



**Anarchist**

**Black Cross**

**Information  
and Resources**

**new edition + January 2002**

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## Introduction: Why This Was Created

This guide is intended to give potential organizers a glimpse of the tendencies, ideas and experiences that have been a part of the Anarchist Black Cross over the last 15 years, and to empower individuals to create individual ABC groups of their own.

The Anarchist Black Cross movement, known throughout radical history as a prisoner support apparatus, served through the early twentieth century as a means of community defense. In addition to providing direct support to victims of political and social repression, ABC groups tied their support to an analysis that viewed prisons as a brutal manifestation of state power. Both, ABC groups said, needed to be abolished. The new ABC Network proposal (included herein) argues that, with the massive global buildup of police state, prisons and assaults against resisters, the role of organizers must also be to relate the street movement to the mission of the Anarchist Black Cross.

Author Christian Parenti argues, in his book *Lockdown America*, that the United States has restructured its economy and criminal justice system in order to save itself from social chaos in the form of political rebellion and the economic crisis in capitalism that occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s. The criminal justice system, he states, has been retooled to crush dissent, real and potential, and to cage those who have been pushed through the cracks of economic restructuring.

Today's American prison population has rocketed to two million captives, an over three hundred percent increase since 1980. The European Union and other nations are seeing an equally startling increase in imprisonment. In all cases, the vast majority in prison are people of color and the indigent. Immigrants and women are among the fastest growing prison populations. In states like California, spending on prisons are far outstripped what's spent on education. And those facts have created a growing movement in resistance to not just criminalization and incarceration, but to the society that has spawned both.

Parenti links expanding prison populations with initial contact with police, acting in part on zero tolerance/quality of life laws and the "war on drugs." Civility laws -- which, in many cities cover everything from 'looking suspicious' to car stereo volumes -- accelerate entrance into the criminal justice system. Violations of those laws build up the criminal records of the people most vulnerable under late capitalism, Parenti argues, making them targets for incarceration. They allow a hyper-policing of communities as they criminalize behavior often associated with living in poverty.

These laws are part of the alarming rate of gentrification created by the development of what Parenti calls "theme park" cities. These cities are the playgrounds of young, mostly white urban professionals with surplus incomes who seek ways to entertain themselves. Products of



the suburbs, they seek communities nearer their entertainment and professional jobs. They want the thrill of city life without the realities of poverty their lifestyles have created. Thus, gentrification is inextricably linked with policing and prisons.

This is where the ABC's analysis over the years has been critical. While the movement actively supports political prisoners (those incarcerated for expressly political actions on the outside), organizers also recognize the need to speak out on prisons, criminalization, support for all prisoners and what is going on in the world today (such as the growing wave of state action against youth, Third World/people of color, the homeless and poor; increased action against resisters and rebels; and the growing gap between haves and have nots, which only fuels prison expansion). We view prisons and the criminal justice system as part of a much larger problem and work to relate what people are facing with imprisonment to the reasons why they face those harsh realities -- due to a system that willingly sacrifices humanity for its own existence and profit.

In many ways, this movement has always been about support, defense and freedom. The origins of the ABC date back to before the Russian Revolution. The Anarchist Red Cross was formed in Tsarist Russia to organize aid for political prisoners and their families and self-defense against political raids by the Cossack army. During the Russian Civil War, the group became the Black Cross to avoid confusion with the Red Cross who was organizing relief in the country. Furthermore, evidence suggests the organization may have existed even earlier.

After the Bolsheviks seized power, the Black Cross moved to Berlin where it continued to support prisoners of the Bolshevik regime as well as victims of Italian fascism and others. Despite the increasing demand for its services, the ABC folded in the 1940's because of a lack of money. In the late 1960's, the ABC resurfaced in England, where it began by aiding prisoners of the Spanish resistance to France's fascist regime.



La tierra es de quien la trabaja.  
*La tierra es de quien la trabaja.*

In the 1970's, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin wrote a series of pamphlets from prison that included *A Draft Proposal for an Anarchist Black Cross Network* and *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*.

In the 1980's, the ABC expanded with collectives working in many regions around the world. In 1989 an Emergency Response Network (ERN) was set up by Chicago ABC to respond to political raids, crackdowns, death sentences, hunger strikes, torture or killings of members of communities we work in solidarity with.

In the 1990's, the ABC expanded, thanks to groups like Toronto ABC (which disbanded in the fall of 1991, but influenced others through their work and publications to take up the struggle). A number of groups started in the U.S. and Europe. Denmark's Sorte Kors (Black Cross), founded in 1983, relaunched the publication of Mutual Aid, the internal bulletin of the international ABC network. In 1994, Nightcrawlers ABC hosted a conference of ABC groups. However, just as quickly, the ABC movement slowed, with only a handful of groups by 2001 left to organize in the midst of an incredible rise in incarceration, criminalization and revolt against repression.

In addition to the political pieces, you'll also find a wealth of helpful information on how ABC work is done. There are also various "focus" pieces here that touch on issues all collectives face at one time or another. This guide is by no means complete. We want to use it as a starting point to help others get organized. Please get in touch with your suggestions, comments and ideas. Updated editions of this booklet can be downloaded free from [www.anarchistblackcross.org](http://www.anarchistblackcross.org).

Special thanks to Gumby for all her support (and co-authoring the sexism piece), and Eric W. of Austin ABC for his tireless work in support of all prisoners. More thanks to Rabid/NAELPSN and Noel M. for their wonderful enthusiasm, assistance and solidarity; and to Joel Olson and Claustrophobia for permission in printing their articles as well as to those who wrote materials from whom we could not obtain permission. Final thanks to: Ali Khalid Abdullah; Philadelphia ABC; Jerome White-Bey and all the MPLU comrades; Khalfani Khaldun; Alvaro Luna Hernandez; Chris Plummer; Robert King Wilkerson; and everyone I am forgetting to mention. Personal thanks to Heather for her humanity and encouragement.

This effort is dedicated to all captives behind the walls, and to Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, to whom so many of us owe so much.

-ernesto

# What is the Anarchist Black Cross?

The Anarchist Red Cross was started in Tsarist Russia to organize aid for political prisoners captured by the police, and to organize self-defense against political raids by the Cossack Army. During the Russian civil war, they changed the name to the Black Cross in order to avoid confusion with the Red Cross who were organizing relief in the country. After the Bolsheviks seized power the Anarchist movement moved the ABC offices to Berlin and continued to aid prisoners of the new regime, as well as victims of Italian fascism and others. The Black Cross fell apart during the 1930s depression due to the incredible demand for its services and a decline in financial aid. But in the late 1960s the organization resurfaced in Britain, where it first worked to aid prisoners of the Spanish resistance, which had not in fact died after the civil war and were fighting the dictator Franco's police. Now it has expanded and works in several areas, with contacts and other Black Cross groups in many countries around the world. The North American section started in the early 1980s.

The ABC has sought to bring attention to the plight of all prisoners, with an emphasis on Anarchist and class war prisoners; and, through contact with and information about prisoners, inspire an Anarchist resistance and support movement on the outside. We fund-raise on behalf of prisoners or defense committees in need of funds for legal cases or otherwise, and organize demonstrations of solidarity with imprisoned Anarchists and other prisoners

We believe, as most Anarchists do, that prisons serve no useful function (except for the benefit of the ruling classes) and should be abolished along with the State. We differ from liberal prison reformists and groups like Amnesty International in two main ways: firstly, we believe in the abolition of both the prison system and the society which creates it, and we initiate all our actions with that in mind; secondly, we believe in direct resistance to achieve a stateless and classless society. Groups like Amnesty International balk at supporting anyone accused of so-called violent acts, thus insinuating that anyone who resists oppression and takes up arms in self-defense, or during a revolutionary insurrection, is not worthy of support. The message is clear: do not resist. Our message is exactly the opposite, and this is what we work to support. We share a commitment to revolutionary Anarchism as opposed to liberalism and individualism or legalism.



Outside of prison work, ABC groups are committed to the wider resistance in which many of these prisoners are engaged. We see a real need for Anarchists to be militantly organized if we are to effectively meet the organized repression of the State and avoid defeat. What is also needed is commitment to revolutionary politics. We see the setting up of Anarchist defense organizations, such as the ABC, as a necessary part of the growth and development of an Anarchist resistance movement, not divorcing ourselves from the revolutionary struggle and then just fighting for prison reform.

As Anarchists we believe in the promotion of direct action and collective organization in the workplace, the schools, the community and the streets, as a means of regaining power over our own lives and creating a society based on mutual aid and cooperation.

## Working Towards Liberation

We believe that prisons serve no function except to preserve the ruling classes. We also believe that free society must find alternative, effective ways of dealing with anti-social crime. But a decrease in anti-social crime is only likely to happen (and therefore prison abolition can only be a realistic option) accompanied by a dramatic change in our economic, social and political systems. These conditions lie at the root of both anti-social crime and the reasons for a prison system. Our primary goal is to make these fundamental changes. We work for a stateless, cooperative/classless society free from privilege or domination based on race or gender. But it's not enough to build the grassroots movements necessary to bring about these changes in society, we must also be able to defend them. The ABC defends those who are captured and persecuted for carrying out acts on behalf of our movements.

## Support for Imprisoned Activists

The ABC aims to recognize, expose and support the struggles of prisoners in general, and of anarchist and class war prisoners in particular. The form our solidarity takes depends on each individual's situation. To some we send financial or material aid. With others, we keep in contact through mail, make visits, provide political literature, and discuss strategy and tactics. We do whatever we can to prevent prisoners becoming isolated from the rest of the movement. We fundraise on behalf of prisoners or their defense committees for legal cases or other needs, and organize demonstrations or public campaigns of solidarity with prisoners we support. We regard prisoners as an active part of our movement and seek to maintain their past and potential contributions by acting as a link back to the continuing struggle. Increased communication between activists both inside and outside prison inspires resistance on both sides of the prison walls. We hope that we can encourage other activists by providing assurance that even if you are persecuted for your activities, the movement will not abandon you: we will take care of our own. Through the ABC, we are building organizational support for resistance.

## Defending Resistance

Outside of prisoner support work, the ABC is committed to the wider resistance in which many of these prisoners are engaged. We see a need to be highly organized if we are to effectively meet the organized repression of the State and avoid defeat. When power is challenged, be it in South Africa, occupied Palestine, Chile, Ireland or Canada, it inevitably turns to violent repression and political imprisonment to maintain itself.

## Remember: We're Still Here

Various ABC groups decide what prisoners to support and what work we will do on a case-by-case basis. These groups put priority on the cases of political/politicized prisoners and POWs as this corresponds to our commitment to building resistance. Although imprisonment is in itself "political", Such prisoners are being held specifically for their beliefs or actions. Unlike Amnesty International, we don't place judgments on what are valid and invalid expressions of resistance: non-violence is not a criterion for support. Unlike other organizations supporting political prisoners, we include those who were "politicized" by the prison experience and have since become organizers inside prison. Many "politicized" prisoners face increased harassment.



## Focus: A few tips for literature tables

- **Be prepared.** Bring your own table and a chair unless you're told you don't need to. Lots of places won't have either to give out. If you're selling things, bring change, especially \$5 and \$1 bills. If stuff is free, put a small label out that says so.
- **Get there early.** Enough said.
- **Bring a can.** For donations and stuff.
- **Think big.** If you're ok with carrying it, a big display with photos, shirts for sale (if you're selling) and big images draws attention from a distance. Banners, videos (if you have a small TV/VCR) and maybe a black flag are also eye-catching.
- **Try and know the issue.** Tell people about the authors of pamphlets and books you might have. Talk about a particular issue on a flyer and where it stands today. Inform folks as much as you can.
- **Use your time wisely.** If someone who's antagonistic wants to debate, it's ok to ask them to come back and talk after an event. Remember that, for every minute you spend debating, you're missing a chance to talk to someone who might help out.
- **Table and refresh often.** Stock new pamphlets every few weeks, and try to table wherever you can -- shows, speaking events, etc.

# A New Draft Proposal for an Anarchist Black Cross Network

## Introduction

Former Black Panther, political prisoner and a longtime anarchist revolutionary named Lorenzo Komboa Ervin wrote "A Draft Proposal for an Anarchist Black Cross Network" in 1979. The ABC movement was one of those organizations instrumental in helping see Komboa free, and Komboa spoke passionately for the development of a united movement around issues of incarceration and prisoner support. In the 1990s, these ideas were a catalyst in helping many ABC groups find focus. His ideas, while written years ago, embody principles that define our movement:

*The stated purpose of the Anarchist Black Cross Network is to actively assist prisoners in their fight to obtain their civil and human rights, and to aid them in their struggle against the State/Class penal and judicial system. The prison system is the armed fist of the State, and is a system for State slavery. It is not really for "criminals" or other "social deviants," and it does not exist for the "protection of society."*

*It is for State social control and political repression. Thus it must be opposed at every turn and ultimately destroyed altogether. The abolition of prisons, the system of Laws, and the Capitalist State is the ultimate objective of every true Anarchist, yet there seems to be no clear agreement by the Anarchist movement to put active effort to that anti-authoritarian desire. We must organize our resources to support all political/class war prisoners if we truly wish to be their allies, and we must give something more than lip service.*



*Organizing against the enemy legal and penal system is both offensive and defensive. It is carried on with individuals, groups and among the masses in the community. We must inform the people on a large scale of the atrocities and inhumanity of the prisons, the righteousness of our struggle, and the necessity of their full participation and support. We must organize our communities to attack the prison system as a moral and social abomination, and we must fight to free all political/class war prisoners.*

Since Lorenzo Komboa Ervin wrote those words, he has stated in recent lectures support for uniting with all prisoners, understanding the profound gulfs of race and class as they relate to incarceration, and of anarchists taking a stronger role in putting prison abolition, incarceration and criminalization on the global agenda of resistance.

The network proposal is the result of several dialogues over the last six months. Among the questions that arose was perhaps the most critical one, "in considering criminal injustice, rates of incarceration, racial disparities, the spirit and nature in which laws are applied and, of course, our collective analysis as people concerned about increasing repression, class warfare of haves against have nots, and for a freer, more just society... what is political? And aren't we waging a common struggle, despite the 'single issue' work?"

What is political about the injustice system, how laws are applied, who goes to jail and how bias factors into that?

What is political about the factors that play into "crime" and how sanction is applied?

And are we, as revolutionaries, little more than collaborators in genocide if we do not stand up?

This understanding is not so much a critique of terms such as "political prisoner," but of analyzing the politics of prisons, social control, law, sexism, racism and power. For years, the ABC and anarchist movements have grasped how each of these issues profoundly affects the lives of people, and have acted in the interests of freedom by building resistance. This must continue.

