

## **Prairie Province Prisoner Support Fund**

### *Free Lands Free Peoples*

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### **WHO WE ARE**

Free Lands Free Peoples is a new Indigenous-led anti-colonial penal abolitionism group based in amiskwaciwâskahikan, Treaty Six and Métis territory. We do popular educational work in the often-hostile socio-political context of Alberta, inside and outside prison. Currently, we are creating a podcast that will assist in consciousness-raising specifically around anti-colonial abolition. Some of our members also facilitate creative writing classes with prisoners. Our work is informed and inspired by the relationships that we continue to build across prison walls. We assert that anti-colonial abolitionism illuminates how the penal system supports settler colonialism and obscures Indigenous justice traditions. We imagine a world beyond “criminal” justice and prisons, grounded in Indigenous sovereignty and just relations.

### **OUR BASES OF UNITY**

- Free Lands, Free Peoples is an Indigenous-led group. We assert that doing anti-colonial penal abolition work is an expression of Indigenous sovereignty. This work recognizes the interconnectedness of police, prisons, the court system, child welfare, and other facets of the penal industrial complex (PIC) in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. It is our responsibility to do this leadership work *and* to be open to the contributions of non-Indigenous comrades.
- We understand the penal system to be a symptom and function of settler colonialism. The same carceral logics and systems that exert oppressive control over Indigenous bodies through the PIC also operate on Indigenous lands under colonialism. Prisons are part of the systematic removal of Indigenous people from our lands.
- We look to work in solidarity with all communities strongly impacted by penal violence and we understand the disproportionate impact of the PIC on many communities, particularly poor and communities of colour, Black and migrant people, women, LGBTQIA2S+ people, and disabled people.

- We believe that communities do and can develop the capacities and tools needed to keep ourselves and one another safe outside of, and in resistance to, the violence of the penal system.
- We work to create and disseminate public, anti-colonial educational resources about the penal system in Edmonton, the prairie provinces, and so-called Canada. We work to build solidarity between incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and non-incarcerated people in our communities. We work to build connections with people and groups doing Indigenous justice, restorative justice, and transformative justice organizing.

## **PRAIRIE PROVINCE PRISONER SUPPORT FUNDRAISER**

From May to October, we crowdfunded and provided \$250 stipends to recently released and still incarcerated prisoners in the prairie provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba). Given the high cost of canteen items and phone calls for people inside, along with the lack of structural and financial support for those recently released, \$250 is just a drop in the bucket in terms of the levels of support that people need. However, we hope that this money can provide a bit of relief by supporting anything from food, clothing, transportation, phone minutes, medication, rent/shelter, and more. The application was designed to lower barriers (as much as we can under quarantine) to receive the funds and stipends are being provided on a first come, first served basis. Our initial funding goal of \$10,000 allowed us to fill 38 stipend requests. We since expanded this goal and raised over \$48,000 that allowed us to provide over 190 stipends.<sup>2</sup>

## **WHY WE DID THE FUNDRAISER**

Raising funds for stipends was not intended to be our original work. However, with the onset of COVID-19 social distancing and quarantine practices, we saw a need and an opportunity both to do some consciousness-raising work around prairie prison abolitionism, as well as materially support incarcerated and recently released prisoners. As a group led by Indigenous women, we recognize our responsibility to be in good relation with all of our kin, especially during times of crisis. State responses to COVID-19 have

increased and thrown into stark relief the intensifying systemic violences of incarceration, policing, poverty, environmental racism, and other violations. We see the redistribution of resources to our kin oppressed by the penal system as crucial to countering – even in a small way – penal and pandemic logics of disposability and isolationism.

Taking up this fundraising work has also given us the opportunity to start building relationships with other individuals and organizations doing abolition work across the prairies and beyond, including Bar None, Prison Libraries Committee in Winnipeg, and the Abolition Coalition, an organizing collective with members across so-called Canada. Our fundraiser was based very closely on the model used by the Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project and Criminalization and Punishment Education Project, who generously allowed us to use and modify their GoFundMe and application templates.<sup>1</sup> Forming these connections has already led to generative scheming and solidarity-building among abolitionists in the prairies, an environment in which abolitionism is rarely discussed or considered as an achievable, or even desirable, goal. Much of the abolition conversation and work is happening in the east and west ends of the country. There is less consciousness about abolition in the prairies, in spite (and perhaps because) of the huge prison population and the hyper-incarceration of Indigenous people in the system.

As prairie abolitionists, we assert that it is important to work from our local context in recognition of the specifics of carceral systems and their histories on the prairies. Shamelessly racist policies being enacted across the prairie provinces that have already been serving to deepen existing inequalities and further normalize the criminalization of Indigenous people are intensifying the instability and vulnerability of those targeted by penal repression.<sup>3</sup> While some provinces are releasing a limited number of people from provincial institutions, in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, as of May 2020 there were approximately 33% fewer people in provincial jails (Ling, 2020). As such, there is an increased need for supports for people being released, who have less access than ever to the basics of dignified living (e.g. food, clothing, transportation, hygiene products, shelter, medication, etc.). In addition, people who remain trapped inside prisons are in need of increased access to hygiene products, phone money, and stamps to stay in touch with relatives, especially as institutions have eliminated visits during COVID-19.

Along with providing resources to people oppressed by the penal system, this fundraiser has been an opportunity to build solidarity and connections

with people in the prairies, as well as raise consciousness about these issues. This fundraiser has been an opportunity to think and dream of the future of abolitionism and collective abolition organizing on the prairies, not just now in the time of COVID-19, but beyond. #FreePrairiePrisoners

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See <https://gf.me/u/x36uav>.
- <sup>2</sup> See <https://www.gofundme.com/f/prairie-province-prisoner-support-fund>
- <sup>3</sup> One example of such racist policies is police street checks (also known as “carding”), a clear vehicle for racial profiling and criminalization (see, for example, Mohamed, 2020). Another example is the recent passing of Bill 1, the *Critical Infrastructure Defence Act*, which prohibits protests in Alberta that involve so-called “essential infrastructure”, such as pipelines, rail lines, or roadways (Koshan *et al.*, 2020). A final example is the policy prohibiting prisoners in Saskatchewan from sending letters to each other across institutions (Baxter, 2016), which contributes to the isolation and fracturing of relationships amongst criminalized people.

## REFERENCES

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