



Every Prisoner Is A Political Prisoner

In spring 2010 Bristol ABC was asked to contribute an article on prisoner solidarity for a journal. We asked a few prisoners we were in touch with for their thoughts. One response was from lifer John Bowden, currently in HMP Perth. We think it sums up well the role of prisoner support, so reproduce it here. We also reprint Bowden's article 'Solidarity without prejudice', from January 2009, because it confronts head-on the issue of solidarity with prisoners in struggle who were not initially seen at all as 'political' prisoners.

Thoughts On Prisoner Support

John Bowden, Sept 2010

Firstly, ideological perspective is critically important, and we have to be absolutely clear that the purpose of prisoner support is not to seek improvement or reform of the prison system for its own sake, but rather to empower prisoners and fight for the complete abolition of all prisons - supporting prisoners therefore is an intrinsic part of the wider struggle against the state.

This clear politicalisation of prisoner support is absolutely vital, otherwise there's a tendency to drift into liberal reformist perspectives on the struggle for prisoners rights that lead inevitably to a legitimisation of prisons, and the focus shifts more and more towards improving conditions within prisons and the treatment of prisoners.

Prisons cannot be reformed

They are intrinsically evil places and a central part of the states war on the poor. With that in mind, every struggle by prisoners that makes the system unmanageable should be supported, whereas campaigns for superficial reform of the prison system should be treated with suspicion.

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 disempower those held captive. Denied support and recognition on the outside, prisoners struggles are quickly isolated, contained and destroyed, but with vocal and committed support outside those same struggles are strengthened immeasurably and provided with enormous political significance.

On the frontlines



There are frontlines of class struggle throughout the whole of society, violent interfaces where the poor and their oppressors confront each other, and prison represents one of the most overt and undisguised frontlines of class struggle that exist. Prisoner support is therefore an intrinsically political activity that should be central to any wider struggle against the state.

Solidarity Without Prejudice

John Bowden, Jan 2009



Should a decision to politically support and build campaigns on behalf of particular prisoners who are engaged in a struggle against the prison system be wholly contingent upon the type of offence that preceded their imprisonment? Are some prisoners, no matter how politicised they've become whilst in prison and committed to the struggle, unworthy and undeserving of support because of lifestyles, forms of behaviour and criminal activity engaged in prior to arrest and imprisonment?

When it comes to supporting the struggle of “social” prisoners or those imprisoned for offences other than the overtly political (although it could be argued that in a capitalist system where the overwhelming majority of those sent to jail are inevitably from the poorest and most disadvantaged sections of society, all prisoners are in some way political) is it okay to support those who are originally convicted of, say, crimes against property but definitely not those jailed for crimes like murder, extortion and even rape? Are some prisoners on account of the crimes that put them in prison so irredeemably beyond the pale that absolutely nothing they subsequently do or become can ever qualify them as worthy of political support and solidarity? On this issue should we bury our differences with the police, judiciary and capitalist media and concur with their endlessly propagated view that some individuals convicted and sent to jail for seriously violent behaviour and the most “wicked acts” should be forever demonised, despised and permanently excluded from the human race?

Prison is for the working class

Most prisoners in fact first enter jail for offences and forms of behaviour almost wholly associated with a life time experience of poverty, disadvantage and abuse, and are for the most part products and casualties of a grossly unequal and class ridden society. Obviously some people find their way into jail because of behaviour that was criminally entrepreneurial (the “career criminal”) and violently predatory, but these are a small minority of the overall prisoner population, and in the case of the “career criminal”, especially, the least likely to jeopardize early release by becoming politically active in prison or being associated with politically radical groups on the outside. The fact is that the prisoners more likely to become involved in confrontation and conflict with the prison system are those initially imprisoned for chaotically violent and rage-fuelled offences.

The revolutionary black American prisoner George Jackson once wrote in a letter to a friend - “I was captured and brought to prison when I was 18 years old because I couldn't adjust. The record that the state has compiled on my activities reads like a record of ten men. It labels me brigand, thief, burglar, hobo, drug addict, gunman, and murderer.” Jackson of course was transformed by his experience of imprisonment into a politically conscious prisoner leader and dedicated member of the Black Panther Party before being murdered by guards at San Quentin prison in 1971.