From country to country and state to state, figures are staggering, but the facts remain the same: Third World/indigenous/people of color and the working class and poor are forced into existences in which communities are gentrified; in which they are targeted over race and class or worse if they are "illegal" immigrants or refugees; health care, child care, food and rents go out of reach in costs; and their "choices" are nothing more than setups to lock them away. Public policies target youth in systematic and institutional ways that hinder the realization of human rights. Racist and discriminatory

institutions and organizations, such as the police, prisons, and border controls and police target people, particularly Third World/people of color and immigrants, via public policies. Revolutionaries who speak out and fight against the conditions of society are imprisoned or killed. And we are expected to stand by until they come for us, if they haven't done it already.

What follows is a new proposal for an Anarchist Black Cross Network. It reconsiders and adopts many of Komboa's old ideas, as well as makes practical suggestions for building an anarchist network of independent groups united in fighting incarceration, repression and injustice worldwide. Many of the European ABC comrades have already taken the initiative to start the building process of this network, so the idea is not new. This effort is merely to put an explanation to a tendency that is already developing and will continue to grow.

## Purpose

The Anarchist Black Cross Network should be a decentralized and egalitarian network of organizations committed to the original ideals of the Anarchist Black Cross movement -- of seeing prisons and the poverty, racism and genocide that accompanies them to be symptoms of a social order whose last days are near. The proposed purposes of the ABC Network are:

- **To unite the many autonomous prisoners, activists and organizations working for prisoner support, defense and freedom in a decentralized, anti-authoritarian fashion.** There has been some fractionalization of the struggle, for various reasons, over the years. Certain groups defended certain prisoners, while paying lip service to others. Certain activists stayed focused in a particular issue, but didn't have the resources to get involved elsewhere. The purpose of the ABC Network should not be one of waging battles over differences, but of finding ways to unite us in a way that is still decentralized and anti-authoritarian. Whether you do work around earth liberation prisoners, "social prisoners," those recognized internationally as political prisoners, anti-colonial/independence prisoners, juvenile injustice, refugee/immigrant criminalization, the roots of prisons (i.e. poverty, capital, racism, et al.) should only be important to an ABC Network as far as how the unity of many groups that truly see 'an injury to one is an injury to all' can help your work. The job of a network, clearly, is not to change a group's current work, but to be a compliment to the work already being done.
- **To serve as a clear and easy-to-use communications tool for activists, prisoners, organizations, families and supporters around issues related to the movement.** If it is to be effective, the ABC Network must primarily serve as a communications and working base for prisoners, community people, activists, groups (i.e. autonomous ABC groups and anarchist, prisoner, liberation, freedom, justice, anti-colonial/independence and/or issue-oriented community groups, etc.) and others who engage in activities consistent with the basic spirit and vision of the ABC movement. So often, groups and organizers change, prisoners are transferred, new campaigns start and old campaigns end. This would be an effort to facilitate communication around varied issues -- from the latest transfers, to disbanded collectives to international support efforts and so on.
- **To support, discuss, learn from and engage one another around the Defense and Freedom activities we engage in.** As state repression increases, more and more activists are facing fines, prison time, detention without charge, etc. for speaking out. Refugees/immigrants are being criminalized over race and class. Prisoners who were incarcerated for explicitly political acts are being denied parole again and again. Prisoners who went to prison for "social crimes" are coming to consciousness about the true nature of incarceration. And prisons will continue to be built in the name of law and order. These are issues 'regular' people are aware of and which activists are often fighting around in a regional, sometimes isolated, way -- not necessarily by choice, but because all-around support needs to improve. As those familiar with anarchist prisoner Ali Khalid Abdullah's "Where Was the Support for Lorenzo Komboa Ervin and the Chattanooga 3?" will recall, one of our major issues is around unity. The ABC Network is aimed at getting prisoners, community people, activists, groups (i.e. autonomous ABC groups and anarchist, prisoner, liberation, freedom, justice, anti-colonial/independence and/or issue-oriented community groups, etc.) and others learning from each other, communicating and working together around the various campaigns, and finding ways of educating each other with our experiences in a clearer, yet anarchist, way.
- To connect with a movement that understands the "single issues" are part of a much larger movement for freedom, and to work actively to see that struggle grow globally and in all communities. On the surface, fighting for political/class war prisoners, supporting earth liberation prisoners, challenging juvenile injustice, political repression, dealing with criminalization of communities marginalized by the state (such as refugees/immigrants, the homeless and the working class/poor), the death penalty and race/gender disparities in incarceration seem like a mix of issues. In reality, most anarchists and others see these are part of a campaign by the state to attack communities and people. The ABC Network should be part of a movement that understands we all wage a common struggle.

Clearly, a network could take on more goals, but these are merely a start.

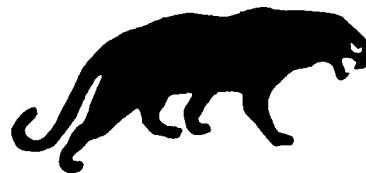
## Goals

The ABC Network should serve to support collectives around the work they currently do rather than coordinate a set of tasks for collectives in which to participate. Tasks that most community people, activists, groups (i.e. autonomous ABC groups and anarchist, prisoner, liberation, freedom, justice, anti-colonial/independence and/or issue-oriented community groups, etc.) and others engage in already, and which affiliates of the ABC Network should serve to help with via strength in numbers include:

### *Defense and Freedom Work of the Network*

**Defense work** involves meeting the needs of the prisoners: whether those needs stem from the daily oppression of the prisons, police, courts or the intense repression by State/Class authorities of prison organizers. Prison support by ABCs meets these needs in many ways:

1. Forming outside support groups on a local and national basis in order to ensure prisoners' defense and survival from enemy attack and from inhuman prison conditions.
2. Organizing defense committees on behalf of prisoners framed or railroaded through the Capitalist courts for their political and social beliefs or prison organizing.
3. Organizing support for activists jailed for their outside work and/or repression by authorities.
4. Securing Anarchist and other revolutionary materials for prisoners to read, and fight for their right to receive this literature if prison officials try to ban or prohibit such literature for any reason.
5. Organizing emergency response calls, letters, faxes and email to continually contact "corrections" and other authorities about the treatment of prisoners.
6. Organizing legal defense funds to raise funds for legal fees and to assist prisoners and outside activists and groups.
7. Organizing correspondence for people to write to prisoners and find out about prison conditions and to show their solidarity and human concern, and observers to go into the prisons, visit the prisoners, investigate their complaints, question the officials and monitor the prison for violation of prisoners' rights.



**Freedom work** means directly challenging the existence of prisons and this work also involves actively campaigning against prison conditions, and propagandizing the actual cases of political/class war prisoners (i.e. prisoners jailed for specific political reasons and those who have become politically aware of the reasons for their oppression while in prison, as well as victims of frame-ups) to the largest possible audience.

Some protest activities many prisoner support, anti-prison and ABC groups engage in today:

1. Linking up the struggles against criminalization and imprisonment with associated social ills: poverty, homelessness, hunger, gentrification, racism, racial/cultural profiling, anti-refugee/immigrant actions, privatization, globalization, the drug war and many other issues.
2. Exposing the fallacy of the Capitalist system of cops, laws and prisons being for the protection of society or as a social necessity.
3. Educating the community, prisoners and others about the class/racist nature of the prisons and the legal system and how to fight against it;
4. Holding protest rallies, marches and street demonstrations in support of prisoners' rights and against the repressive actions of State/Class authorities.
5. Writing press releases and holding news conferences for the Third World/people of color, alternative and radical news media (and sometimes the Capitalist news media) appearing on television and radio news and/or talk shows to discuss prisons.
6. Organizing and/or participating in coalitions with poor people's movements, prison support, Third World/people of color, Women's rights, Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender, Church, Left-wing, and other diverse groups, so as to win them over and to integrate the prison struggle into the general movement for social change.
7. Assisting prisoners in getting parole, probation or a pardon by demanding their freedom when they become eligible for parole or are seeking executive clemency.
8. Working against the death penalty and exposing it as an instrument of racial genocide and class and political repression.
9. Demanding the freedom and amnesty of political/class war prisoners, and the abolition of prisons. Especially demand the immediate release of prisoners who have served unnecessarily lengthy sentences.
10. Demanding the immediate closing of all control/isolation/supermax units in prisons.

Any ABC Network that forms should encourage, but not mandate, a diversity of tactics as suggested here and more. The network's proposed communications purpose could certainly also be utilized to help build unity around regional cases and tactics (i.e. demonstrations at consulates, etc.).



## Structure and principles

The ABC Network should foremost intended to accomplish the goals above among the many autonomous groups that are doing the grassroots, day-to-day work around campaigns, prisoners, criminalization and liberation. What unites us are the principles mentioned by Komboa -- of struggling to expose injustice, corruption and oppression; supporting prisoners who (consciously or unconsciously) are combatants against the state; providing advice and support to activists who put their bodies on the line in defense of freedom and revolution; and seeing our continued activism, campaigns, etc. in the larger picture of prison abolition and revolutionary change -- as well as our own experiences in creating conditions for change.

There should be no "party line" of the ABC Network. As anarchists, we believe in building a culture of resistance rather than legislating it. How you or your group conducts your effort must solely up to you, although you may want to link up to some activists and resources, work through ideas, learn together and help in others' campaigns. But regardless, how you organize your group must still up to your local conditions and membership.

The ABC Network should do its work in a broad, nonsectarian manner. You should not have to be explicitly named an ABC group to join. Conformity to certain naming, uniform moral/"security" codes, focus, etc., all correctly criticized in previous work, cannot be part of a successful initiative. This is a fundamental difference between the proposed Network and previous initiatives -- having the involvement, input, comments, criticisms and efforts of local organizers, prisoners and groups is a necessity and privilege for an ABC Network to take shape. It is not a necessity or privilege for a network to form and communicate with activists... loose, unannounced networks are already happening. This is merely an effort to make it stronger and unite many around the ideas we're already struggling toward.

Prisoners should be involved in discussions and with area collectives or those collectives supporting the particular prisoner. In many cases, collective-prisoner relations already are building, and everyone should seek to learn how those communications are coordinated and developed among groups. How prisoners feel about the development of the Network is critical to its success and they should be consulted about all of its facets.

Issues of racism and sexism are critical to deal with in the movement as a whole, and all groups should take genuine measures to involve women and Third World/indigenous/people of color in campaigns and, as often as possible, local groups - not only by having their bodies around, but engaging minds and seriously taking those ideas/comments and criticisms to heart. Too often, male- and white-dominated groups have not made the efforts to broaden and involve other communities, or women's input has not been taken with the consideration and seriousness needed. Add to this the need to build stronger ties with women prisoners. This must be improved, and, ideally, an ABC Network can dialogue around strategies groups are utilizing to be more egalitarian in approach.

If we are to improve an ABC Network, hearing comments and criticisms should be a regular part of discussions. About every six months, affiliated groups with the ABC Network, activists, prisoners and others should be asked to give their comments, criticisms and suggestions for how to make the Network better, stronger and more helpful to each others' needs. While the purpose of this is not to develop "legislation," it is intended to get people regularly thinking about how we work together and how the Network stays relevant to our unity. However, please know that the floor should be always open to raise comments/ideas/critiques, etc. We must welcome these ideas, because discussion, debate and joint resolutions are how we become more effective.

## Conclusion

In June 2001, Anarchist Black Cross groups from around Europe met in Ghent, Belgium. People from Italy, Poland, Czech Republic, France, Luxemburg, UK, Holland, Germany and Belgium agreed that a network of autonomous groups would be formed to further the aims of the ABC. In their post-conference statement, attendees concluded:



*"We believe in the abolition of the prison system, but not only that, but the destruction of capitalism and all kinds of authority. We believe the struggle against the (in)justice system, as it is against capitalism, is international. Therefore recent attempts by European governments ( e.g. Europol in Spain 2001) to criminalise the anarchist movement must be opposed by all revolutionaries. We respect the variety of ways people resist government violence and terrorism, and will support those incarcerated by the state. We strive to provide practical and material aid for class struggle prisoners and to encourage support for them."*

The groundwork is already laid for an international ABC network to unite autonomous groups. In Europe, this network has already come into being. It is a network that respects the autonomy of each group to act within the different circumstances of their own local situations. It is a network urging support for political prisoners. And it is one that understands that support is only one part of our true struggle -- for freedom, revolutionary change and anarchy.

Over the last 15 years, the Anarchist Black Cross and anarchist prisoner support movements have inspired new awareness in repression, of the need to work with those criminalized by society in an effort to build a more liberated world, and to develop tactics and strategies addressing prisons, law and social problems. The ABC movement was building on these efforts long before these issues got attention from the mainstream media. Nevertheless, our struggle can continue to grow and see more victories.

Many of these ideas restate Lorenzo Ervin's original draft proposal, although many ideas presented therein are worth supporting, such as an ABC conference (to potentially unite the North American section of the network, since a European conference happened in 2001) or a newspaper that reaches out to people on incarceration. Uniting the many prisoner-written zines into a "news service" of information could also be helpful. In addition, working with various forces to create ABC-oriented radio/Internet programming could also come together. Uniting our organizing to develop theory and strategy around crime, class and liberation is another possibility.



## **Comments/Criticisms/Interest**

If you have comments, (any kind of) criticisms and/or suggestions to improve this proposal or are interested in dialoguing locally and possibly building a group or affiliating your own group, get in contact with the initiating group (Antiprison, Austin ABC, Houston organizing group) via email at [abc-net@anarchistblackcross.org](mailto:abc-net@anarchistblackcross.org) or via post at P.O. Box 667233, Houston, Texas 77266-7233, USA.

All comments, criticisms and/or suggestions received by by January 31, 2002 will be compiled (we won't use your verbatim statements unless you ask) and an update to those interested. Get in touch.

*New Draft Proposal issued on 5 November 2001.*

*Anniversary of the 1862 death sentence for 303 Santee Sioux for taking part in a Minnesota uprising. US President Abraham Lincoln commutes many sentences, but 38 chose to hang at Mankato, singing their death song on their scaffold.*

*Anniversary of the 1928 banana workers' strike in Colombia against the United Fruit Company, in which 1,000 workers were killed.*

*Anniversary of the 1916 Everett, Washington, Massacre, in which seven Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) labor activists are murdered by Everett's police as part of a campaign to suppress working class resistance.*

Revolutionary love and solidarity!

# Gardens of the Law: The Role of Prisons in Capitalist Society

by Joel Olson

Prison isn't a place to keep the "bad apples" from spoiling the rest of society. It is for the social control of the entire population--good and bad apples alike. Capitalism requires a politically obedient population that can be put to work making profits for the wealthy. Prisons ensure this politically docile and economically useful population. Prisons are useful for the powers that be; they are only a problem for those locked inside them, their loved ones, and those who want a free society.

