

Reflections on 4strugglemag and the Importance of Media Projects with Prisoners

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4strugglemag (see www.4strugglemag.org) is a print and online magazine edited by anti-imperialist political prisoner Jaan Karl Laaman, who is currently imprisoned in USP Tucson, Arizona. It is produced, printed and distributed with the help of members of the Toronto Anarchist Black Cross Federation (ABCF). As a collaborative initiative, it is a work-in-progress, constantly evolving and gaining strength as our community grows.

The idea for the project took root in 2002, when Laaman expressed a desire to develop a publication that gave voice to political prisoners – where they could share their insights, not just about “prison issues”, but about current world issues, struggles and events. By early 2004, we had produced our first issue and this year we released Issue 14.

There are more than 100 political prisoners and prisoners of war (PP/POWs) in the United States, coming from the Black Power, Puerto Rican, Asian, indigenous, white anti-imperialist, anarchist and anti-authoritarian movements. Many PP/POWs were active in the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s and have already spent more than 30 years in prison. And now, with the renewed criminalization of dissent, more and more activists, particularly from animal rights and environmental movements, are facing jail time. In order to continue their activism and advocacy for social justice, these prisoners rely on the support of the larger activist community, which benefits in turn from their continued participation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA PROJECTS WITH PRISONERS

You do not have to support political prisoners, advocate for human rights for prisoners overall, or subscribe to a particularly radical ideology in order to recognize the importance of media projects with prisoners. The issue at stake is the right to communicate. Prisons are a form of censorship, silencing the voices of millions.

As Michel Foucault (1977) notes in *Discipline and Punish*, the rise of industrial capitalism in the eighteenth century was accompanied by the rise of the modern prison. Corporal punishment was increasingly replaced by confinement as the object of penal repression moved from the body to the mind. In *Prison Life and Human Worth*, Paul W. Keve (1974) notes that

prisoners are allowed to communicate, but only in a highly regulated and formal exchange of information, which deprives them of a large part of human communication. He suggests that the need for human communication is so basic that it escapes notice, even though it is actually essential to interpersonal relationships and psychological health: “Personality health requirements so basic as these cannot be tampered with except at serious risk. Sooner or later the prisoner must lose his spirit, or he must rebel” (Keve, 1974, p. 42).

When something so fundamental as human touch is almost entirely absent from a person’s life, written communication becomes all the more essential. In this realm, too, there are constant barriers. Even for those who work, prison labor wages are so low that many prisoners have difficulty obtaining stamps, paper and other basic necessities. Censorship of both incoming and outgoing mail is rampant and arbitrary. Even then, because prisoners are usually forbidden from writing to each other or anyone on parole, they are isolated from many of their comrades, sometimes for decades. Phone calls, often costing more than a dollar per minute, are difficult and infrequent for many prisoners, their families and other outside supporters. The situation is even direr for those in solitary confinement or “administrative segregation”, “special housing”, or “control units”, as the most current euphemisms would have it. Political organizing is labeled “gang” or “terrorist” behavior, and many PP/POWs languish in solitary. These labels – “gang member”, “terrorist” and “criminal”, among others – are part of a system of language that seeks to exert control through classification and repression.

The importance of giving PP/POWs and other prisoners a chance to tell their own stories in their own words has long been recognized. In her introduction to *Imprisoned in America*, Cynthia Owen Philip describes how writing in prison can contribute to self-understanding and emotional health. The results are amplified when such efforts are published: “And so I have taken the role of listener and collector in hopes that, through their communications, prisoners might begin to break down the barriers that so falsely exist between them and those who are not in prison” (Philip, 1973, pp. xiv-xv).

Those voices can in turn have a tremendous impact on the individuals and movements in “free” society. Imprisoned civil rights leaders, including Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, wrote some of their most important works from prison. George Jackson (1970) wrote his pivotal

book, *Soledad Brother*, as a series of letters to family, friends and supporters, sparking a passionate movement among prisoners and supporters, and riots when he was killed in 1971.

