

PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

Why We Do What We Do *Brighton Anarchist Black Cross*

The Anarchist Black Cross originated in Tsarist Russia to organize aid for political prisoners. In the late 1960s the organization resurfaced in Britain, where it first worked to aid prisoners of the Spanish resistance fighting the dictator Franco's police. Now it has expanded, and groups are found in many countries around the world. We support anarchist and other class struggle prisoners, fund-raise on behalf of prisoners in need of resources for legal cases or otherwise, and organize demonstrations of solidarity with imprisoned anarchists and other prisoners. *Active Solidarity* is our occasional newsletter, with the latest news on prisoners, repression and solidarity. We are also very involved in writing to prisoners. Prison is isolation, so contact with the outside world, letting a prisoner know she or he is not forgotten, helps break this down. Sometimes just a friendly card can boost morale.

Why do we do what we do? We live in a society where a tiny minority own the wealth, the land, run the big companies, and live in luxury on the backs of the working people who produce everything. They try to control our lives and keep us in line by every means possible. If we obey orders, work hard, do not answer back, we can live a reasonable life – until the next recession. We can help our bosses keep others down, like the police or bailiffs do, and get our rewards: power, wealth, security.

But for those of us not willing to work to keep our rulers in luxury or those who try to take back any of the wealth that we have made from the owners, there is the justice system. Strike for a decent wage, steal to stay alive, resist the control and abuse in our lives, or break the bosses' laws in any way and we face police, courts, prison. Prison is the bottom line in control – their ultimate weapon.

Prison means isolation, bloody punishments, and divided families. It drives people to despair and suicide. The whole system is built to split us up and isolate people who could set an example to the rest of us. Likewise, if we step outside so-called normal behaviour we may be stigmatised, tranquillised and ultimately imprisoned.

On the outside, fear of prison is built up to stop us from fighting back against the injustice in our lives. Myths are created about prisoners to divide us from them. Most people are inside for trying to survive. In Britain, 94 percent of recorded crimes are against property. About one third are inside

for non-payment of fines or taxes. Thousands are on remand. Many others are guilty of nothing more than being working class, Irish, black, framed by the police. Full prisons give us the impression that the police are ‘cracking down on crime’ and remind us who is in control. Most prisoners are working class people, just like the rest of us. They are not all the mad beasts that the newspapers would have us believe.

The press hype-up stories of ‘violent crime’ to give the existence of prison some justification and to divide us from prisoners. But the fact is that only a tiny percentage of crimes are violent. It is also true that such crime is not prevented by prisons. The system we live in encourages competition, power relationships and self-interest. This system is anti-social. While it remains intact, there will always be violence. Calling the shoplifter, the person on the picket line and the rapist all criminals as if there were no difference between them uses most people’s horror of anti-social violence against the vast majority whose offences are to do with property and resistance.

It should be up to us, in our communities, to deal with anti-social elements in our own ways. We do not need their so-called justice system to control us in the name of fighting crime. You will rarely see the bosses or owners in court – no matter how many laws they might break or deaths they might cause. The laws are in place for their protection. Even if they do end up in court, they often get suspended sentences or let out of prison after a few months. We most often get years.

Just as the class war goes on in our daily lives, it carries on inside prisons too. Many prisoners resist the prison system – in their own cases, individually or collectively. Their battles inspire ours and ours theirs. At any time, any working class person can end up inside. We must support prisoners in their day-to-day fight for better conditions just as we support strikes and all forms of on-going struggle.

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On our website you will find advice on writing to someone in prison:
www.brightonabc.org.uk/writing.html