## Prison Myths

Prisons are not about decreasing crime. In 1976 the Panel on Research on Deterrent and Incapacitative Effects examined the role of prisons in deterring crime. Their report concluded that states like California and Massachusetts, for example, would have to increase their prison populations 150 percent and 310 percent (from mid-'70s levels) to achieve a 10 percent reduction in crime. Minnesota's Assistant Commissioner of Corrections admits, "There is no evidence of a relationship between the incarceration rate and violent crime. We're in the business of tricking people into thinking that spending hundreds of millions [of dollars] for new prisons will make them safe."<sup>[1]</sup>

Prisons are not about rehabilitation. In 1981 New York State Correction Commissioner Thomas Coughlin confessed, "The department is no longer engaged in rehabilitative and programming efforts, but is rather forced to warehouse people and concentrate on finding the next cell." Packing in more and more bodies inside their walls is what prisons do; rehabilitating lost souls in order to return them to society is not.

Perhaps most shocking of all to our common sensibilities, prisons are not about punishing people for crimes they commit. Of course, this is one of the things they do (as well as punish people for crimes they did not commit), but it is not the primary function of prisons. Prisons are first and foremost about social control, about suppressing dissent, about creating a more politically obedient and economically useful population. Sure, they isolate and warehouse "criminals" to keep them from the rest of us, but prisons are about controlling "the rest of us" as much as they are about controlling criminals.



## How Prisons Achieve Social Control

In a capitalist society, when most people think of crime, they do not think of the acts themselves so much as they do an imaginary "criminal class" that commits them. It's always these few "delinquents" that commit violent crimes and that have to be brought under control, so the story goes. The criminal in capitalism is defined not so much by their specific unlawful acts, but by the lifestyle s/he leads: gangsta, hoodlum, dope fiend, dealer, thug, whore. The criminal exists before the crime is even committed; a criminal's prison record is merely a badge that recognizes him or her for doing what is expected. This is one reason why rich white people rarely go to jail: the rich and the white are not defined as "criminals" in this society, therefore when they break the law it's easier to have sympathy for them for "making a mistake" and to give them a lesser punishment, or no punishment at all.

Prisons are not just the storehouses of this criminal class--they produce criminality by concentrating otherwise decent people into a cramped, crowded, and oppressive environment. In prison, an individual is subject to isolation, confinement in a control unit, violence, torture, gang activity, guard brutality, organized white supremacy, and a life of boredom and useless toil. When and if a prisoner is released, s/he is often condemned to a life of poverty and run-ins with the law. Prisoners have a difficult time getting a job because they are required to notify all potential employers of their felon status on job applications. College scholarship funds for former prisoners have been slashed or eliminated. By sticking people in prison, the prison system condemns them to poverty and stigmatizes them as lifetime members of the criminal class.

The criminal class is the scapegoat for America's social ills and the justification for spending millions of dollars on building more prisons, hiring more cops, and for drafting tough new "anti-crime" laws. But by trying to make life tough for criminals, we make life tough for ourselves, because the laws that get passed to control the criminal class apply to everyone. If you, the "good citizen," somehow run up against the law, well, you must be a delinquent, a member of the notorious criminal class. Better shape up, obey the laws and avoid any trouble so you won't be one of those, thoseÉ criminals!

By distinguishing "criminals" from the rest of society--not for people's actions but for who they are--prisons and the "fight against crime" are used to attack target populations and garner obedience from the general population. This is what led writer Michel Foucault to write, "Let us conceive of places of punishment as a Garden of the Laws that families would visit on Sundays." [2] Prisons are places where criminals are punished, but they are also "gardens" that remind citizens of what could happen to them if they were to become a "criminal." In this way, prisons help craft a more obedient population outside the walls, outside the garden. Prisons put the cop inside your head. Prisons control your life even if you've never been inside one.

## Black People are America's "Criminal Class"

While prisons control the population on the outside by demonizing "criminals," they control "criminals" through terror.

In the United States the criminal class created by capitalism and the prison system are poor people of color, especially African Americans. Over 33 percent of African Americans lived below the poverty line in 1994, [3] and they make up 48 percent of the U.S. prison population. One out of three Black men aged 20 to 29 is under some form of criminal justice control, which is more Black men than are in college. [4]

This is not because Black people commit more crimes. The total number of crimes committed in America is huge (estimates range between 13 and 49 million annually, for example). [5] Only a tiny fraction of the people who commit them are ever imprisoned. [6] It has been well established that while most of the nation's drug users are white, the vast majority busted for drug crimes are Black. [7] Why are most of those who are caught and convicted Black?

The only possible answer is that African Americans are the specified "criminal class" of America, or are at least its biggest subgroup (Latinos and Chicanos are an increasingly large subgroup as well). Of course, most poor Black people are not criminals, but that's the role they are forced into in the United States. As the author of *The Coming of Black Genocide* argues, "Black men are considered a criminal class, who must be pushed out to keep white people safe. Anything that is done to them, anything at all, is ok. Everyone is told to fear them, they are the threat." [8]



Because Black people are the United States' criminal class, and because in a capitalist society the criminal class must be subdued by terror, obedience from Black people is acquired through terror: police violence, locking up loved ones, etc. Just as the rest of the population doesn't have to actually go to prison to be made more obedient by the prison system, Black folks don't have to actually spend time in prison to be terrorized by it. As Malcolm X said, "Don't be surprised when I say I was in prison. We [African Americans] have all been in prison. That's what America means, prison."

## The Role of Control Units

Just as prisons create a docile and useful population outside prisons, control units create obedience and usefulness within prison walls. Prisons put the cop in the citizen's head; control units put the cop in the criminal's head. It's not the "worst of the worst" who get thrown in control units, it's a specific section of the prisoner population, chosen for the perceived threat they pose to order and obedience.

As in the larger society, the vast majority of those locked up in control units are Black. For example, all but a few in the management control unit at New Jersey State Prison are Black. Most are in there because they make trouble for the prisonrats: they are jailhouse lawyers, political prisoners, activists, and revolutionaries. Especially Black revolutionaries. As Ralph Arons, former warden at Marion admits, "The purpose of the Marion Control Unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in the society at large." The crime itself doesn't matter--George Jackson did 11 years for a \$78 robbery--it's the class you belong to that determines whether or not you will go to prison, and once in prison, whether or not you will end up in lockdown in a control unit. And your class is determined by your "revolutionary attitudes," i.e., a refusal to obey those in power.

## Prisons and Liberal Democracy: Brothers in Blood

The notion that crime, the "criminal personality," and imprisonment naturally go together is a capitalist myth. We need to separate the issue of imprisonment from the issue of crime; they are not about the same things, and one does not cure the other.

One complaint by liberals of the new incarceration society the United States is building (those few liberals who haven't jumped onto the "get-tough-on-crime" bandwagon, that is) is that it is incredibly expensive. Of course, on the surface they are right; some control unit facilities cost \$800,000 per prisoner just to build, and that doesn't include living costs for the prisoner (\$30,000-40,000 a year for general population prisoners). However, those who hold power in this society see things a little bit differently, and regard the rising costs of imprisonment as worth the investment. Since prisons control not just the "criminal class" but the entire population, compared with the possibility of a Northern Ireland-style military occupation of American cities, prisons actually obtain social control of the entire society at a relatively low social and economic cost for the rich. For most folks, though, the cost is devastating, which is why prisons must go.

Capitalism and its sidekick liberal democracy give us the vote, constitutional rights, consumer buying power, and a trunkful of goodies. Why aren't we free? Because though some of us have toys, we still don't have power in this society; that privilege is reserved for capitalists and the state. Why does this tiny class of society have all that power, while the majority has so little? Why don't we just take power from the rich and "vote the bastards out"? Because the ruling class have developed other ways to control the population, so that our political power is much weaker than we are led to believe. Prisons are the linchpin to this social control; they guarantee our submission to the powers that be by opposing "citizens" to "criminals."



The way to fight this is for those of us on the outside to align ourselves with those on the inside. Together, we can dispel the popular notion that crime and prison automatically go together. Together, we can expose prisons for their true nature. This can't be done outside the context of fighting capitalism, patriarchy, and a white supremacist society. As capitalism and imprisonment go together, so must they fall together. The gardens must burn.

## Notes

[1] Criminal Justice Research Associates telephone interview with Assistant Commissioner Dan O'Brien, May 28, 1996.

[2] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, (New York: Vintage Books), 1979, p. 111.

[3] *Black Americans: A Statistical Sourcebook*, 1994, p. 190.

[4] Marc Mauer, *Young Black Men and the Criminal Justice System: Five Years Later*, (Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project), 1995.

[5] National Institute of Justice (NIJ), *Victim Costs and Consequences: A New Look*, (Washington, DC: NIJ), January 1996.

[6] Annually in the United States, there are more than 11,876,000 arrests, 945,500 convictions, and only about 339,000 people sentenced to state and federal prisons. *Black Americans: A Statistical Sourcebook*, 1994; Bureau of Justice Statistics, *State Court Sentencing of Convicted Felons*, (Washington, DC: GPO), 1994; Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, (Washington, DC: GPO), 1994; Henry and Camille

## Focus: Direct Action Against Sexism

by *Gumby Cascadia & Ernesto Aguilar*

It is critical that we, as organizers, realize how important it is to recognize, celebrate and affirm the involvement, input, achievements and criticisms of our sisters in the struggle. This isn't a matter of "guilt-tripping," "PC-ness" or whatever. It's about understanding reality, accepting responsibility as people wanting social change, and acknowledging that, as people exposed to an oppressive culture, unlearning those behaviors is a constant effort.

Men should consider all the subtle and overt messages they received about women as they grew up, and things they see today. How often are women cut off from speaking? How often are men the ones who do "everything," without question? How often is the presence of women considered a gender balanced group/meeting, as men dominate the discussion and direction? Why do you think women do not get involved, leave or sit in silence? Are they being actively

involved in the conversation? Are women who assert there's sexism in a group heard out, and their points considered, or are they written off?

The intent of talking about these issues isn't to put people on the defensive, but to encourage women and men in the movement to understand how our brothers are sometimes unconscious (or worse, conscious and regular) accomplices in replicating negative behaviors women have tolerated in the movement for years. All men, on some level, have been engrained with sexist thinking as a result of living in patriarchal societies, and we are pressed to look at our relations, our expectations, etc. These issues cut across race and class, and it's not just the issue of middle-class, punk-rock white boys. It's something we all need to confront.

*Some things to observe:*

**Understand it's OUR problem.** No one is perfect. No one is  
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# Towards an Alliance of Flames in Each Indignant Heart

*by the Claustrophobia collective, Spring 1998*

*"You know why everyone loved John Dillinger? Cause he robbed banks!"*

This is intended as a contribution to debates currently going on within the anarchist prison support movement. We hope that it can elicit discussion on all our parts that proves useful in bringing us together to a more effective and stronger movement, by focusing on the themes that resonate in all our experiences and show a possibility for linking the prison struggle with the independent self-definition of movements of various other sectors of the working class. Responses are welcomed.

## I. The struggle must be as broad as the class...

We want the coalescence of ABC and other anti-authoritarian prisoner solidarity groups into a tendency which is rooted in class struggle and which makes the re-development of a revolutionary prison movement its aim, while struggling for anarchism/anti-authoritarianism within that movement. We hold this in opposition to a pole of the PP/POW support movement that, in our view, is mired in an excessive legalism and organization-fetish that effectively isolates it from the anti-control attitudes and experiences of the larger class. This tendency of which we are critical-most visibly and successfully represented by the Anarchist Black Cross Federation-performs a valuable role in the anarchist movement at this time by bringing into movement dialogue the lessons and experiences of the wars (early experiments in people's armed struggle against an oppressive liberal capitalist state) fought across the continent in ghettos and reservations through the 60's and 70's. We agree that this work is important to carry out, but disagree with the conclusions they seem to draw from these experiences and the ends to which they push the lessons they draw.

When we say working class we are not referring to any one of the selective bigoted class identities promoted by capitalism to divide us against ourselves. We are not referring just to those who have the relative privilege steady employment, but to welfare moms and outlaws as well. We are referring to both those who grew up in neighborhoods that gave to each of its children a class consciousness and to those who came up in neighborhoods designed in everyway to obscure class identity. Our class includes those who never held a wage job in their life and those who always thought they were middle class til one day they realized they'd been working a little above minimum wage for ten years.

When we talk about "our class" we mean something more like "the people" than a particular component of any narrow economic analysis of capitalism. The class has both objective socio-economic components and an individual subjective one. The basis of our class identity is both that we own neither capital nor our own lives and at the same time that we make this reality the basis for where we put ourselves, who we align ourselves with, what side we are on. Any revolutionary class identity has to itself be the basis for the dissolution of hierarchies of privilege which divide us.

For us class struggle cannot be limited to the activities of formal political organizations, though we don't deny a role for these. Similarly struggle goes on among those who aren't perfectly politically conscious, whatever we might deem that to mean. Class consciousness for one is not dispensed by the vanguard militants down to the unconsciousness mass (as suggested by Lenin), but develops in different ways among each of us going about our daily activities of surviving and striving. Out of this life we are forced into we unavoidably develop ideas about what is behind our condition, how we'd rather it be, and what we might be able to do about it. To the extent that people confine themselves to more conservative channels, it is often because they do not see the possibility of what we propose. This is not unconsciousness so much as a flawed but practical analysis. We always have a critical attitude to people's consciousness - assessing its particular usefulness and insight - but we don't try to negate that they have one. We make this central to our perspective.

The same way we resist negating the subjectivity (particular self-consciousness, and activity) of members of the class, as a whole and the various specific parts of it, we also resist attempting an arrogant imposition of our views of struggle. Class



struggle is seen in many acts, many of them invisible to the politicians. We value each of these activities and struggle to relate to each of them as a radicalizing influence.

Revolution, in our view, is the process by which oppressed groups in society, based on their own internal culture shaped both by the nature of their oppression and the methods of resistance to exploitation they have developed, come to break with state and capitalist domination and build consciously independent, internal, sustaining, and anti-exploitative relationships that can defend against the state and replace their need for state intervention. We are only one of thousands of points within these collectivities working toward those ends. As anarchists, we refuse to see ourselves as trapped in a 'competition' with these other people and groups. Our struggle is to do what is possible to spur the development of these revolutionary tendencies in the communities we live and move in, presenting our opinions on situations that develop from a position of equality.

This is our starting point: looking at the relationships that exist on our side of the class struggle, defining the positive tendencies and working within them. We are only speaking as one political grouping that is based in particular scenes and circuits on the streets, with an interest in reuniting with people who are comrades to us locked up in prison, or separated from us by other forms of state control.

