR A BETTER VENUE TO STRENGTHEN MY COMPREHENSION OF THE STRUGGLE."

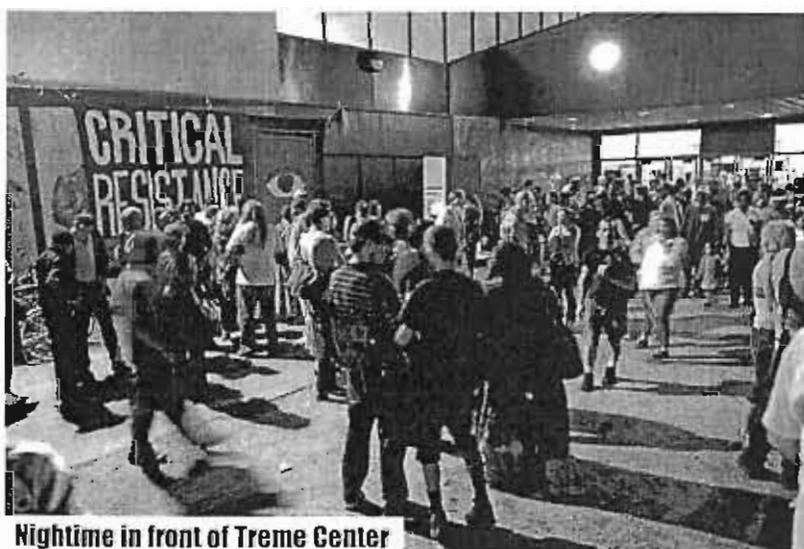
SABIR ABDUL-HAQQ, MS

Saturday April 5th presented a full day of action at the conference. A breakfast of donated French pastries and coffee opened at 7:30 a.m. and by 8 a.m., registration was again abuzz. It was another beautiful day and the charged energy of the night before lingered over the site. The only complaint: having to choose between the 20 workshops running simultaneously at any given time, plus films, live performances, and a prisoner art show.

In addition to the ongoing programming, there was the foyer of Craig Elementary School, which became the main networking hub, jam-packed with "tablers" displaying information about their work, selling books and tools for organizing and doing a whole lot of meeting and greeting.

It was also here that written statements from prisoners all over the region could be read and collected, alongside a photo exhibit featuring the "survival programs" of the Black Panther Party in the 60s.

Workshops ranged in topic from increased surveillance of communities of color since September 11th, to police brutality, ability-tracking of kids as a pathway



Nighttime in front of Treme Center

to prison, community-based responses to interpersonal violence, the impact of the criminal justice system on women, children and families, abolitionist strategies, family members of prisoners supporting each other, prison journalism, young people as targets of the PIC, rural organizing against new prisons, political prisoners and more.

"THE SET UP OF THE WORKSHOPS REALLY PROMOTED COLLABORATION AND COLLECTIVE ACTION, RATHER THAN THE TRADITIONAL LECTURE/PANEL STYLE OF MOST CONFERENCES. IT FELT LIKE WE WERE BUILDING A MOVEMENT."

DAN BERGER, FL

Just as the last workshop sessions for the day let out, the humidity that had been building all day, perhaps as a result of all of the charged energy that was being released in the neighborhood, let loose in a powerful spring storm! Our plans for an evening picnic/cultural event in Armstrong Park were out of the question and the sound and stage team scrambled to pack up the beautiful tent that had been erected in Congo Square, and move the event inside the Treme Center.

But nothing could stop the generous donation of more than 200 pounds of beans and rice and jambalaya that a local restaurant had been preparing all day to deliver. Hungry conference goers lined up inside the Community Center gymnasium, the first wave

workshop at St. Augustine Church



lucking out with a slice of the delicious "Critical Resistance cake" a volunteer had baked and decorated with the big green eye that is the CR logo! The music got started late, but those with enough energy left from the busy day stayed to enjoy the Atlanta-based youth hip hop tour "Dare to Struggle", local political hip hop artists Truth Universal and Nabi Bastet, and local musicians Rudy Mills and the Caribbean Funk Band, the Thunder Blues Band and Percy Williams with keyboardist Bobby Love.

day three

"I HAVE BEEN A COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

FOR FIFTEEN YEARS. I GREW UP IN TREME. A CLOSE FRIEND OF MINE WAS JUST SENTENCED TO 99 YEARS IN ANGOLA. SINCE THE CONFERENCE, HE SAYS HE AND ALL THE INMATES THERE NOW HAVE HOPE. AFTER TAKING PART IN THE ECUMENICAL FORUM AND EXPERIENCING THE CONFERENCE I AM RE-INSPIRED AS AN ORGANIZER."

