

Prisoner Solidarity in the UK *Bristol Anarchist Black Cross*

We are Bristol Anarchist Black Cross (Bristol ABC) prisoner support group, from southwest England. We are part of a loosely connected international network¹ in which groups organize autonomously, with their own priorities and local interests. The primary concern of Bristol ABC is prisoner solidarity from an anti-prison and anti-state perspective – we are ideologically opposed to the incarceration and control of humans by an all-powerful state and government that acts primarily in the interests of the ruling class. A social prisoner and prison resister (name withheld), locked up for over 30 years, has this to say on the role of prisoner support: “The most important advantage of real prisoner support is that it assists prisoners in struggle to transcend their isolation and captivity and defeat one of the most central functions of prison – to isolate and dis-empower those held captive”.

The history of the ABC can be traced back to 1872 when political prisoners and their families inside Tsarist Russia were in need of support. In 1905-1906 this support spread internationally when many political agitators fled Russia into exile in Europe and North America.² This activity has continued ever since wherever ABC groups have existed, providing support for both local and international political prisoners, primarily anarchists, because if we did not look after our own nobody else would.

ABC groups in the UK have diversified or branched out from supporting only anarchist prisoners over the last 30 years, however, for three main reasons. Firstly, there have been few anarchist prisoners in the UK. Secondly, there have been a number of other political prisoners in need of support, including Irish Republicans, peace activists, animal rights campaigners, and (particularly in the 1980s) workers engaged in prolonged and bitter industrial disputes. Thirdly, there is a growing awareness that social prisoners who have fought back against the repression of the prison system are part of the larger anti-state struggle.³

From the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, the UK witnessed a high number of prison revolts and disturbances, provoked by inhumane conditions as well as a petty and oppressive prison regime, culminating in the Strangeways (HMP Manchester) uprising of April 1990 and simultaneous disturbances in at least 15 other prisons.⁴ Since then revolts have declined, partly because of the internal redesign of prisons isolating prisoners from one another, and also due to changes in prison management procedures alongside schemes designed to control prisoner behaviours through incentives and punishments.

This has coincided with a general decline in mass struggles in wider society. An exception to this is the on-going struggles in migrant Detention Centres, for which the No Border Network⁵ provides solidarity and support. We have also recently observed an upsurge in activity inspired by the idea of revolutionary solidarity with prisoners and against the prison society on the outside that we hope does not result in another wave of political prisoners.

There has also been a reduction in the number of UK ABC groups and supporters, from around fifteen local groups in 1995 to around three groups today. These numbers are supplemented by supporters of political prisoners engaged in targeted campaigns (i.e. Anti-fascist prisoners). Some of our present activity concentrates on international political prisoners, primarily across Europe, but also North and South America, as well as Russia.⁶ We write letters to these prisoners to break their sense of isolation, publicize their situations, and try to influence their respective governments via communications and occasional pickets. Recently there has been a great deal of support in the UK for the wave of prisoner rebellions and hunger strikes in Greek prisons.⁷ We have some contacts and joint working with ABC groups in these countries, and also distribute the Canadian published *Certain Days* political prisoner calendar in the UK.⁸

On the home front we support a number of political prisoners, as well as a very small number of social prisoners – we only publicly support those prisoners who request such support. We are an open, public group, producing a monthly updated list of prisoners welcoming support⁹ and hold monthly public letter-writing sessions. A jailed animal rights activist (name withheld) stressed the benefits of receiving letters: “The meaning of this communication cannot be underestimated. It keeps you connected to the real world, not sucked into the institutionalisation of prison life! It stimulates and nourishes you mentally, emotionally and even practically. You can establish new friendships and contacts and in a minor way it keeps you in the loop of wider struggles”.

We put on fundraising cafes/film nights, benefit gigs, hold discussions and take stalls to various events. We maintain a blog and try to influence other UK social activists to understand the importance of prisoner solidarity and the prison society surrounding us. We also link to and work alongside other groups such as books to prisoners,¹⁰ opposition to prison expansion, queer prisoner solidarity¹¹ and a campaign against prisoners being used as ultra-cheap slave labour by big business.¹² We do not engage with prison

reform campaigns / groups on the basis that their work is prompted by a liberal morality and merely legitimises the existence of prisons by trying to make them somehow ‘nicer’. We send our love and solidarity to prisoners everywhere.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ There is in fact no formal international co-ordination, just a sharing of aims and news, informal co-operation and solidarity. In Europe, there have been a series of informal gatherings, most recently in the UK in November 2009. In North America there is the ABC Federation, but in reality the majority of North American ABC's are outside the Federation – for a current list see <<http://torontoabc.wordpress.com/links/>>.
- ² A concise history of the ABC is available at <<http://www.abcf.net/la/laabcf.asp?page=la/yelensky>>.
- ³ See “Social Prisoners” by Brighton ABC at <<http://www.brightonabc.org.uk/support.html>>.
- ⁴ Jameson, Nicki and Eric Allison (1995) *Strangeways 1990: A Serious Disturbance*, London: Larkin Publications.
- ⁵ See <<http://noborders.org.uk/>>.
- ⁶ After the decline and break-up of the USSR, anarchism re-emerged in Russia and elsewhere. Repression again followed and branches of the ABC were revived. See <<http://avtonom.org/en/anarchist-black-cross>>.
- ⁷ For the October/November 2008 Greek prisoners mass hungerstrike see <<http://anarcores.blogspot.com/2008/11/update-on-struggle-inside-out-and.html>>. For information on current prisoners and prison struggles see <<http://actforfreedomnow.blogspot.com/>>.
- ⁸ See <<http://www.certaindays.org/>>.
- ⁹ See <<http://bristolabc.wordpress.com/tag/prisoner-list/>>.
- ¹⁰ See <www.havendistribution.org.uk/>.
- ¹¹ See <www.co-re.org/joomla/index.php/bent-bars>.
- ¹² See <www.againstprisonslavery.org/>.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Bristol ABC
c/o Kebele Community Coop
14 Robertson Road
Bristol, BS5 6JY, UK
Email: bristol_abc@riseup.net
Website: <http://bristolabc.wordpress.com>