Recognizing class war requires understanding that when slavery was "abolished", they built all sorts of prisons. When we've risen up, the prison was used to crush us. When we've run petty hustles to get out of debt, the prison was there to keep us poor. When we had enough of some cop's hassles and we banged him in the head, the prison kept our revolt contained. When we tried to settle a problem amongst ourselves without going to the state, they imposed the prison on us anyway. When we acted as if the world had no borders and moved where we wanted, they placed the border of a prison cell around us. When we violently struck out against the confinement of a brutal marriage, they subjected us to the prison's brutal confinement. When we tried to escape a painful reality by getting a little buzz on... When we stole a car for a joy ride, for lack of any better revolt at the time... When we robbed a bank in order to avoid working our whole life... Today there are more people locked-up and more people under other forms of state supervision than at any other time in the history of the world. So we understand that the prison is not a special issue for a small segment of the class, but is one of the dominant institutions of our oppression. Class war must destroy all prisons.

## Back up for a running start...

When we started out as an ABC group four years ago, the only measure we had for our work was Komboa's Draft Proposal for an Anarchist Black Cross Network. This was written originally when Komboa was in Federal prison in 1979. It was then revised around the time that we first got hold of it, when Komboa was looking towards a unification of the budding ABC movement. Today, the document is a little dated, which actually gives us the extra gift of an outside perspective on current disputes over the direction of the ABC.

Throughout the Proposal, Komboa argues for the defense of "anarchist prisoners," "class war prisoners," "prisoners," "political prisoners," etc., almost interchangeably and without at anytime assuming that supporting one group means neglecting the other. Nowadays some might find his use of terms sloppy and "unprofessional" to the extent that clearly defined distinctions are not made between different categories of our people locked up. At the time he was under no compulsion to explain this orientation because it was the common perspective of just about all anarchists, so we are required to explain its logic now that it has been eroded.

In Komboa's depiction of the prison movement, there is a flow of struggle that engulfs all prisoners in one way or another. So we ask, how can we separate comrades who became political on the street from those who became political on the inside without fragmenting what's going on inside? The struggle always comes from the class as it exists at a given moment, out of its complexity, and not solely from the cadre of particular organizations. Thus he talks about Carl Harp, George Jackson, the Attica Brothers, Martin Sostre, Ojore Lutalo, Assata Shakur, Andaliwa Clark, Shaka Shakur, some of them PP/POWs and some of them not, but all of them comrades. It is also undeniable that the struggle of George Jackson was not simply the heroic struggle of an individual to conquer that which sought to conquer him, though it was that. His was a struggle that reflected the uprising of at least hundreds of other people at the same time, in those lock-ups where George was and beyond. We can't honor George's struggle without honoring the struggle of prisoners in general. What unites this perspective on the prison movement is class struggle against prisons. Komboa writes, "Firstly, we believe in the abolition of both the prison system and the society which creates it and we initiate all our actions with that in mind". The prison "is for State social control and political repression. Thus it must be opposed at every turn and ultimately destroyed altogether. The abolition of prisons, the system of Laws, and the Capitalist State is the ultimate objective of every true Anarchist, yet there seems to be no clear agreement by the Anarchist movement to put active effort to that anti-authoritarian desire". For us, Komboa's pamphlet is still a starting point in our understanding of the role of anti-prison organizations in a revolutionary Anarchist movement.

When we wrote "Prison Abolition in a Neo-colonial Ice Age" a year and a half ago, we talked about the need for true political support of the prison struggle, that is contributing fully to the search for answers to the problems that face us as a class and as a movement. That is the spirit in which we offer these formulations. At the time our break with what we see as a more bourgeois minded politic was largely negative (against the bourgeois politic), in that we had not fully taken up a clear

identification of struggle rooted in the broad class, the world-wide toiling class, working class, proletariat, heir to the human legacy of domestication that our class is.

## II. the 60's 'movement' didn't just disappear

The mid to late 60s was a time of hope for the world, for people everywhere. There have been plenty of moments of uncertainty since then, when it seemed like anything just might be possible, that any mass of people could break down and become collectivities of free & human individuals. But our generation hasn't yet experienced those moments become a life.

Baltimore-to take just one example-in the late 60's had a scene going on, with communes coming together, study groups everywhere, and always the sense that people were consciously moving towards something: whether you knew where that was or not, it was somewhere, and you were constantly studying to figure out how to determine and destine that path.

There was an experience in radical feminist and anti-imperialist collectives and living experiments around Waverly, there were high-school students at Eastern High joining the Black Panthers and waving their pride and revolutionary spirit in the faces of a reactionary racist system that couldn't hold them down. There were neighborhoods that were a lived collective of communes and families and all kinds of social networks that worked together against the state and its institutions and its security forces...



These struggles were brutally repressed by the state in all the forms they took. People were killed where the escalation of the conflict allowed and necessitated that. Thousands were captured and silenced by imprisonment, hundreds of whom still remain locked up. Communities of resistance were broken up physically by walls and highways, economically by gentrification and segregation, and spiritually and culturally by a consciously planned mis-education system in the schools, media, and entertainment industries. The most desperate-& therefore potentially the most dangerous-sectors of society were crippled by government-directed floods of addictive drugs and social workers and checked by the most massive increase in policing the world has ever seen.

The point in remembering this history is simply to give respect to the elders of our movements and communities, who remember parts of this history because they built it as their lives. These elders include political prisoners and many others, who experienced directly the building of the movements and then the state repression visited on them. The fact that there are those who remain in prison alone should keep this movement alive for us. All of us somehow experience the repression that was handed down over the last generation, but these are people who are forced to carry it with a much greater level of urgency than others of us might.

The point for us is not to fetishize the particular forms that resistance has taken, as some are inclined to do. Nor is it to build moral or logical criteria in arguments that explain our compulsion to defend these political prisoners; that feeling should come instinctively to anyone who identifies with the "movement" and it's not necessarily linked to our feelings towards the particular actions or ideologies they were associated with. These are our comrades, we have plenty still to learn from them and we need to acknowledge that we owe them a debt that, until we win our revolutionary struggle, we can repay only by our respect, sympathy, and support.

## III. Against the Laws We Obey...

Anytime you're gonna talk about something you start by knowing where you stand in relation to it, or else you're just getting ready to lie or be fooled. As proletarians, as revolutionaries, we must not start with an acceptance of the State's law, its morals, its values. From the start we reject these out of hand and refuse to refer to "criminals", as opposed to "Political Prisoners". The argument that PP/POWs are not really criminals because they did what they did for the struggle can become a trap when its corollary is that the rest of the prisoners are "criminals". We reject the idea of the 'criminal' and the 'criminal class' because these ideas do not originate from our own self-understanding and do not give us tools to fight with. Liberals often say that "the capitalists are the worst criminals", this is true enough if by it is meant that the Capitalist is an enemy far worse and more dangerous to us than any small time hustler or thug; but beyond this we are not interested in a redefinition of criminality because its corollary is Law.

My mom once told me the joke about a dude who said "Just because i suck a little cock now and then everybody calls me a cocksucker!" We start with a rejection of the idea of criminality pushed by the state, if only because we cannot be defined by any selective aggregate of our actions. As soon as one of us is convicted of a 'crime', that mark of criminality is our only public identity. We are nothing but that act, or even less. The guilt that a 'criminal' is judged to feel at committing a forbidden act is supposed to substitute for the lifetime of experience that led her/him to that particular point. But our subjectivity is much deeper than any socially proscribed identity. These identities are the basic units of social control. Each of us is afforded our due accordingly, but none of us is granted freedom in our lived subjectivity, least of all the imprisoned "criminal."



What is often misleadingly identified as the 'criminal class', 'criminal underclass', is really not even a class in itself. It is, like the stigma attached to welfare recipients in this country, just another means for capitalism to prevent one segment of the people from recognizing and allying itself with others. What does exist is a section of the working class who state and capitalist planners have marginalized to the degree that regular sustainable employment is unreliable and survival at times requires something else. This something else, 'crime' - illegal trades, illegal markets, illegal supply routes, etc. - is usually combined with legally sanctioned work. The marginality, which promotes criminal employment, is itself enforced by the idea of the criminal class. It is this stigma of criminality, imposed on whole neighborhoods or sides of a city, which keeps people in a socially degraded position that matches an economically mandated marginality. The definition of 'crime' is tied up in the ruling class's business plan of maintaining a cheap labor force (increasingly so inside the prisons). It has been used this way historically. In particular, criminalization of drugs has been used to attack whole communities of workers (usually of particular national communities, e.g. Chinese, Mexican, New Afrikan) who constitute a labor surplus and are threatening capitalist order.



According to the structure of the class in different areas at different times, an ideology defining this 'criminal class' will be developed. The one we are all familiar with promotes Black/New Afrikan working class people in this role. Similar criminalized identities are drawn up for every other community that finds itself at the bottom of the American pyramid. The same stereotypes are used against "white trash"-rebellious working-class people who refuse to or are unable to accept the privilege - separation and distinction - that being "white" is supposed to mean. So "crime" is, first, a code word for a section of the class that's targeted by the state for control and at times elimination.

What is vital and what we know we are unable to do here, is to gain an understanding of state role in the production/reproduction of criminalized economies. The first principle is that the state plays both sides and gets paid on both ends. Underground markets serve many purposes of both State and Capital. Provision of covert revenues, low-maintenance for a section of highly marginalized workers, for example. Also what is the meaning of an 'underground' economy that in some areas is the dominant money flow and employer? These and other related questions are something we need to look at, but they are not the main focus of this essay. What needs to be emphasized for our purposes here is that not only is the concept of 'the criminal class' a creation of the State, but the illegal channels through which people are forced to find part of their survival, are themselves intimately tied to the functioning of State and Capital, some of them directly controlled and created. So again we see how the identity of 'criminal' is a creation and imposition of the State.

Above all else, our values must be rooted in the relations we build-up amongst ourselves. With hearts and minds cleared as much as possible from the conditioning and the moral authoritarianism of this civilization, we become free to develop our own lives and ways of living together. Law and the punishment of "criminality" is one of the main institutions closing off space to this libertarian experimentation.

## A working-class hero is something to be

What does it mean for us-supposedly "anarchists"-to impose the idea that popular rebellion can only legitimately take certain forms? The high-born French anarchist Jean Grave made the argument around the turn of the century that to commit crime was to partake of a bourgeois outlook on the world. Now of course the rich share the "criminal" outlook and lifestyle of getting paid by any means available; but the similarity ends there. Can you really say that robbing a bank is the same as owning one? Does the state treat the repo man coming to take back a car the same as the working family who missed a payment or two on it? This idea, so strangely respectful of bourgeois property, was thoroughly critiqued in both word and deed by the Illegalist Anarchists of the day, from the one-legged street orator Albert Libertad, to the invective of Victor Kibalchich (aka Victor Serge) in l'Anarchie magazine, to the famous Bonnot Gang that originated the get-away car.

Fortunately for the anti-authoritarian hopes of humanity, a certain number of people have always sought their own path out of (or simply, against) their oppression, not simply trusting the various programs imposed by revolutionary leaderships (whether anarchist or not). This is not to say that the Bonnot Gang blazed the true path forward - though their path truly blazed - but that rebellion comes up in all kinds of ways. In fact, the Bonnot Gang was a very politicized form of illegality, whose members almost entirely came straight out of the anarchist movement. What about Bonnie and Clyde and a thousand other local criminal heroes, and the antagonism they inspired in hundreds of thousands of poor folks' hearts?

And of course one need not be so grand as Bonnot or Bonnie for the same point to apply. A poor kid who steals is not simply compelled to do so out of poverty - to say that would be to do violence to her, to deny her subjectivity. In fact, one also chooses crime as less submissive, as a better way to live, and as a profound expression of class consciousness. Or at least

that is one common way to choose crime. This is not to say we are not forced into the choice itself: washing dishes or stealing bikes, for example. Our consciousness comes from facing a no win situation. If all you can do is try to train people against the dreams of "setting it off" and into a more orderly opposition, without feeling the spark and human impulse that runs through all these million individual explosions, you will lose touch with the thread that has held humanity together from day to day and through several thousand years! Is the class struggle really confined to those who hold membership in revolutionary organizations and can support their actions by reference to Marx, Bakunin, Mao or Malcolm? Is it really our belief that humanity will march four abreast into the new world of our dreams? Or does the true hope of our class rest in the alliance of flames in each person's indignant heart?

Our class needs to know itself. It needs to recognize its power and beauty and its roots in an ancient struggle to break all chains that confine (and define) it. The power of this self-consciousness is itself a revolutionary power. The same way that the State has tried to camouflage and defuse the meaning of the armed struggle of the BLA and other combatants, we are denied a full understanding of the latent rebelliousness underlying so many of our everyday actions. To rip through the veil of the coverup is to allow people to see into their own aspirations and to embolden them. To go back to Bonnie and Clyde for a moment again, why were these bumbling robbers so loved among the people? They've been sung about and adored on movie screens. And wherever they've been talked about people have preferred a fictionalized version that makes their lives more principled than they probably were. So many working people, despite patriotic expressions or other backward consciousness, love Robin Hoods and identify with their actions. Many working people also feel a self-hatred because they see themselves and the class (however its defined) as a failure, as unable to offer any resistance. This sense of failure is thoroughly self-defeating and it need not exist. All around us, there are expressions of resistance. Class struggle is the development of self-consciousness and organization of these rebellions. If we contribute to the masking of these actions then what side of the class struggle have we fallen on?

Our comrade Gregory Hunt, remembered as Rock on the street, was executed a year ago for his killing of a cop over a decade ago. A hustler who shoots a cop to avoid lock-up is not likely to get much back-up from the left. And after twelve years of confinement and a personal transformation that brought a commitment to both revolution and Islam, in all reality Gregory was still without much back up. The socialist group that organized demonstrations against his execution wouldn't go anywhere near supporting Gregory the man, the proletarian rebel. For the fake socialists and communists and the anti-death penalty liberals, Gregory was simply a victim whose actions were best avoided since they could only damage the anti-death penalty cause. No surprise that some middle class wannabe bureaucrats would find no meaning in the life struggles of one of the rebellious damned, in fact, we should hope they continue to be blind to reality as they are our enemies. It was us who failed to push the dialog past the limits placed by these socialist managers. Loud amidst the uninterrupted spew of pacifist liberalism was the silence of Gregory's friends and neighbors who might have been called upon to vouch for the passion for living that drove him to shoot a cop.



An interesting postscript to this thought is the increasingly "political" nature of criminality today "political" even in the sense of the organization fetish that surrounds the definition of "political imprisonment". In a day when innumerable gangs, cliques, and individual ghetto spokespeople are making reference to Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and revolution; when the rural white working class and agricultural petit-bourgeoisie are organizing along lines that run the spectrum from outright fascism to a sort of libertarian populism, we are reaching a period when the distinction between the organizations people being arrested today come from ('gangs') and the organizations the political prisoners of the 70's came from may not be as great as activists make it out to be. What is the distinction between a politicized and principled gang of rebels and a "revolutionary" organization of the left? Aside from the obvious differences of their position in the community, the only distinguishing factor is that the gang doesn't need to set itself up as an agent of "law" or appeal to international legal bodies to justify its existence, it knows itself as a necessary element in the conflict of classes.