RANDALL MITCHELL, LA

Sunday morning began with more workshops and an Interfaith Breakfast, where leaders of Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish and other faiths came together to dialogue with others who do social justice work that is inspired, strengthened by and rooted in their spirituality.

"We have a black city council, black mayor, black leaders and a black chief of police and we sighed with relief when we looked around and saw black faces running the city," spoke one Christian minister from New Orleans. "But yet their sons were arriving by the busloads to Angola—how can that be?"

The last scheduled dialogues of the conference were the state caucuses, where people attending from each of the CR South states could gather to network and discuss issues affecting them in their local areas. About 30 Floridians met and collectively brainstormed the key issues around the PIC that are affecting them in Florida. They then set a

follow up meeting for one month later in Florida, to devise a plan for addressing some of those issues.

The South Carolina caucus included people from various organizations across the state. They agreed to form a statewide study project based between the College of Charleston and South Carolina State University, to look at the economic impacts of prison expansion in the state, as well as the social impact of juvenile incarceration.

The North Carolina caucus discussed the state's current proposal to finance 3 more prisons and used the time to network with each other.

The conference closed with a *secondline*, a traditional, New Orleans-style street parade, this time used to raise awareness about the PIC in the streets. Led by the Treme Sidewalk Steppers, a well-respected neighborhood social club and the lively New Birth Brass Band, conference participants and community members danced through the Treme neighborhood with signs, banners and umbrellas, in a powerful union of culture and resistance.



tabling area and prisoner statements display

closely together and left feeling they were part of a larger movement that they could continue to access and collaborate with. We succeeded in creating a space where information and resources were shared effectively, and most importantly, relationships built that have the potential to form the fabric for a renewed movement against the PIC in the South.

|media coverage|

And we certainly drew attention to the issues! On the national level, about 130 major dailies carried stories about the conference and

JPI's southern prison crisis report- about eighty of those stories were in major southern dailies such as the Miami Herald.

In New Orleans, our major daily paper, the Times Picayune, ran four stories. All three New Orleans African American papers published at least one story, and our weekly alternative paper did a 3000-word lead story.

Leading up to the conference, CR spokespeople appeared on a number of radio and TV talk shows, including New Orleans' most popular morning news program. The media coverage helped put the name "Critical Resistance South" and the concept of the PIC on the public agenda and terms like "prison abolition" appeared with respect for the first time in major papers.

Our local coverage also brought people to the conference. "At one point, 2 out of 3 people who I was registering had simply heard about it on the news or the radio and decided to come over," said one registration volunteer.

Between the media coverage and the power of word-of-mouth on the streets of New Orleans, the conference really created a buzz, successfully competing with the Final Four college basketball tournament that was taking place the same weekend in New Orleans!

results and next steps for Critical Resistance in the South

THE
CONFERENCE
WAS
INSTRUMENTAL
IN RAISING
PEOPLE'S
AWARENESS
ABOUT PRISON
CONDITIONS
AND HOW
SEVERE THEY
ARE AND HOW
MUCH OF A
MONEY-MAKING
SYSTEM IT IS."

MLINATA JOHNSON,
LA

|movement building|

To those of us who worked so hard to organize CR South and from reports from those who attended, the conference was a tremendous success. An incredibly diverse group of people came from all over the region, many from communities directly impacted by the PIC. Over the course of the weekend, 1200 people registered for the conference, while hundreds more participated in some part of the conference.

People were inspired and motivated to work more

|a radicalized movement|

Finally, we have the sense that the movement was radicalized by the conference and its focus on PIC abolition. From the introduction to abolition on Friday night, to the well-attended workshops on abolitionist organizing strategies, and other workshops that approached the ideas less directly, finding ways to create community safety without relying on prisons, policing and surveillance, was central to the agenda throughout most of the weekend.

Several conference goers who work in traditional reform organizations have spoken up since the conference about how they now better understand what CR means by PIC abolition and agree with the need to pursue abolitionist strategies and reforms that do not undermine the ultimate goal of abolition. In the space we all shared and created over the course of the conference, it really felt like a world without walls was possible.

|new CR chapters on the horizon|

Since the conference, people from several states, including Florida, Louisiana, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas have expressed interest in starting local chapters of Critical Resistance. In other states, people are hosting meetings to follow up on the connections made and information gained at the conference and see where they want to take their work locally. Although all in beginning stages, a lot of important, concrete alliances emerged from the conference, and the organizing work that results will be progressing in coming months.