4STRUGGLEMAG AS A WORK-IN-PROGRESS

4strugglemag editor Jaan Laaman has been an activist since the sixties, when he was involved with groups like the United Steelworkers of America, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and other anti-war and anti-imperialist groups. In 1984, he was arrested as one of the Ohio 7, and is serving a total 98-year sentence. From prison, he has contributed to socialist and revolutionary journals, and was involved in the publication of the New England Prisoners Association (NEPA) paper.

From the very first page of the zine, Laaman makes his interest in ongoing dialogue clear: “While 4strugglemag is primarily electronic, hard copies are available for prisoners and others who can’t access the Internet. We encourage readers to respond, critique, and carry on the discussions in the magazine”. He stresses the dual goals of the project: “I hope 4strugglemag will become a way for at least some PPs to further contribute to the anti-war, social justice and revolutionary struggle. At the same time this will remind readers that PPs do exist and languish in U.S. prisons. It will help raise our profile as we contribute to ongoing struggles”.

4strugglemag is published three times a year and it is now in its fifth year of uninterrupted publication. Our subscribers have grown from a few dozen to a few hundred, as prisoners got hold of the magazine, requesting more and more copies. Online, we have more than 15,000 visits a month.

The project has an abolitionist orientation and positions prisoner struggle within a larger anti-imperialist political context. This means that we do not simply focus on “prison issues”, but also publish articles on other political issues and world events, and promote the political development of those on the inside and out. Central to this position is the recognition that imprisoned people amount to more than their current status as prisoners. In the case of PPs especially, those of us on the outside have much to learn from their vast political study and years of experience, which should not be devalued by their present circumstances. Their first-hand experience of the lengths the state is willing to go to in order to exert power often leads to much sharper and more valuable analysis than that coming from outside. For us, the prison

struggle involves integrating those prisoners' voices in our everyday work around *all* issues, not just those pertaining to prisoners.

CONSCIOUS PRISONERS

Our correspondence with “social prisoners” grows each day, as they learn of our efforts and begin to participate in our dialogue. We send more than 200 printed copies to prisons across Canada and the United States, where each issue is shared among multiple prisoners and used in prisoner-organized study groups.

The majority of our prison readers are those who have become politically conscious while in prison, and the voice of this group has grown significantly in the magazine in recent issues. For example, one such prisoner – Akili Castlin – began a dialogue about the relationship between the older generation of political prisoners and the younger, “hip hop generation”, currently being imprisoned at an alarming rate. His first letter, sent to us in the summer of 2006, sparked a discussion that continues to this day, and has included responses from PPs such as Mumia Abu-Jamal and Herman Bell. We are excited to see bridges being built across this generational divide, as each generation has much to learn from the other. For younger prisoners, the older PPs serve as guides through the maze of prison bureaucracy and brutality; as teachers of political theory, history and the struggle of recent decades; and as role models who made real contributions to political struggle. Older PPs can also learn from the energy, insights and enthusiasm of the youth, who can offer salient critiques of how political movements can stay relevant to contemporary circumstances. Most importantly, these articles and letters have begun what we have always wanted to accomplish with 4strugglemag: real dialogue.

CERTAIN DAYS: FREEDOM FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS CALENDAR AND OTHER PROJECTS

Two of the outside organizers who work on 4strugglemag have also been fortunate enough to work on the Certain Days: Freedom for Political Prisoners Calendar (see www.certaindays.org) – a collaborative project with political prisoners David Gilbert, Robert Seth Hayes and Herman Bell.

Others, including groups like Jericho and the publishers Kersplebedeb, AG Press, and PM Press, have and continue to print in-depth writings from political prisoners. We hope that all social justice groups will discover the value of including prisoners' voices not just in prison-centric discourses, but in every publication, event, and major discussion.

Communication and action are at the heart of revolutionary movements. Dissent in the realm of the symbolic must be accompanied by daily, active struggle in the realm of the real. Consciousness raising and movement building will come as prisoners develop their own themes, identities and demands. Those who hope to facilitate such work from the outside must increase possibilities and spaces for reflection, and encourage dialogue between prisoners who are kept apart. As Paolo Friere put it: "But to substitute monologue, slogans and communiqués for dialogue is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication... To achieve this praxis, however, it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason" (Friere, 1970, p. 53).

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