Is a drug dealer who channeled his profits into community projects a "political prisoner"? How about someone who forged documents for illegal immigrants to be able to survive under American surveillance? Or an activist busted for check scams or welfare fraud, trying to fund the needs of their particular struggle or simply to live on while sustaining a community based on resistance? All of these people are operating on the revolutionary side of the class struggle as it exists today in the North American ghettos and marginal circuits we are based in; it seems much more effective for "us"-the carriers of an isolated movement-to link our efforts against state repression with theirs, provided we can do so on a principled basis that does not spare necessary criticism on either side.

And then, from the other side, these same communities and many others have plenty of stake in the actions and economies defined as "criminal"-from survival to drawing together community to repossession of the capitalist's stolen wealth. There are so many criminal acts that we'd like to defend, or merely give props to which the movement grants little political weight and even less material support. So that those who take risks and often suffer lock up or other forms of state intervention get no back up. Because of this we are forced to look past stereotyped definitions of what is "political", straight at the activity arising from the class that bear a hatred and resistance to the system. What act of resistance is not political? A movement organized around class struggle against prisons is forced to politically defend all these actions and organize itself to aid and abet them.

## Neither legalism nor illegalism, but constant struggle against control

Our class is divided by many negative forces within itself which we are forced to fight against. Crime is said to be plaguing and destroying working class communities. But it is not crime, i.e. illegality, that is attacking us. The State names as crime both our damnation and our salvation, so it is up to us to sort through 'criminality', separating that which is a positive force for the class and each of us individually, from that which is not. It's far from our purpose to simply flip the state's terminology and affirm what it seems to negate. Every act, from habitual shit-talking to stealing bikes in the suburbs, needs to be addressed in a broad class 'dialog'. That the class has no war to fight against crime can be illustrated easily enough by Giuliani's 'zero tolerance' in New York that uses those aspects of 'crime' that weaken us as cover for an attack on our autonomy which is seen as an erosion of the rule of law (squats, street vending, unlicensed cabs, neighborhood gardens, access to public space, street art, etc).

Every significant revolutionary effort has had to address these questions. The Panthers, the Black Liberation Army, the German sponenists of the late 60s, the French illegalists, among many others tried to work out the relationship between cultures of illegality and revolutionary struggle. Each of these need to be studied.

## IV. Class struggle Behind Bars

There is already quite a prison movement. Like the movement on the streets, around twenty-five, thirty years ago there was more activity inside than is visible now. But we all know resistance never dies. We are all forced to resist or die in some way or another, and this decision is thrust more bleakly on someone in a cage.

The mass reality behind the walls today flowed directly out of the state's response to our struggles then. The repression that we spoke of earlier created both our Political Prisoners and the thousands of drug war POWs and the 'zero tolerance' for everyone else caught up in the mix. The power void, the loss of direction that came about with the repression of the Panthers and other revolutionaries was filled by street organizations whose goal was no longer inter-communalism but drug sales. This massive influx of first heroin and then cocaine, originating within government circles, then distributed as contraband by the most desperate parts of the class, became the pretext for the "drug war". And the drug war has been only one part of a broader extension of state police powers and the reach of law. Perhaps all this is one lens that can unify people's vision of the prison reality, and shatter illusions as to the chasm separating the lives of political prisoners and 'social prisoners'. On a mass level both came to see the inside of a prison cell born of the same historical forces. In fact, it was crack, the drug war, that got the original Political Prisoner of the '60s, Huey P. Newton; killed in a fight over drug debt on an Oakland street in 1989. So we are faced with attacking the prison, not simply as the cager of movement militants, but as the oppressor of our entire class.

We want to show some of the different elements in motion that form today's prison movement. We represent each of these experiences as outsiders and so our accounts are no doubt flawed. All of these things need to be discussed and studied more. We need to assess the role of outside support in the development of struggles inside and their linking to struggles on the street, where that has happened; and where it hasn't, we need to see what we need to do that it does happen. We would also like to suggest the power that attacking prisons has in not only dismantling prisons themselves but in undermining the various other repressive projects of the state.

## Federal prisoners revolt

In the fall of 1995 the federal prison system was rocked in a massive rebellion against the drug war (among other things). Shortly following a congressional vote to maintain harsher sentencing of crack, four federal prisons went up in revolt



(Talladega, AL, Allenwood, PA, Memphis, TN, and Greenville, IL). Other prisons' around the country saw insurrection for the next week and some days. From Lewisburg, PA to Atlanta, GA, Dublin, CA to Leavenworth, KS. The uprising most often took the form of seizure of a part of the prison and heavy damages to property. In Memphis \$5 million in damages were reported and the buildings were rendered useless. Otherwise the rebellions took the form of work strikes and other disobediences. The rebellion included both men's and women's prisons. There was a system-wide lockdown brought by the Bureau of Prisons which itself provoked more rebellions. Towards the end, the rebellion broke out of the federal system when over 100 prisoners in a privately run Tennessee detention facility seized the prison and smashed it up. The prisoners were from North Carolina and demanded to do time in their home state. This system-wide uprising received almost no support and had only the most tenuous connection to outside political organization; it has since fallen into obscurity and has not been a lesson for our efforts at organizing. By no means were these the only open insurrections in prisons in that year or since.

## **INS detention center revolts**

U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service contracts with other state and county prisons for detention of illegal immigrants. Information on these prisons and struggles going on in them is difficult to obtain. We have seen brief reports on riots and other resistances in various INS facilities. These struggles should be considered part of the movement, studied, and joined with directly. Weakening the State's anti-immigrant program empowers the freedom of movement against borders, which is essential to our worldwide proletarian movement. That 40% of Latinos imprisoned in California are foreign citizens demonstrates the international reality of U.S. imprisonment.

## **Hunger strike at SCI Greene (PA)**

After prisoners won recent court litigations, the prisonrats struck back with a restriction of prisoners' commissary, property, visitation, and phone access. Following this, half the 111 prisoners on death row at Greene (among them Mumia Abu Jamal) initiated a hunger strike which lasted 12 days and resulted in an end to the conditions imposed by the prison. The prison has since back-pedaled on the demands of the prisoners, but the struggle is by no means over.

## **Study groups/literature requests**

There are at least a dozen anarchist prison literature distribution projects in North America handling a steady stream of requests for literature covering the Black Panthers/BLA, anarchism, anti-sexism, etc. Many of the requests come from prisoners organized in study collectives.

## **Domestic abuse POWs**

The struggle for the freedom of women who killed their abusive partners is another integral part of our class' struggle against prisons. We heard recently of a woman in California who cut off the penis of a man, just released from prison for having raped and killed this woman's friend. We can't help but wonder if she was not emboldened by the relative prominence of support campaigns for domestic abuse POWs in that state. A single act like this gives us great hope in the possibility of circulation of struggle that can come out of an attack on the prison system.

## **Escapes**

Recently in Baltimore, a prisoner in the supermax was able to make it out of a window and to the street (but no further) by virtue of a strong hatred of confinement and being pretty skinny. These stories are always inspirations to us (particularly skinny folks) and no doubt to others.

## **Control unit resistance**

For four years there has been the development of contacts between prisoners in different control units around the country and from those prisons to activists on the outside. This network has been trying to find a way to build a wide spread public opposition to these particular torture units. As such it works if unconsciously in the direction of building a class movement against prisons. The control units themselves reflect the war going on inside the walls. An element in the ever escalating technology of control responding to the obstinacy of human resistance. The most rebellious prisoners, organizers, gang members, etc are the ones sent to these isolation cells. Abolishing these units breaks the isolation of the rebels from the general population and eliminates one of the States sanctions against resistance. In another fragment from Baltimore, a legendary prisoner (originally locked up for beating down a numbers man who wouldn't pay him what he'd won) required the construction of a cell specially for him due to his constant resistance (at 250 pounds he was tearing bars apart).

## **Indiana**

The prisons in northern Indiana, cages for folks primarily from Gary and Chicago, have burned bright in rebellion for at least a decade. Much recent activity centered on death sentences placed on two comrades who'd been framed for killing a cop in Gary. After the state execution of one of the comrades, Ajamu Nassor, among other resistances a guard was killed in

retaliation. Another revolutionary organizer, Khalfani X. Khaldun was then brought up on charges for this retaliatory attack. When Ziyon Yisrayah faced execution two years later, another major round of protest erupted, involving unit-wide silent strikes. This brought another round of repression against prominent organizers, with a sweep of shakedowns and charges against six. People were shipped out to distant prisons or the control unit at Westville. Ziyon was murdered. The intensity of struggle has pushed the state to develop new methods of control more experimental than most of its peers. Units like D cell house at Indiana State Penitentiary, and Westville have been sites of intense repressive violence, if merely in the timing of lights, yet they have become themselves points of resistance and organization as the suit filed by Westville prisoners and current activity at D-ch demonstrate. The dynamics of the Indiana prison movement is directly tied to that of struggles for the politicization of Gary and Chicago youth street organizations. Groups like Brothers United to Save the Hood serve as one link between these two fronts.

## V. Links against chains

"Tomorrow I shall go to the High Court of Eagles for ... the first time? Does anyone in this strange and terrible land go anywhere, without having been there before in myth or dream? The minister with whom I shall confer will ask me a simple question. Beyond my campaign to free Neveryon's slaves, whom will I align myself with next? Will I take up the cause of the workers who toil for wages only a step above slavery? Or will I take up the marginal workless wretches who, without wages at all, live a step below? Shall I ally myself with those women who find themselves caught up, laboring without wages, for the male population among both groups? For they are, all of them—these free men and women—caught in a freedom that, despite the name it bears, makes movement through society impossible, makes the quality of life miserable, that allows no chance and little choice in any aspect of the human not written by the presence or elision of the sign for production. This is what Lord Krodar will ask me. And I shall answer..."

"I shall answer that I do not know." Gorgik's hand found the little man's shoulder; the horny forefinger hooked again over the collar. Noyeed, at any rate, seemed steadied. "I shall say that, because I spent my real youth as a real slave in your most real and royal obsidian mines, the machinery of my desire is caught up within the workings of the iron hinge. Slavery is, for me, not a word in a string of words, wrought carefully for the voice that will enunciate it for the play of glow and shade it can initiate in the playful mind. I cannot tell this minister what slavery means, for me, beyond slavery—not because desire clouds my judgement, but because I had the misfortune once to be a slave." — Samuel R. Delany, *Neveryona*



The consciousness of a revolutionary movement and the consciousness of a ruling elite are two different phenomena; they operate on completely different principles. As revolutionary subjects, the "prison movement" can only know and interpret prison as a part of our individual subjective experience. It is not, as Delany's hero puts it, "a word in a string of words, wrought carefully for the voice that will enunciate it"—prison is nothing more than one limitation imposed on working-class life by the capitalist system which tries to limit our life in all directions. The struggle against prison then is rooted in the experience of every one of the class who has been "caught up within the workings of the iron hinge", and needs no further justification.

To the state, to capitalism, prison is nothing—merely a convenient means of controlling and disposing with its enemies. Their primary interest in the prison movement is that it remain a prison movement. A revolution cannot be successfully fought, or won, in prison. What the spies, informants and counter-intelligence agents they continue to send into our ranks are forever trying to determine and control is the political question: how are these struggles circulating among the different sectors of society as a whole? A movement where prisoners and their allies band together to effect changes in conditions or consciousness is one concern for the power structure, a nationalist struggle which focuses on prisoners' issues is another one, a class front movement of individuals—both imprisoned and not—who see their destinies linked and have agreed to fight together for a new world is yet another. Which of many possible models the "prison movement" chooses to identify with, or rather, how these models interplay with each other, is the question the power structure wants to know—and preferably, before the movement itself is aware of it.

We've heard accounts of one of the first Gay Liberation Front demonstrations in NYC where protesters marching past the Tombs shouted in solidarity with those held inside and made a link between radical gay culture which breaks with patriarchal

authority and all other libertarian struggles. This, while being a limited example, suggests some of what needs to happen in linking struggle beyond the boundaries that we are made to live within.

The most recent publication of the Midnight Notes collective employed the phrase "One No Many Yesses" which we think bears reiterating here. Our one No is the rejection of the rule of Capital (in shorthand) and our many Yesses are the diversity of lives and self-creations that compliment this rejection. Links are the vehicle of connection between a particular struggle inside prison and any other sympathetic revolt elsewhere in the world.

We have argued for a political understanding that starts at ground level with day to day particular experiences of the class, and doesn't limit itself to formal expressions of politics. An organization that tries to relate to this understanding of the class struggle cannot be the centralist type of organization that is so familiar. We don't need organizations that attempt to engulf and then represent and coordinate all of these related yet independent struggles according to the leadership's master plan. Struggle comes from the needs of people in particular situations and must remain determined by those from whose will it arises. Though if it is to succeed it must also link with the struggle of others.

This implies a number of things for organization. The first thing is that we must have dialogue among all sympathetic sectors of the prison struggle (with links beyond). And from that dialogue we can begin to see what elements are needed to allow the confluence of each particular rebellion into a powerful insurrectional alliance. The root of libertarian organization is the facilitation of communication and cooperation and coordination horizontally. So it must be self-generating and constantly the servant of the interests of each locality of the network.

And it also affects our ways of thinking about links and circulation of struggles. Circulation of struggles has meaning not only in the Attica Brothers developing their manifesto and demands from one made by prisoners in Folsom a year earlier and the fact that the Attica rebellion was in part sparked by George Jackson's murder, but that on some unknown street an unknown ghetto dweller who heard fragments about George and heard about the heroic uprising of the Attica Brothers felt emboldened and inspired to an unknown act on his own and when he saw his neighbor after hearing the radio reports he called that neighbor 'brother' or 'sister' as the case may be and meant it in a way he couldn't usually manage to mean it. Things like this constitute an equally profound circulation of struggles. These are the things which formulate the characteristics and orientation of each section of the class, and its willingness to act on its own behalf.

Part of what has kept our activities on the outside so contained is the specialized role which it has pursued. We are caught in an as yet infinitely sustainable feedback loop of communication: letters, alerts, discussion bulletins, etc cycled within a closed circuit that only occasionally spills out on the streets or cell blocks. And simultaneously it is the other way around, the narrowness of our activity reflects the extent to which the prison movement has been contained and has not generally broken out in the old hoods of the prisoners. We are limited in the role we can play, in that all 'we' can be is those who are linked together by way of our particular struggles against prison. That is what we should aim to be. As anti-prison activists, the less we are rooted in particular struggles the more irrelevant and bureaucratic we will become. It is similarly true that the more we are limited to the activities of the activists rather than the bad works of the bad workers, the more irrelevant and bureaucratic we will become.