Mutual aid inside the walls

Amongst prisoners themselves the diversity of offences that initially landed them together in jail is quickly subsumed in a common experience of repression and collective adversity, and apart from the traditional hatred of serious sex offenders, prisoners are completely non-judgemental of one another's crimes and bond quickly in a common struggle for survival. Brotherhood and sisterhood amongst prisoners that organise and fight back is a real imperative and heart felt dynamic. Possibly in the enclosed world of prison populated by what ordinary society considers outlaws and law breakers and guarded over by individuals often prepared to brutalise, maim and occasionally murder in the interests of absolute control, "normal" values of behaviour and morality become inverted and corrupted; or maybe in conditions of extreme repression, struggle and survival, what originally put a person in jail matters nothing compared to the infinitely more important need to stick together and collectively resist a system that treats them all as something not fully human and undeserving of basic human rights.

Inevitably, there is conflict and division amongst prisoners that is often fostered by the guards for the purpose of exerting greater control, and some prisoners enter into a complicity with their jailers which creates a diffused suspicion hindering trust and solidarity, but during moments of collective and open rebellion the most natural and powerful tendency amongst prisoners is to band together and develop a new relationship, whoever and whatever they may have been during their moments of freedom.

Whose side are you on?

Political activists on the outside who feel dubious about showing support for prisoners because of their original crime should maybe consider this: when prisoners revolt and fight back they are subjected to the cruelest and most vicious repression because isolated and stigmatised by the state and demonised by the media, conditioned and manipulated "public opinion" largely endorses the behaviour of the prison system when it brutalises prisoners back into line. Refusing to recognize and support the struggle of prisoners purely because of their pre-prison lives is tantamount to taking the side of the system against them and suggesting they get all they deserve; it also suggests ingrained middle class prejudice and fear of working class folk devils and tacit recognition of the legitimacy of the prison system.

That some prisoners, no matter how brutalised and brutalising they might have been before their imprisonment are radically changed as people by the experience of prison and sometimes embrace revolutionary politics to their very core is undoubtedly true. Yet to deny such prisoners any recognition and support when they politically fight back is also to deny the possibility of profound change in such people as a result of struggle. In fact, prison can and often is a crucible for radical change and a deep politicisation of some prisoners, and as in all areas and places of extreme oppression and resistance prisons by their very nature do produce revolutionaries and individuals who single-mindedly fight back. In the U.S. radical black groups, like the Black Panthers and Symbionese Liberation Army, were actively and theoretically guided by prisoners and ex-prisoners; George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, H. Rap Brown, Malcolm X etc., were all radicalised in prison following conviction for crimes such as robbery, rape, drug dealing, pimping and serious violence.

Middle class moralism



It is easy for those who have never experienced extreme poverty and discrimination, never experienced imprisonment and the inhuman brutalisation that takes place there, to be moral purists about the behaviour of people that have – it's a middle class inclination and attitude based on ignorance, arrogance and a distaste of the poor, and it pervades the characters of some individuals who claim to retain not a trace of their middle class conditioning, like some “anarchists”.

Obviously prison isn't full of nice people and there are individuals on both sides of the divide in jail, both guards and prisoners, who are so seriously de-humanised by the system. It's difficult to imagine them living safely amongst ordinary people in the community; although whether prison as an institution, the chief cause of their de-humanisation, should exist to constrain them is another issue. The issue here is that by its very context and the nature of the environment struggles that take place in prison will be represented, instigated and organised by people originally sent to jail for often the most destructive and violent forms of behaviour, that's what initially put them there and it's what the state uses to justify its brutalisation of them for ever afterwards. The organisers and leaders of most major uprisings in the U.K. during the 1960s, 70s and 80s were all people that the state and media described as “psychopaths”, “terrorists”, “gangsters” and “murderers”, individuals that some strictly principled anarchists would no doubt deem unworthy of any expression of support and solidarity.

Struggle, survival and solidarity

In prison, as in all places where repression is extremely sharp edged and survival hard, struggle is not an abstract concept or idea, it is a basic necessity of existence and an all important imperative of surviving with dignity and integrity, and it informs one's instincts about, above and beyond everything else, who the true enemy is.

Real prisoner support, if it means anything, is about expressing the same instinct and supporting all those on the inside who are fighting the common enemy.



John Bowden is a social prisoner serving life for murder. Politicised by his struggles in prison, he has been in constant conflict with the state – beaten, locked down, ghosted, framed. He is currently fighting for parole. Send messages of support to: John Bowden - No. 6729, HMP Edinburgh, 33 Stenhouse Road, Edinburgh, EH11 3LN

Some Resources

Brighton ABC - <http://www.brightonabc.org.uk>

Bristol ABC – <http://bristolabc.wordpress.com>

Leeds ABC – <http://leedsabc.org/>

Campaign Against Prison Slavery - <http://www.againstprisonslavery.org>

Anti-prison/anti-state - <http://325.nostate.net/>