

Towards an Alliance of Flames in Each Indignant Heart

Claustrophobia Collective

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"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 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 every way 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 corolary 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 which 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 which 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 Gulianni'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 spontenaists 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 prisoncrats 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-pedalled 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 obstinance 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 around 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 which 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 which 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 which 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 which 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 effects 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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