Within each of the programs that we've ever run there is the possibility of making it a vehicle for breaking out of confinements, confinements of consciousness and of alliances. For example, our Emergency Response Network was a linkage of anti-prison activists around the country and so it contained itself within that limit. A more profound organization of solidarity would link struggles to struggles. The Texas Prisoner Labor Organization linked to shop floor organizing in other areas, as an example of an obvious first step. And that such a link be with workers in a stealing frenzy in a Brownsville, TX restaurant, rather than just the activists of the IWW trying to make a revival. Each project can be undertaken in a way that builds solidarity across struggles within the prison, and beyond to struggles throughout the class; or it can be carried out in a way which maintains isolation of objectives and consciousness within the boundaries imposed by the present organization of our everyday non-lives.

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# Sisters Inside: Prisons and Social Control

*Collective piece by staff, from Kinesis, published by the Vancouver Commission on the Status of Women, June 1987*

The judicial/prison system most often comes up in feminist discussion in deciding how to deal with men who commit crimes against women. The urgency of ending violence against us has compelled women to implicitly support this system.

However, in doing this, we cut ourselves off from the struggles of women who are imprisoned. We also lose sight of our long-term goal of a society not based in coercion; a goal that requires the dismantling of the prison system. We need to remember how women's issues and prison issues are part of the same struggle.

Prison issues are important for feminists, both because individual women are being oppressed by prison and, in a wider context, because the judicial/prison system exists to support the larger power structure that oppresses us all.

Women in prison are fighting to maintain a sense of self within a system that isolates and degrades; one which attempts to teach submission to authority through the constant exercising of power, in both serious and petty ways, over prisoners. What is generated is not obedience but anger, and since a prisoner risks punishment such as being sent to segregation if she directs her anger at the system that's hurting her, that anger often gets directed inward or at other prisoners.

Because the most brutal methods of social control are directed at a society's most oppressed groups, the women most likely to be sent to jail [and prison] are poor and/or women of color. In North America a very high proportion are Native. That the great majority of prisoners are in for crimes against property shows the system's role in maintaining the economic order.

Prison is a type of violence that enforces a state's power over its citizens, in the same way that rape and battering enforce the power of men over women.

Since this kind of power by coercion is antithetical to feminism we need to make prison abolition part of our feminist analysis.

One implication of this is that we have to reevaluate the strategy of trying to have abusive men put in prison. For now, it's one of the only strategies available to protect women and children from particularly violent men. What other approach could be used remains a difficult question. However, this doesn't have to stop us from opposing the prison system as a whole; we can recognize that if we use the system to convict violent men, it is an unsatisfactory and short term solution.

What we have to abandon is trying to inject feminist values into an essentially patriarchal system. We've seen how our demands, even when clearly articulated, are twisted and used in the state's interests in our recent anti-pornography work.

We've implicitly supported the system by trying to change it using its own terms. Since the severity of the penalty for an action is supposed to express society's amount of disapproval for that action, feminists have pushed for stronger penalties for crimes against women as a way of increasing the expressed disapproval for these crimes. This doesn't work for several reasons.

First, the economic elite controls the justice system through government. It therefore supports that elite's interests (retaining power) and will continue to reflect their values and not those of feminists.

An example of these values is a recent sentencing by Supreme Court Judge Samuel Toy. Finding a B.C. man guilty of the rape and murder of a teenage woman, he sentenced him to fifteen years to be served concurrently with the sentence he had already received for the rape and murder of a second teenager. This same judge three years ago imposed a life sentence on political activist Ann Hansen for her part in actions with the Wimmin's Fire Brigade and Direct Action.

This raises another point. When we support the state's imprisonment of a rapist, we support the state's right to imprison, period. And this is used against us when we challenge the system.

In the last decade or so, women in prison have also faced the backlash against feminism. Previously, the court held women less responsible for our actions than it did men and thus women received shorter sentences. But this is one of the few places where disparity between women and men decreased quickly. One of the state's first responses to our demands for equal legal rights has been to hand out longer sentences to women.



Another problem is the whole approach of responding to someone's violent or irresponsible behavior with various degrees of punishment. It implies that revenge is the most important response to a wrong-doing, rather than supporting the victim or trying to prevent the behavior from happening again. It also suggests that people have to be coerced to behave responsibly.

Feminists must participate in the search for alternate ways of dealing with those who oppress. With the awareness that the judicial/prison system is not our ally in the long run, we'll be more reluctant to ask one part of the patriarchy to protect us from other parts.

Our other task is to learn about and support the struggles of prisoners. Women inside fight back and resist all the time. And although there are few methods of resistance open to prisoners some of them are: talking back to guards, breaking rules, destroying prison property participating in sit-ins, occupations, work or hunger strikes, and exposing brutality through the media and through lawsuits.

Support from the outside is a crucial factor in the success of campaigns. The knowledge that people outside care about what's happening contributes to prisoners' strength and makes prison administrators respond much more quickly to demands.

We can express our support for particular campaigns against unfair court decisions or treatment of prisoners through letter writing, protest phone calls [and faxes], demonstrations and education campaigns in our communities. We can also work for reforms of the prison system, keeping in mind that this is an interim measure to abolishing prisons. This includes lobbying governments to fund more prison programs with as many options available to female as male prisoners and training in a variety of jobs.

On an ongoing basis, we need to strengthen connections with our sisters inside. We must recognize women prisoners' struggles as an essential part of our movement. We can do this by:

- visiting women in prison when possible; meeting with individual women who want visits, organizing informational or skill-sharing workshops, musicians can play gigs at prisons and so on.
- writing to women prisoners who request letters of support or correspondence.
- sharing our resources; sending money to defense funds and prisoner support or action groups, donating books, musical instruments, art supplies to prisoners.
- sharing information; sending periodicals free to prisoners, soliciting articles from prisoners and providing material support to prisoner publications.

## Focus: White Privilege and Inclusion

It is the imperative of anyone organizing for all kinds of prisoner support and against the prison industrial complex to do so in a way that welcomes, actively involves and solicits the skills of Third World/people of color. As anarchists, it is essential that we take the time to challenge white privilege and racism every day.

Paul Kivel, author of *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, suggests the following guidelines for being an effective ally against racism, freedom and white privilege

- **Assume racism is everywhere, everyday.** We assume this because it's true, and because one of the privileges of being white or male is not have to see or deal with racism all the time. Notice who speaks, what is said, how things are done and described. Notice who isn't present. Notice code words for race and gender, and the implications of the policies, patterns and comments that are being expressed. You already notice the skin color of everyone you meet and interact with--now notice what difference it makes.
- **Notice** who is the center of attention and who is the center of power. Who is making decisions and who is getting blamed or scapegoated.
- **Take a stand against injustice.** It is the only healthy and moral human thing to do. Intervene in situations where racism is being passed on. It should also be clear

that we can't become strong allies if we are afraid to say the wrong thing, make a mistake, take a risk or upset anybody.

- **Don't call names or be personally abusive.** Attacking people doesn't address the systemic nature of racial and sexual inequality.
- **Support** the leadership of people of color.
- **Don't do it alone.**

When considering public policy, various political positions, our own organizing and how society is structured, understand how race and gender are crafted to distract our attention from the source of our problems and shift blame to those who are not responsible. Some of the questions we need to ask are:

- **How is the problem being defined?** Who is defining it and who is not part of the discussion?
- **Who is being blamed for the problem?** What racial or sexual fears are being appealed to?
- **What is the core issue?**
- **What is the historical context for this issue?**
- **What is being proposed for a solution?** How would it affect people of color?
- **What are other options?**
- **How are people organizing** to address this problem in a more progressive way? How are people organizing to resist any racial backlash this issue might represent?



# Qualities of a Prisoner Ally

*[Republished from "Anarchist Black Cross Information and Resources, Second Edition," December 1993, by Nightcrawlers ABC (now disbanded)]*

There are many ways of "helping" prisoners.

One is to impose what you think is "best" for them. This is the typical approach of well-meaning "experts" and "professionals" who are members of the criminal (in)justice bureaucracies.

Another way of "helping" prisoners is through charity. We use charity in prison to provide relief of suffering and do express compassion. But there are problems with charity: Charity creates dependency, it communicates pity rather than shared outrage and can romanticize the prisoner. Charity sometimes relieves the sufferings of prisoners, but it does not alter the basic conditions responsible for the sufferings.

A third way of helping prisoners is to become their ally. These are some of the qualities of a prisoner ally as compared to those of the charitable person:

The charitable person does not think of altering the prisoner's persistent need for help. The prisoner must always depend on the good will of the charitable.

The prisoner ally helps the oppressed prisoner become empowered to change his/her situation.

The charitable person often acts out of guilt and pities the prisoner who is seen as a "poor soul."

The prisoner ally treats the prisoner as an ally in change, sharing anger about prison oppression.

The charitable person might think that the prisoner's situation comes from some fault within the prisoner.

The prisoner ally identifies social and cultural forces that contribute to the cause of the prisoner's oppression.

The charitable person often has a plan for the prisoner, who is not regarded as a peer.

The prisoner ally and the prisoner strategize together, mutually: no one must be "thanked."

The charitable person expects the prisoner alone to change.

The prisoner ally works with the prisoner and takes mutual risks, experiencing change also.

The charitable person has his/her own view of what the prisoner must feel.

The prisoner ally understands the prisoner's experiences through the prisoner's own words.

The charitable person has easy access to the criminal (in)justice bureaucracies.

The prisoner ally often has a stormy relationship with the bureaucracies, because s/he is perceived as threatening to persons who hold power in the system.

Note: Obviously we are not proposing that the ally and charitable person are always so very opposite or that people ever actually fulfill either role in exactly the same manner presented here. Rather, our purpose is simply to contrast the basic quality of these two relationships. Learning how to become an ally is an abolitionist task.

- This was originally published in *Reality Now*



# The Ins and Outs of Prisoner Support

*From the Yule 2001 EF! Journal*

*by the NA Earth Liberation Prisoners Support Network*

Leafing through the Earth First! Journal, most readers have probably seen the Journal page devoted to Earth and animal liberation prisoners. Usually relegated to the nether regions of the magazine, the page contains names, addresses and short descriptions of individuals being held captive by the state for acts of Earth and animal liberation. The question that may be asked is: why does the Journal list political prisoners and why should I do anything more than give a short glance to its contents?

As the EF! and larger ecological defense movements have grown, more militant and direct actions have surfaced, particularly in the last 4 years. The introduction of genetically engineered crops, the continued decimation of the last old-growth forests and the expansion of development projects into the last wild places have spawned a new generation of warriors more likely to physically destroy the oppositions' machines and buildings than hold signs or petition the government for change. The proliferation of actions taken against industry (claimed by the Earth Liberation Front, Animal Liberation Front or unclaimed) is enough to warm the heart especially after the reactionary stances taken by many radicals post September 11th. As we have seen in the Pacific Northwest (US), every action (or dozen) has a separate and equal reaction in this case the reaction of the state to acts of sabotage against industry. The state apparatus is expanding rapidly in order to hunt down "terrorists" wherever they rear their head (this time it's the Green Scare). The FBI/ATF budget is expanding exponentially and we have to come to terms with the fact that this war being fought against industry will yield prisoners of war. It would behoove us to do more than just cheer when we hear of wild horses being freed by elves in the night, McDonald's burning down, or a beheaded Columbus statue.



The point is simple: no serious political struggle which has any chance of attaining revolutionary potential can afford to ignore its prisoners. To turn our collective backs on prisoners is to ensure that our movement will stay small, relatively mild and will never be a threat to biocidal industry. Who would want to take action if they knew their support would be minimal (or behind closed doors) if they got nicked?

In this article I want to give some ideas on the many ways we can support the prisoners that are in the Journal prisoner page as well as some guidelines for doing support work. Here is just a few of the most accessible ways that you can assist those being held captive by the state:

## Corresponding with prisoners

Letters quite simply help bridge the gap between the "inside" and "outside" worlds. They help inform the prisoner of what is going on in their movements, the world and even their community. The penal system exerts a massive strain on prisoners to break ties with the outside world. Communicating with prisoners helps work against that strain and ensures that they do not feel completely isolated. Often times, people say "what would I write to someone in prison? I wouldn't know what to say." It's simple. Remember: they are human. They have needs and interests like anyone on the outside. Share something about your life with them. Ask about what life is like on the inside and what they plan to do when they get out. Offer some assistance. An unexpected letter from a supporter can be a welcome break from the daily monotony of prison life. Don't feel intimidated by the person you are writing—they are not a superhero; just someone that had the courage to act for what they believe in.

Consistency is paramount when communicating with prisoners. Commit to writing to one prisoner and do it well. They will appreciate it more than a short hastily written letter. The examples of people attempting valiantly to keep up with writing to 10 prisoners and then having to scale down to 1 or 2 are innumerable. Consistent support is always better than short-lived "flash in the pan" support. That being said, people should not feel the responsibility to commit to writing to prisoners for the length of their sentence. Prisoners will generally appreciate a letter with some kind thoughts and may not even have the time to keep a steady correspondence with everyone who writes them.

Keep in mind that there is a very good chance that what you write will be read by any or all of the above: prison guards, wardens, other prisoners, FBI, CSIS (Canada), the new Office of Homeland security (US cabinet position) ... You should assume that what you write can be used against the prisoner, yourself and your community so be careful and have discretion.

Many prisoners are targeted by prisoncrats for being political, receiving large amounts of mail or for the “subversive” content of the mail they receive. It is important to know the guidelines concerning prisoner mail. First, ask the prisoner what they may or may not receive. Usually, they have a fairly good idea of what is appropriate to send and what will not make it past the censors. Prisons are known for having strict regulations for what a prisoner can receive e.g. new books only, first-class mail only. If that does not work, write to the warden of the prison requesting a list of regulations. A tool commonly used to disrupt prisoner support is the “Mail Violation Notice.” They can (and sometimes do) reject mail for any reason they want including the presence of a “circle A” on a zine or the use of the word “Anarchy” in a letter.. Don’t be discouraged by these tricks-either file an appeal (which you have little chance of winning), modify the package to appease them (easiest and most likely to work), or send it again (hoping a different mail censor sees it). Whatever you do, do not give up and allow them to further alienate the person inside.

## **Fundraising**

If there is one thing that all prisoners and those on trial need, it is a large amount of financial assistance. Legal fees are exorbitant and many political individuals will not receive any reduction in these fees based on their principles or the action they took. Prisoners often need assistance with setting up legal defense funds that will be maintained by trustworthy individuals that are prepared to make hard choices with little money. Because of their imprisonment, the act of setting up a bank account is impossible. It is important to set up a way for people in the movement to help out financially. Ideally, these accounts would exist already in cases of emergencies, but that is rarely the case. Setting up a bank account, a PO Box for people to send checks to and a person/name who will act as a recipient of those checks is key and should be a high priority. The prisoner needs to be fully informed and in control of the money that is raised on their behalf. Never underestimate the generosity and solidarity of our movement and your own community. Thousands of dollars have been raised for people facing imprisonment from small benefit shows and zine/T-shirt sales.

