

SOCIAL PRISONERS +

The Anarchist Black Cross started life around 1900 in Tsarist Russia as the 'Anarchist Red Cross' (eventually changing its name to avoid confusion with the other Red Cross) organising aid for anarchist political prisoners and deportees and, during the 1917 Revolution, helping organise defence of the Makhnovist resistance in Ukraine. Following the Bolshevik takeover, the ABC was eventually driven from Russia but continued to organise support for imprisoned Russian anarchists from Berlin. In the 30's ABC groups all but disappeared but the name was eventually resurrected in London in 1967 for a group providing aid for prisoners of the Spanish resistance under Franco. Groups sprang up across Europe, USA and Australia. Since then ABC groups have continued to support anarchists and other class struggle prisoners across the world.

WHY SUPPORT SOCIAL PRISONERS? ~~~~~

The primary role of ABC groups has been, and always will be, the support of anarchist prisoners and their families; but by the very nature of our anarchist politics and because of the level of modern day social struggle in the UK, we have also supported fellow class struggle prisoners. Unfortunately, certain elements within the anarchist movement, often with little or no involvement in prisoner support work, have tended to argue that the role of ABC groups should be solely that envisaged in the 1900 version of the ARC, namely supporting 'our' prisoners (anarchist 'POWs') only. All other prisoners are 'social prisoners' i.e. non-political and therefore not worthy of our support.



However, there are both strong practical and ideological reasons why ABC groups should, and in fact do, act in solidarity with these so-called 'social prisoners'. Particularly in Britain, where there is one simple unavoidable truth - anarchist prisoners are few and far between.

This has practical consequences far beyond ABC groups not having 'home' prisoners from the 'anarchist movement' to support. This is especially true for anarchists who have to spend any length of time in prison and who wish to continue to resist the system in anything other than glorious isolation. One has to find comrades in struggle where one can, from amongst political and social prisoners alike. Just ask the last long-term anarchist prisoner Mark Barnsley.

LET'S BE PRACTICAL =====

It is an obvious truth that the level of social struggle in our prisons mirrors that in the rest of society. In the 70's and 80's social struggle in Britain was particularly vigorous and in the jails prisoners were fighting back against a brutal prison regime that in many ways had changed little since Victorian times. This brutality had radicalised many 'social prisoners' who chose to fight back against that regime, demanding better conditions and/or freedom. Then, when their protests went unheeded, they rioted and on occasion simply destroyed the prison.



Ultimately, these prisoners were engaged in class struggle and the government understood this, so following the 1990 Strangeways Prison rebellion, they sought to take back control of the prison system by introducing their own version of 'class struggle'. With the new Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme (a glorified behaviour modification programme) the Prison Service sought to put prisoners in competition with each other for a limited number of paid prison jobs and other 'rewards' for good behaviour. Since then this 'divide and rule' policy (together with the advent of piss testing and heroin) has effectively destroyed class solidarity within today's prisons in Britain.

MUTUAL AID & SOLIDARITY ++++++

Beyond mere expediency, as anarchists we also have ideological reasons for supporting social prisoners. The most basic of these are solidarity and mutual aid. Prison is the major weapon deployed by the ruling class against the working class in order to defend their positions of privilege and they defend those positions of power by co-opting workers (police and screws) to maintain their social order and to protect their property. Even a cursory glance at the statistics shows us that the majority of 'crimes' are those against property rather than against the person. Most 'crimes' are also drug-related and as a consequence it is the socially marginalized that find themselves in prison rather than the privileged, who stand a good chance of remaining free.



As a system of control, prison also functions to isolate the individual from their support networks, and this is especially true of those who rebel against that system of control. Prison rebels and agitators regularly suffer segregation and 'ghosting' (unannounced moves). Anarchists are able to overcome this via the movement at large. Social prisoners who rebel however, do not have this luxury and constant ghosting can sever the links to what is often their only support network - their family and friends. It is therefore essential that when we as a movement have common ground with class struggle social prisoners we show them strong political and practical solidarity.

"As anarchists we chose to stand in solidarity with every self-organised, unmediated, confrontational struggle of the oppressed and exploited against the oppressors and exploiters. We do not need to identify with particular demands, they are not ours to identify with." - Committee of Prisoners of the Greek State, November 2008.

IDENTITY POLITICS? =====

It is not necessary that we as anarchists identify with particular demands, the mere fact that prisoners are willing to take on the system in struggle is enough (for now). If these were workers pursuing workfloor demands thorough wildcat strikes and sabotage, would we be so dismissive? Remember, one victory often begets another and showing up the inherent contradictions of the system is never a bad thing. One particular area where anarchists have been involved in prison struggle is campaigning against compulsory prison labour, not simply because of the exploitation of prisoners but because it is also an intrinsic part of the current system of prison discipline and control.

To continue to argue that we as anarchists should not support social prisoners is to effectively endorse the prison state, to accept the status quo and to say "yes, we'll continue to support the good (i.e. our) prisoners and the rest, the bad/evil social prisoners are not worth our time and effort." Of course we are not saying that anarchists should support 'all' rebellious prisoners. That would be as absurd as those in the 'movement' who applaud riots but choose not to support prison rioters themselves because they are 'criminals' and therefore unworthy of support. We see a clear difference between 'prisoners of property' and those of sexual violence, but of course, the modern prison system does not view these transgressions as so different, both requiring confinement; nor does the system deal with any of these continuing problematic elements of society in any kind of depth, nor in way that is beneficial to our communities.

In fact, this same system produces and maintains 'crime' through class exploitation and patriarchy. The anarchist perspective is libertarian and revolutionary - it is only possible to abolish the cells along with the state and capitalism, and should this happen there will certainly be a strong enough social movement to carry the release and destruction of all the prisons, as it will have countered the greatest foe of us all - property of goods and human beings. Until then we can only hope to keep fighting alongside those 'inside' the prisons.

The bottom line is that we, in the wider struggle against the 'prison state', need to grasp any opportunity to link with prison struggles and currently the only real option are social prisoners in struggle against prison regimes (c.f. the recent hunger strikes in Greece, Italy and Germany). We need to continue supporting radical social prisoners engaged in prison struggles and not just those who specifically adopt the label anarchist and have been formally accepted into the 'fold'.

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