Wanting to make a long-term commitment to the community where the conference took place, CR will help the New Orleans office shift gears from conference-organizing, to the Southern Regional Office for Critical Resistance. The mandate of this office, and the Regional Coordinator about to be hired, will be to foster and support new CR chapters growing in the region, and to continue to support the development of a strong anti-PIC movement in the South.

In places where people are thinking about starting new CR chapters, they are engaging in a careful process of identifying the key issues related to the PIC in their states, examining the work already underway by existing organizations, and strategizing ways to both support existing work and fill gaps.

In Louisiana, for example, CR organizers made follow up calls to nearly 500 people who attended the conference from our state, to ask for input on CR's next steps locally and get feedback on the conference. Similarly we followed up with all of the prisoners with whom we were in correspondence throughout the conference organizing, to share the results of the conference, and solicit their ideas for long-term community organizing projects with CR in the South.

So stay tuned, because as we all realized from the start, with the success of the conference, our work in the South has just begun...



the closing secondline

CRITICAL RESISTANCE

IS SUPPORTED BY

The Adco Foundation
The Akonadi Foundation
The Boehm Foundation
Cheddar for Change
The Ford Foundation
The Fund for Nonviolence
The Funding Exchange
The Impact Fund
The Michael Blake Foundation
The Norman Foundation
The Open Society Institute
The Peace Through Justice Fund
The Public Welfare Foundation
Resist
The San Francisco Foundation
The Tides Foundation
Working Assets

AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, BY DONATIONS
OF TIME, MONEY AND CREATIVITY FROM
CR ORGANIZERS AND SUPPORTERS
ACROSS THE WORLD.

Critical Resistance Southern Regional Office
4041 Tulane Ave, suite 103
New Orleans, LA 70119

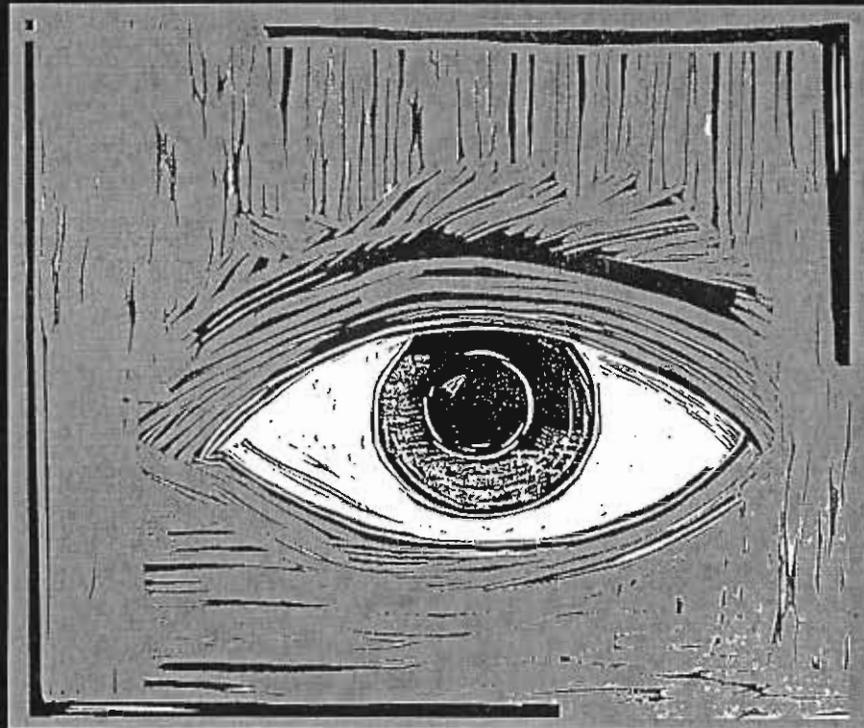
phone . 504.488.2994
email . crsouth@criticalresistance.org
web . www.criticalresistance.org

CRITICAL RESISTANCE

beyond the prison industrial complex

mas alla del complejo industrial penal

RESISTENCIA CRITICA



Southern Conference
& Strategy Session

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
April 4 - 6, 2003