Keep in mind that prisoners are always in the position of having to buy from the incredibly expensive (and monopolistic) prison commissary which is the only place a prisoner may buy envelopes, stamps and even soy milk. A consistent flow of funds into their books is one of those things that makes prison life bearable. A contribution of as little as \$10 a week can cover a prisoners’ postage fees thus allowing them to communicate with supporters and friends on the outside. Often times, funds can be sent directly to the prison and deposited into the prisoner’s account.

## **Solidarity Actions**

Many people will feel drawn not to writing letters or raising funds but to continuing the struggle that the prisoners are fighting. Some call this concept revolutionary solidarity-an action committed in solidarity with a prisoner that may or may not focus on a similar target. When anarchist prisoner Nikos Maziotis was sentenced to 15 years for the attempted bombing of the Greek Ministry of Development, others committed multitudes of actions in solidarity with him. Maziotis’ sentence was reduced from 15 to 5 years on appeal partially because of the threat of continued attack should Maziotis be held captive any longer. (He ended up serving 3.5 years and was released last August!). Similarly, when Rod Coronado was sentenced for action relating to the ALF’s Operation Bite Back, many felt that his jailing would stifle actions taken for animal and Earth liberation. The ALF responded with a series of fur farm liberations throughout the Midwest US dedicating them to him. Former prisoners have commented that the only thing that freed them was the pressure on the streets and the threats of continued action. Former Black Panther and Political Prisoner had this to say about this premise: “But I learned that the movement in the streets determines whether you languish in prison or are released, not the State. If it becomes strong enough it can compel a favorable outcome, even if the officials swear that you will be executed or die in prison.”

Here comes the tricky part: there really is no way to know the effect that an action or a communiqué can have on a prisoner’s case. For example, three days prior to Jeffrey Luer’s (Free’s) trial last spring, 36 SUV’s were torched at the same car dealership that Free and co-defendant Craig Marshall (Crittter) took action against a year prior. The communiqué that came out stated that the action was done in solidarity with Free and Crittter and against their unjust imprisonment. There is no way of knowing the impact of this statement prior to Free’s trial but these are Free’s observations (reprinted from the Break the Chains newsletter #9):

“My critique is this: this act would have been just as significant and more beneficial to me if my name was not mentioned in the communiqué. That said, I would like to extend my revolutionary thanks to those persons unknown. To those responsible for these actions, please know my gratitude”.

This is not meant to be a criticism of this action just a reminder to people that we all need to proceed with caution when it is other people’s freedom and well being that we are dealing with.

## **Work on projects that are prisoner-directed**

The most successful prisoner support projects are those that are conceived of and directed by the prisoners themselves. Two examples of such projects are the Victory Gardens Project in Maine (started by NY3 political prisoners) and the Anarchist

Prisoner Legal Aid Network (APLAN- started by anarchist prisoner Rob Thaxton). They are successful and long-term because the prisoners themselves are leading them and working in conjunction with outside support to achieve their aims. Another prisoner directed project is the publishing of prisoners writings and artwork in 'zines. This could include receiving the letters, typing, copying, distribution and fundraising. It's a big task but many examples exist of excellent prisoner directed zines like Strong Hearts (done by Rod Coronado while imprisoned) and the South Chicago ABC group which publishes tons of prisoner zines.

## Some Prisoner Support Guidelines

*Support prisoners and people facing imprisonment (and their choices) unconditionally*

Barring a major transgression such as snitching on a co-defendant or other individuals, those facing heavy sentences for actions need to be fully supported and without the "carrot and stick" approach that some prisoner supporters use. For example, lets say that a well-known activist gets busted for a number of different actions and is approached by supporters who want to help with her legal situation. When the activist decides that she knows what is best for herself and wants to take a plea bargain, she is attacked as not being worthy of support or righteous enough. This dynamic, albeit exaggerated (not by much), has played itself out before between people being held in jail and others who claim to want to lend assistance. People need assistance about legal options but do not need to be told what to do nor how revolutionary their choice is. When it comes down to it, they have to deal with being in a cage, not you.

*Drop your lifestyle issues*

One thing we need to get past regarding supporting prisoners is the focus on issues relating to the prisoner's lifestyle whether before their arrest, on the run or while in jail. For example, the ALF Support Group has a policy of only recognizing a prisoner as an Animal Liberation Front member/prisoner if they fulfill clause #3-"one must be vegan or vegetarian." This archaic clause (written presumably by the people who started the ALF in England) creates a really absurd basis of support. What if a person eats meat but decides that they are going to destroy 12 vivisection labs, liberate 5,000 mink, spike a few timber sales and sab hunts? If they get nicked, who will be lifestylist enough to tell them "No, sorry. You are most definitely NOT a member of the ALF and will not receive ALF prisoner support. Please refer to clause 3". This sounds exaggerated like other examples previously used but it really isn't too far from an actual example and could happen again in the future. If we are going to enter into relationships with prisoners, we need to understand that they are not going to be carbon copies of ourselves. They will eat things we don't like, do things we don't like and we may even have enough time sitting around to endlessly dissect the merits of their action. Those items are irrelevant when it comes to providing principled and strong support for prisoners. On that note, I would strongly suggest that the ALF support group (in every country it exists in) drop that clause as a basis of their support.



For more information on how to support Earth and animal liberation prisoners, for a copy of our newsletter, Spirit of Freedom, or if you know about a Earth and Animal liberation prisoner that needs help, contact us at:

North American Earth Liberation Prisoners Support Network  
 P.O. Box 11331  
 Eugene, OR 97440  
 naelpsn@tao.ca  
<http://www.spiritoffreedom.org.uk>

# Supporting Prisoners: Some Practical Suggestions

by *Nightcrawlers ABC*

[*Republished from "Anarchist Black Cross Information and Resources, Second Edition," December 1993, by Nightcrawlers ABC (now disbanded)*]

In supporting prisoners, we try to achieve several things. These people are locked in cages and are often kept in control units where they spend most of their time in isolation. We must not allow the state to cut them off from the outside, from the continuing struggle. We keep prisoners informed about and involved in the struggles going on through correspondence and visits. This also does a lot to help lessen their isolation. Besides this, through dialogue you can learn a lot from the prisoner. Supporting prisoners also involves providing them with material aid, such as food packages, clothing, stamps, etc. The prison system exploits the prisoners and makes it difficult for them to get decent food and other things that seem basic to us. We must also act to help defend them against the brutality of the prison officials. When they are harassed we must be prepared to harass back, to let the prison administration know that there are people watching. These are the goals we have in mind when we do prisoner support work.

These guidelines were written with the idea of making it easier to get around the maze of the prison bureaucracy and preparing people for some of the obstacles that we've encountered. A lot of them are very basic but can make your work much easier.

Of course, all of the issues that will come up are not covered here, this is simply what we have learned in the time we have been doing support work. Supporting comrades who have been locked up can be difficult. You should find out about groups in your area that have experience with this kind of work and ask for help if you need it. People are generally very willing to help.

## Research

People should know as much as possible about prisoners they are considering supporting. But, prisoners may not always be able to speak freely about activities they have been involved in, or cases that may still be pending.

- Ask them for documents regarding their case.
- Talk to people who have supported them or worked with them in the past.
- Ask other prisoners about them.
- Talk to prisoner support groups about the way that they do research.

## Correspondence

- Date all of your letters.
- Make a note in the letter of all enclosures (stamps, photocopies, etc) so that the prisoner can make sure they all make it through.
- If the prisoner tells you that anything was not received, write a letter appealing the confiscation, usually to the warden.
- Send postage stamps to help cover the costs of correspondence. [*Note: some prisoners cannot receive stamps and require a money order instead to cover the stamps. Check the prison's regulations first.*]
- Either send promptly to the prisoner, or let the prisoner know that you can't send, any items requested.
- Note if you receive a letter later than you should have.

## Visits

- Check with the prisoner beforehand about the date.
- Know the visiting rules and regulations (write to or call the prison for a written list of regulations or ask the prisoner for one), dress code and acceptable forms of ID are two main considerations.
- Be on time.

## Items Sent Into the Prison

- Find out what the prisoner wants/likes.
- Know the prison's regulations (get a written copy) about what is allowed in and how much.
- Help the prisoner find out what kinds of things are available to them for free (several publications are, for example).

## In General

- Be consistent.
- Know as much as you can about the prison regulations.
- Know that prison workers will arbitrarily lie to you.
- Learn from the prisoner, who knows a lot about the prison bureaucracy.
- Be clear with the prisoner about what you can and are willing to do.
- Be open and direct with the prisoner about any concerns you have.
- Be aware that all correspondence and interactions that you have with the prisoner are monitored by prison officials, or that you may attract attention from other state agencies.
- Do not pass on correspondence or packages unless you are fully aware of the contents.
- Know the phone numbers and addresses of the prison administrators so you can harass them about problems (when mail isn't received, when the prisoner is harassed).
- Respond quickly to any situations that arise.
- Discuss with the prisoner any actions that you take; the prisoner will often know the best way to respond, and should be involved anyway.

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a saint. No one expects anyone to be either. Being an anarchist does not mean you're above criticism by your comrades either, and puts an even greater responsibility on you to be a more principled person. These are critiques of behavior and are intended to make us all better comrades.

**Listen.** Some have observed the tendency of men to interrupt, write off, ignore or not take seriously a woman's speaking when it is spontaneous, or if it isn't composed/annotated and thus somehow more of merit or "political." Being rehearsed or official sounding, in truth, can sometimes stifle our interactions. It is also incredibly disrespectful to ignore, not recognize the merit of or treat as lesser the opinion of any person, especially women (who, whether it's understood or not, take more risks in being involved in political movements).

**Retreat.** After seeing consistent patterns of sexist and patriarchal behavior, it's not uncommon to see women and others leave a group dominated by a few men. It is not the responsibility of women to point out sexist behavior! Women have lives, desires, hopes and ideals -- it is not up to them to get into heated discussions educating men with backward behavior. As one essay\* put it "Men need to stop feeling self-righteous and defensive (classic reactions to even a third-person comment about gender inequity) and look honestly at their ways."

*A few strategies to start the process of challenging sexism*  
 [Gumby] One argument I hear most often from men who react defensively to discussion of gender inequity is the "Women need to stop being victims and speak out, take leadership roles, initiate discussions themselves, etc." argument. This assertion assumes that the playing field is level, not tilted precariously to the side of men through millennia of social conditioning in patriarchal society. As a woman who is strong and outspoken, I have noticed in meetings that I can drown out others, men and women alike, who are of quieter, more thoughtful, more recessive demeanors. One good method to allow room for quieter folks to step into conversations is to agree on a 'deep breath' between speakers. Often, dominant people are more busy formulating a response to a previous idea instead of actively listening. Stopping between speakers, taking a collective time out/deep breath, and waiting a moment, can open up a 'hole' in the conversation for the quiet

thinkers in the group to step in. After someone finishes a thought, get into the habit of looking at faces around the room. You'll notice, if you're mindful, that some peoples' body language will indicate that they've got something to say. Perhaps they're leaning forward, opening and shutting their mouths, twiddling their thumbs. A gentle suggestion, "Did you have something to say?" might make someone who's been quiet feel comfortable enough to speak. Gender-role conditioning has taught men to be 'assertive, direct, and good at debate (the Top Dawg Syndrome)' while these same qualities in women are viewed as 'bitchiness'. We need to deconstruct these limiting roles. This means, for some, abdicating power and letting go of the need to be 'right' or to 'have the last word.'

Also, a 'homework assignment' of books to read would be good. Anything by bell hooks, especially "Feminist Theory: from margin to center" and "Ain't I a Woman: black women and feminism." Susan Faludi's "Backlash" Also, suggesting that men have anti-patriarchy discussion/accountability groups. It's working well here!

[Ernesto] In "mixed" (female/male) groups, I think accountability of men to women's voices and inclusion is necessary in every phase of our efforts. Right now, women's voices are marginalized in many sectors and that reflects every time women raise important issues. I've seen situations where women came forward with statements of rape by a man in the movement/scene, where there was more explaining away of the man's actions ("he wouldn't do that" "I'm staying out of this") and blaming women in an underhanded way (citing their lifestyle or career choices) and such must be understood as completely unacceptable.

[Gumby] Also, suggest having reverse-gender roleplays. People (usually men! ;) are totally threatened by role-playing. But starting a meeting with five minutes of the women all talking over each other while the men twiddle their thumbs and try to jump in, can be a good, humorous way to focus the group on the issue of gender inequity which will affect the 'vibe' of the rest of the meeting in a GOOD way!

*\* Bits of this piece came from "What It Is To Be A Girl In An Anarchist Boys' Club," which appeared in the Alphabet Threat zine in the mid-1990s. This article excerpted from "How 'Bout Sharing That Pedestal?: Direct Action Against Sexism."*

# A Few Do's and Don'ts in Correspondence

A few dos and don'ts on writing prisoners whose backgrounds/politics you may not know.

## Dos

**Do use common sense.** Use a "neutral" address, such as a Post Office Box, for correspondence. Do not divulge sensitive personal information (i.e. your home address, phone number, credit card and bank details, people's full names, etc.) to a prisoner, particularly one you have never dealt with before. This is for your security and that of the prisoner. Be aware that authorities often read these letters and sensitive information can get into the wrong hands. Occasionally, prisoners have misused this information as well. Do not send money or honor immediate requests for money.

**Do think ahead.** Research local prison regulations. Learn about the prisoner before writing. Make sure to put a return address on your envelope. When first writing to an incarcerated person make sure you ask them specifically what the rules are for writing letters, and make a careful note of them. No one under eighteen years of age should be writing a prisoner -- again, this is for the prisoner's security as well as the writer's.

**Do be forward and clear in your letter as well as your intentions.** Say who you are, and if it's relevant that you're with an organization. Be upfront about your politics and say where you heard about the prisoners and her/his case. If you are interested in starting a pen-pal relationship and that is all, say so. Ask if they would like to correspond and if they'd like to discuss any topics, as well as what topics they don't wish to discuss. Keep your first letter reasonably short and to the point.

**Do be patient.** Prisoners may not write back or may take awhile. They may occasionally sound cynical, angry or disinterested in their words -- keep in mind many "supporters" or people who've written before may have stopped writing them, made promises/lied to them, or they just had a rough day and they're venting that on paper. Responding to an angry letter with more anger is not helpful.

