After working “The Farm” for 43 years, Albert Woodfox knew what it meant to be a captive. Every day, he and hundreds of other Black men picked corn, soybeans, and cotton in 90-degree heat. No one dared to mutter a word because in the corner stood white overseers called freemen. They sat on horses, wearing 10-gallon hats, waving shotguns at men in shackles. This isn’t a scene from a U.S. history textbook. It’s Louisiana. In 2016.  The New York Times of March 11, 2016, clarifies, these captives technically aren’t slaves; they are prisoners. “The freemen” is what they call the guards and “the farm,” oh that’s just their colloquial term for Angola­­—Louisiana’s State Penitentiary. The September 21, 2015, Atlantic reveals Angola is actually a former slave plantation, and all it’s done is reinvent that legacy by forcing its 76% Black population back onto the field under the US Prison Labor Program. And Angola’s not the only prison that’s turned back the clock. Prison labor’s legal in 37 states, where inmates get paid an average of 93 cents a day, and in Texas, Georgia, and Arkansas, nothing at all. Their jobs? Construction, agriculture, manufacturing, garment work, mining, and as the June 17, 2015, Washington Post notes sewing lingerie for Victoria's Secret. The August 11, 2015, New York Times reminds us the US may have only 5% of the world’s population but we’ve got 25% of the world’s prisoners, and with that an obligation to remove the vestiges of slavery from our prison labor program.  For a country that let us own people for 246 years, it shouldn’t be difficult to imagine first why the system exists and second how it hurts us. But let’s discuss these factors so that we can finally, learn what it means to be abolitionists 150 years after thinking we’d never have to again.

In 2011, Alabama inmate Mark Melvin asked permission to read a book—the 2009 Pulitzer Prize winning *Slavery by Another Name—*a request that was denied because the prison said this book was “too provocative.”  You know what, yeah, informing prisoners the system is enslaving them might be a bit provocative. But if Melvin had read the book, he would have discovered the reasons the system is designed against him—legal loopholes and profit.

First, prison labor exists because of the way the law is written, dating back to 1868. During reconstruction, white plantation owners still had one question—who was gonna pick the cotton? So the February 26, 2016 Connecticut Law Tribune reveals the 13th amendment outlawed slavery except “as a punishment for crime." Today, prison labor lives because of a loophole similarly designed to put prisoners back where those in power think they belong—a loophole in the Fair Labor Standards Act or FLSA. Drafted in 1938 to establish a minimum wage, overtime policies, and safety protections, the September 21, 2015 Atlantic explains under FLSA prisoners aren’t employees, so the law designed to protect does not apply. Legally, these prisons are doing nothing wrong. Legally, neither were 19th century slave owners.

Next, Prison Labor exists because companies are blinded by profit. For example, the January 27, 2016, Pacific Standard explains for 74 cents a day, inmates at the Colorado Corrections Industries produced $64 million worth of gourmet cheese and tilapia for Whole Foods. Whole Foods, McDonald’s, Walmart, even our own government use prisoners to turn a profit. In Massachusetts, the highest paying prison job, at $20 a week, is to stitch American flags. Normally, workers would rise up against these conditions. But the benefit of convicts is that they cannot retaliate. Because looming over their heads is the fear of solitary confinement or a longer prison sentence or as the January 4, 2016 Miami New Tropic explains in Florida, being chained and tortured and whipped. And then sent back to work.

870,000, 1868, 90. If you know nothing else about prison labor, you need to know those numbers. 870,000—that’s the number of Americans working from a jail cell. 1868—the year newly freed slaves become the first prison workers. They were arrested for “selling cotton after sunset.” 90—90% of the prisoners working Angola’s plantation will die there. 2 effects:

First, prison labor cripples the American economy. The Winter 2014 American Prospect encourages us to think about it like this: 1.2 million prisoners have a combined 2.7 million kids. Today, those fathers and mothers get paid so little that that family is 50% more likely to need Medicaid and 200% more likely to need food stamps. For most of us, that’s services we have to pay for. But poor workers get hit even harder because companies no longer need them. For example, when Whole Foods decided to use prison labor, the September 29, 2015 Christian Science Monitor reveals it could lay off 1500 employees. Sure, prison labor might sound cheap but millions of Americans paying for it, some with their jobs.

Second, prison labor encourages prisons to keep beds full, contributing to our problem with prison population growth. Investigative journalist KJ McElrath reveals in a September 1, 2015 podcast that private prison corporations—who profit on every inmate they have—are allowed to keep up to 40% of wages companies are supposed to be paying prisoners.  So it’s no wonder the April 28, 2015 Washington Post notes private prison companies like Corrections Corporation of America to lobby to keep prisons at 90 to 100% their maximum capacity. This is the same company the February 26, 2013 Texas Observer found denied a diabetic woman her insulin injections because they were too expensive. So you best believe, for a country that has more prisons than it does universities, that’s more likely to throw you into a jail cell than it is a classroom, high incarceration rates aren’t coincidental, they’re solicited power grabs.

Common practice in the Antebellum South had slaves digging their own graves, so that they could be shot by their masters and thrown into them. Today, the January 13, 2016, San Jose Metroactive News reports in California, prison workers built an $850,000 lethal injection chamber. They dug their own graves. The path to being a twenty-first century abolitionist won’t be easy, but it starts with two solutions:

        First, Prison Labor exists because companies make money off of it. The February 12, 2016, US News and World Report points out that President Obama just signed into a law a bill that would ban products made by prisoners from being sold in the United States—only if they were made in a foreign country. To retaliate at home, we have to hit businesses right where it hurts—their bottom line. This card contains some of the worst prison labor offenders, along with alternative places you can take your business to. Share this card with your friends, teammates, families—literally any decent human being— because in the midst of public outcry, Whole Foods decided to stop its prison labor program by the end of this month. Other companies need to follow suit.

 Second, legal loopholes in the 13th amendment and FLSA allow prison labor to exist. Practically, we can’t solve 13th amendment. But we can sidestep it and close the loopholes with protections on a state by state level. So I’ve written a bill that requires prisons to pay prisoners fairly and treat them well. I have created a packet for every state that includes the bill text, a letter of intent, and contact information for state representatives. Sponsor a state. All you have to do is send this information over. It was the law, sure, that made slavery possible for 246 years, but the law only existed because the right people didn’t care and the wrong people did. We shouldn’t let the law, public apathy, and corporate greed bring back slavery today.

        1880 was an iconic year for Angola because in that year a Confederate major bought the plantation and turned slave quarters into a place to house inmates. As the prisoners of Angola literally pick the cotton that their ancestors fought to stop picking, we took a look at some causes, effects, and solutions. When this country was young, it broke the backs of women, men, and children to build the backbone of this nation. Today, it’s unfathomable how much we’ve got left to overcome.