

ORIGINS

The Winnipeg Anarchist Black Cross is one of many autonomous chapters of Anarchist Black Crosses (ABC) that exist around the world. The ABC started in the first decade of the 20th century to support anarchist Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War being detained and tortured after a failed revolution attempt in Tsarist Russia. It formed after a break with the already-existing Red Cross, which in many prisons was refusing to give support to anarchist prisoners, despite the overwhelming amount of donations and help it received from anarchists on the outside. Within a couple of years, ABC chapters had opened up in London and New York. Over time, the ABC has come to have a presence in all corners of the globe.

The Winnipeg ABC has gone through a couple of incarnations since the 1990's. The Winnipeg ABC started as a support group of the Anarchist Black Cross Federation (ABCF, more on that later) around 1996. The first incarnation of Winnipeg ABC group ceased to function around 2001. Several years later, a new ABC chapter was created which chose not to federate with the ABCF and organized consistently until 2010. Most recently in late 2013, a new chapter is just evolving. These different incarnations were not ideological splits, but rather the group stopping and starting again with new waves of energy and interest.

PHILOSOPHY

ABC fundamentally works towards prison abolition, and sees as inherent in this goal the necessity to also challenge the state and capitalism, recognizing that none can exist without the presence of the others. Within our Canadian and prairie context we also seek to challenge colonialism and the racism inherent in our justice system. In Canada, visible minorities, especially Indigenous people, are way vastly represented. However, Manitoba is significantly worse than the national average, where Indigenous people make up 11 percent of the population but a staggering 70 percent of the prison population (Comack, 2008). In this sense, we recognize that prisons are the more subtle way of continuing the cultural genocide that has been taking place here since European settlement began.

WHAT WE DO

Programs that the Winnipeg ABC has put on vary depending on the amount of people and energy involved at the time. Holding monthly “Political Prisoner Letter Writing Nights” are a staple of most chapters as well as doing documentary screenings, books to prisoner programs, a “Running Down The Walls” annual fundraising run (which spurred the Run for Rights fundraiser that now takes place annually in Winnipeg), supporting the ABCF’s Warchest program, which delivers much-needed funds to political prisoners, and organizing international conferences, such as the three-day “Doing Time: Exploring the Politics of Imprisonment”, which was put on in 2000 (and co-organized along with an editor of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, Bob Gaucher) in part at the University of Winnipeg. Directly helping out on the front lines of blockades or other actions, fundraising brunches, and distribution of information through print and Internet are also activities that ABC has regularly participated in. All chapters have either helped, or taken a lead in organizing around the issue of police brutality, seeing it as deeply intertwined with prisoner solidarity organizing. We have also coordinated with other prisoner support groups, like Elizabeth Fry Society, initiating and helping implement the Reading Stories project, where ABC and Elizabeth Fry volunteers recorded insiders reading stories for their children and distributed the audio recordings to the families of the insider. Winnipeg’s ABC is no longer involved, but Elizabeth Fry Society is continuing this project.

WHO IS DEFINED AS A ‘POLITICAL PRISONER’?

Due to the autonomous nature of individual chapters, who it is that receives support tends to vary. Some chapters cast a broad net and work with anyone who wants to work with them. Other groups, like those under the banner of the ABCF, adhere to a more strict definition of ‘Political Prisoner’ and will only offer (or prioritize) support to those who are being imprisoned for a conscious social action or participation in progressive or revolutionary movements. According to the New York ABC, there are currently almost 100 prisoners who fit this description in the United States alone. These range from Black Panthers who have been imprisoned since the early 1970’s, members of the Earth & Animal Liberation Fronts, hackers and information leakers, Grand Jury resisters, war resisters, and many more.

POLITICAL PRISONERS IN CANADA

Contemporary examples of political prisoners in Canada include the many people who were convicted and served time for charges in relation to the 2010 G20 Summit in Toronto. Only in December 2013 were the last two people convicted in G20-related offences released on parole. ABC organizing here also included support for Indigenous land defence struggles in Gustafsen Lake, Tyendinaga and Elsibogtog. Winnipeg ABC advocated on behalf of Gustafsen Lake defenders to have them added to the ABCF's Warchest program, collected items needed by the folks protecting the quarry in Tyendinaga and delivered the materials to them, as well as organizing speaking events, information sharing, and fundraisers for the protectors of the land. There are plans to arrange a fundraising brunch for the protectors of the land in Elsipogtog in the coming months.

Other struggles in Canada that do not fall under the 'Political Prisoner' definition, but that still deserve our support are those involved in the Federal Prison Strike that took place in the Fall of 2013, where federal prisoners across the country went off work in protest of a legislated 30 percent pay cut to their already meagre wages. There has also been a lot of awareness raised recently around the detention of migrants at the Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay, Ontario where people are being held, some for up to seven years, and the only crime many have committed was not being born in Canada.

CONTACT US

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REFERENCE

Comack, Elizabeth (2008) *Out There/In Here: Masculinity, Violence and Prisoning*, Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.