**Do deal with the right channels.** If a prisoner wants you to send a book, ask what channels their institution requires for that, or refer them to a Book-to-Prisoners project near their unit. If a prisoner is getting out in the next few weeks, do not offer your place to stay (no matter how desperate they sound) unless you have corresponded for a significant amount of time and are in contact with both a parole officer and a prison intermediary (e.g. prison chaplain). Even in cases like this, it is far more helpful to a prisoner to help them secure employment and develop a support base (whether that is through her/his church/mosque, family, friends, etc.) than to. Chances are, there's a legal process to be dealt with in cases like this and they need to be followed by both you and the prisoner. However, use your head and don't land in a bad situation or one that will land the prisoner back in jail.

## Don'ts

**Do not make promises.** Many well-meaning people write letters offering support to a prisoner, or make offers for help out of good will. Unfortunately, most never follow through and build false hope in a prisoner. This is not fair to them. If you're writing, don't make promises. Don't offer to do a support campaign if you can't make that time. Don't offer to send items when you can't afford it. Be honest. It's best to start writing and keep it that way, at least until a relationship is established.



**Do not romanticize prisons or prisoners.** Many activists have ideas about who prisoners are, why they're locked up, the system, etc. While it's correct to have political clarity about incarceration and the nature of the criminal justice system, it is not correct to romanticize a prisoner, anything they might be locked up for (especially a "social crime") and their lives. They're people just like you, and have strengths and weaknesses. It is dangerous to assume that anyone (free or jailed) is able to overcome all their personal weaknesses, or be completely truthful, or are not dealing with the stressful situation they're in in negative ways. Some are estranged from their families as a direct result of their own actions. Some may have learned manipulative behaviors over the years. Prisoners are people like you.

**Do not discuss potentially illegal political action with a prisoner.** Again, this is for your security and theirs. Prisoners have and can be implicated for outside action that violates the law and you should be mindful that, if authorities even find such information in the hands of prisoners, prisoners can face added time and harsh treatment.

**Do not attempt to place political judgments on prisoners' experiences.** Some prisoners, out of desperation, write publications to get pen pals and may not agree completely with the views of the paper, but read it for information. Some prisoners have been converted to Christianity or are Muslims. Some have views that may be somewhat backward. Rather than attack a prisoner, it's best to be polite, but firm, if there's something you'd rather not discuss or find objectionable. Do not attack or insult a prisoner because of their religions, preferences or experiences. If the prisoner declares her/himself a white supremacist, you are well within your rights to explain your disagreements, encourage them to reconsider their views and discontinue the relationship; please be aware that several white supremacist gangs have ties to the outside from prison and it is smart not to get into insults or threats against such prisoners. Don't send literature unless requested and be aware you don't have to go with every request.

Good luck!

## Focus: Criticism/Self Criticism & Praise

Criticism and self-criticism (C/SC) is a feedback mechanism to help us constantly improve our work and relationships. In the dominant society, criticism is made within a legalistic framework: certain things are against the rules and if you can prove that someone broke a rule you've won a case and they should be punished (feel bad?). How a person makes you feel doesn't matter; anything more subtle than physical harm doesn't constitute a problem; your needs will be considered if and when they start to affect your performance.

We want to create a place where people can be happy with their work and each other. That means getting away from laying blame. If one person has a problem, that's a collective problem. Everyone to different degrees shares most common problems anyway. The purpose of a criticism is to find the happiest possible resolution to the problem. A problem is a problem when one person says it is. And that's not making accusations, so there's no need to hold back, there's no harm in bringing something up. And we want to be as honest as possible, develop our perception of our own feelings and the dynamics between people; to be good at saying what the real problem is. That means legitimizing such things as "I don't feel like you're concerned about my welfare." or "Such and such a thing you do makes me uncomfortable."

It's incredibly easy to not make criticisms. On the contrary, it takes energy to keep them going on the best road. It's too easy to assume that if someone did something you don't like that they must have bad intentions, and then assume that if you do anything anyone else doesn't like they'll assume it's an honest mistake and bring it up. Our lack of skill in resolving such problems leads us to look for easy answers, and the easiest one is 'they just don't want to listen.' It's essential to realize how difficult this task is, and quit blaming each other when things aren't easy.

### Guides for Making Criticism

- o **Make the criticism at the time** unless you have a good reason to wait. Don't let bad feelings build up.
- o **Don't be legalistic.** Criticize or discuss what really bothers you.
- o **Take responsibility for your feelings** (usually by stating them)
- o **Enter into joint decision making** (i.e., don't dump the problem on them)
- o **Assume they have good reasons** for what they do.
- o **Take the time to formulate the clearest statement you can of the problem.** This is most important for heavy, or fundamental criticisms. Specific incidents tend to be better handled right at the time, with the best off-the-top-of-your-head approach you can come up with.

### Guides for Receiving Criticism

- o **Look for the truth** in what the person is saying.
- o **Try to account** for the person's feelings or perceptions.
- o **You don't have to accept a criticism you don't really think is right.** Don't think you've gotten to the bottom of it when you can say, "I was wrong."
- o **Try not to feel persecuted** or otherwise take the criticism negatively. If you do feel this way, take responsibility for it by stating your feelings and trying to deal with the criticism independently of them.
- o **Understand the criticism** before you decide whether you reject it or not (take responsibility for your feelings usually by stating them).
- o **If you accept the criticism, make it a self-criticism.** Follow through towards change.
- o **If you accept the criticism but don't want to change, say so.**

Excerpted from: <http://groundwork.ucsd.edu/criticism.html>



# Practical Tips for Starting an ABC group

Starting ABC groups is not an easy task. You will no doubt be asked for a lot of things by prisoners, other groups and local supporters. And the last thing you'll want to do is start up, only to shut down six months later, leaving prisoners and others in a lurch. So, think carefully about starting a group. Here are a few pointers to help you go through the process you should go through to get off the ground. Good luck!

1. **Check your schedule.** Ask yourself some questions before you start and make sure you have time to make the efforts.
  - a. **Do I have the self-discipline/commitment to do this?** Be totally honest here. There's nothing wrong with not being the type who writes letters, organizes stuff, visits prisoners, etc. But it'll be a headache for you and people you come in contact with if you start out with a lot of good intentions and don't follow through or drop out of it in six months. It doesn't take a special person to start an ABC group, but it does take some self-discipline occasionally to get things done.
  - b. **Do I have the time?** Lots of folks interested in activism tend to be involved in lots of things. If you want to start an ABC group, do you have the time to follow through on it? How many hours a week can you realistically spend on ABC work? It doesn't have to be lots of time, but if the answer is "none," there might be a small problem! Particularly as letters from prisoners in your region seeking help pour in, it's easy to get overwhelmed. However, remember that if you ever feel like you need help keeping up with letters, you can always ask others in the ABC Network to help you write prisoners or for a hand in anything.
  - c. **Do I understand the issues?** The "tough questions" regarding criminalization are never easy. And there are so many issues that are interrelated. Of course, you can learn as you go along, but make sure you have time to do so.
2. **Pace yourself.** You do not want to overextend yourself in a blaze of glory, only to burn out in six months. Think carefully about how you're going to schedule activism into your daily routine so that it will become a part of your life and not an intrusion. Think realistically about how you're going to fit activism into your life. You may have a full-time job and may have to juggle time with family and friends
3. **Choose issues?** Some activists find it easier to choose one to four issues to focus their efforts around, while doing occasional work on others. Of course, ABC work is anti-prison and aimed at challenging the state, but maybe that's broad to you, or an issue like refugee/immigrant rights, police brutality, poverty, private prisons or women prisoners is more your passion or is relevant to your community. Think about choosing the issues that mean the most to you. Your energy and enthusiasm around topics you have the most interest in will show.
4. **Educate yourself.** Writers like Christian Parenti, Ward Churchill, Angela Davis, Marilyn Buck and many others have written extensively on relevant topics. Learn about the issues and stay informed on current news via the web or papers.
5. **Learn about your area.** Become familiar with the people and facilities in your area. As you compile facts, resources, and other materials, set up a filing system to keep your information organized. Get a list of local media from an area Society for Professional Journalists; you can usually put your name on file there if you're prepared to speak to the media about issues. File important or useful newspaper clippings according to the issues they concern. Keep the names and addresses of good resources for easy reference.



6. **Get a way to contact you.** Get a post office box and a voicemail. These are helpful from a security as well as communications standpoint -- you want people to be able to contact you, of course. Post office boxes run from \$30/year on up, so shop around and be mindful of hours, box accessibility and cost. Can you check mail 24 hours a day or can you only come at certain times and similar questions should be asked. Make sure to put your ABC group on the contact card of the box. Voicemail runs at various rates. If you're okay with having a local number that allows you an extension, [www.onebox.com](http://www.onebox.com) offers free voicemail and covers many cities. An email address is also good, but make sure you can check it weekly!
7. **Get a computer as soon as you can afford it, or ask groups or supporters to donate one.** This should be one of your earliest priorities, because using a computer makes it so easy to get — and stay — organized.
8. **Public or closed?** Some ABC groups prefer to be closed membership groups of one to four members, while others prefer to do public outreach, meetings, etc. Choose the one that works for you. If you do public meetings, try not to be too discouraged if the gatherings are small; this happens! If you are closed, consider making sure others learn how the group runs so, if you move, someone is there to continue on.
9. **Connect!** If you find basic agreement with ideas put forward in the New Draft Proposal, and you would like to affiliate yourself as an individual, an existing or new Anarchist Black Cross collective or existing formation/organization, please drop an email to [abc-net@anarchistblackcross.org](mailto:abc-net@anarchistblackcross.org) with a little about yourself/group, current activities (and if you'd like those listed online), whether you want to be listed online or printed materials as part of the network and a way other collectives can contact you. If there is already an affiliated group in your city, you are welcome to start another affiliate or get in touch with the existing affiliate. ABC Network affiliation is consensus-based. If there are concerns about a particular group affiliating, those will/should be discussed. Note the ABC Network is intended to connect autonomous (i.e. non-federated) ABC groups and other autonomous groups, organizers and supporters. This is because there has been no expressly stated network uniting autonomous anti-statist, anti-prison efforts for some time
10. **Get active locally.** This is a good way to inform people about issues. Here are a few ideas that ABCs have tried over the years.
  - o **Political film showings.** A biweekly or monthly film showing can be done anyplace there's a TV and VCR and films can be theatrical (i.e. In The Name of the Father) or documentaries. (from Independent Media Center films to those from AK Press to Cascadia Media Collective to even a bookseller). Some good films that can be purchased online or swapped with another ABC: *Passin' It On*, speeches by Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Zapatista!*, *US Off the Planet: An Evening in Eugene with Ward Churchill and Chellis Glendinning*, *A Year In The Streets*, *The FBI's War on Black America* and *Slam!* You'd be amazed how well these can go. Films should always be free, but accept donations by all means. A good fundraiser! You can also team up with other local groups (thereby doubling your promotional help) to use these as joint fundraisers.
  - o **Poetry Not Prisons.** Gather up some local poets and musicians for verse on creating a better world.
  - o **Benefit shows.** A good opportunity to educate and entertain.
  - o **Letterwriting Party.** Invite people out for a night of music, coffee and writing letters for emergency actions.
  - o **Teach-In.** Invite a speaker to come address your group on a given issue.
  - o **Build a common front.** Groups like Food Not Bombs, Anti-Racist Action and other street level groups are addressing symptoms of criminalization. Where can you unite? Network and get connected.
  - o **Reading groups.** Pick pamphlets to read with others and discuss how they apply to your work.
  - o **Protests.** For March 15's international day against police brutality, Prison Reform Unity Day or other special date. Make it a festival or a music benefit!
  - o **Support other work locally.** Can your ABC group unite with an area grassroots anti-poverty organization? Or a prisoners' families support group? Or an indigenous/Third World solidarity group? How can your group support and ally with that effort?



## Items

All of these items are needed by prisoner support groups. You should stock up when possible.

- o office supplies (pens, envelopes, pads)
- o computers
- o postage
- o photocopiers
- o free copies
- o translation skills (Spanish, English, German, Castellán, Italian, Mandarin and others)
- o people to organize benefit shows, and bands to play
- o artists to create graphics
- o skills contributions (websites, postering, etc.)

# International ABC, Prisoner Support, Anti-Prison and Revolutionary Contacts

## Europe

Antiprison  
(Europe)  
antiprison@anarchistblackcross.org

ABC Denmark  
c/o Peter Bach  
Strandvejen 93  
Slagelse, Denmark  
DK-4200

Anarchist Black Cross/ASH  
Box 4081  
10262 Stockholm  
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abc-stockholm@autonom.zzn.com

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Brighton  
BN1 4ZQ  
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<http://www.brightonabc.org.uk>

ABC Ghent  
(don't put ABC on envelope)  
PB 40  
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Ghent 2, Belgium  
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[http://www.geocities.com/abc\\_gent](http://www.geocities.com/abc_gent)

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Germany

ABC/CLASH (Berlin)  
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*South America*

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Santos, Brazil

ABC Brazil  
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Rio De Janeiro, Brazil

ABC / São Paulo  
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EIC 9M9  
Canada

*Mexico*

ABC/Cruz Negra Anarquista  
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c/o Miguel Angel Cortes O.  
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Houston ABC  
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website: www.houstonabc.org  
houstonabc2@hotmail.com

Claustrophobia ABC  
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claustro@charm.net

South Chicago ABC Zine Distro.  
P.O. Box 721  
Homewood, IL 60430

*Other Prisoner Support  
and Anti-Prison Groups*

Anarchist Prisoners  
Legal Aid Network  
818 SW 3rd Ave  
PMB 354;  
Portland, OR 97204, USA  
aplan@tao.ca

The Jericho Movement  
P.O. Box 650  
New York, NY 10009, USA  
website:  
www.thejerichomovement.com/

North American Earth Liberation  
Prisoners Support Network  
P.O. Box 11331  
Eugene, OR 97440, USA  
naelpsn@tao.ca  
www.spiritoffreedom.org.uk

Animal Liberation Front  
Support Group  
Box 69597  
5845 Yonge St.  
Willowdale, Ontario, M2M 4K3,  
Canada

Vegan Prisoners Support Group  
P.O. Box 194  
Enfield, Middx  
EN1 3HD, England

Crossroad Support Network  
3420 W. 63rd St.  
Chicago, IL 60629, USA  
(773) 737-8679  
crsn@aol.com  
website:  
http://www.afrikan.net/crossroad/

The MOVE Organization  
P.O. Box 19709  
Philadelphia, PA 19143, USA  
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onamovellja@aol.com  
website: http://www.moveorg.net/

Chicano Mexicano Prison Project  
P.O. Box 620095  
San Diego, CA 92162, USA  
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http://burn.ucsd.edu/~udb/cmpp/

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free prisoner subs