

Page One Newsletter

Volume 1, Issue 4

Special Edition: *Writing Political Prisoners*

July 2019

This is a special issue to coincide with the release of a video we recently made with Burning Books. The video along with this newsletter can be used as resources for hosting political prisoner letter writing nights and can be found at @page1collective and @burningbooks. Thanks to all who helped make it happen. Until all are free!

A Brief History of the ABC

Anarchist models of political prisoner support

In the repression that followed the defeat of the 1905 Russian Revolution, thousands of radicals from across the political spectrum were rounded up and imprisoned in Tsarist jails and penal colonies. It soon came to the attention of Russian Jewish anarchist exiles in New York and Chicago that aid in the form of food and care packages were being distributed along party lines, and that Social Democrats were keeping anarchist prisoners from receiving much needed aid (Tsarist prisoners had to purchase their own coats, boots and blankets to survive the Russian winter). The anarchists organized charity concerts and dances to raise money for care packages, and also increased their communication with the prisoners in Russia, often having to outwit authorities to do so.

This led to the founding of what was then called the Anarchist Red Cross, which kept up this necessary work until the 1917 revolution opened the prison gates. Many radical exiles returned to Russia as well to help build the new world, in the enthusiastic revolutionary optimism that swept the global left. Before long, sadly, it became clear that this new world was just the old world with new masters, and soon the prisons were again filled with Anarchists and other non-Bolshevik radicals. Once again it fell to anarchists to try to help meet the needs of those inside, while also trying to raise awareness of their plight. A crucial difference in this generation's work was the conviction that *all* Left political prisoners should benefit from this aid. Of course this was not universally agreed upon, but emerged as a dominant position in practice over time. This organizing led to the emergence of what would be called the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC), to

distinguish from the Red Cross in the context of the ongoing First World War.

The work to inform the world of the fact and plight of Bolshevik political prisoners extended for years, as the numbers only grew. Similar organizational methods learned through these struggles were employed on behalf of Mexican revolutionaries such as the Magon brothers in the 1920's, and more famously, on behalf of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti.

The Spanish Revolution of the 1930's was another moment of hope for anarchists and other radicals, but with its defeat and the fascist rise to power there was an urgent need for support for both prisoners and refugees. New tactics were learned in the ensuing decades that combined support for political prisoners and refugees with direct action against the fascist regime. Out of these networks emerged a renewed sense of purpose in internationalist prisoner support.

Out of these networks the Anarchist Black Cross was re-forged, this time with a broader internationalist scope and incorporating values learned from self-determination and feminist struggles. From this originally largely English based-endeavor, and through their paper Black Flag, a new international network grew of Black Cross collectives emerged.

These Black Cross networks have evolved in scope and practice and have been actively involved in supporting prisoners from Black liberation, indigenous anti colonialist resistance, anti-imperialist, Earth and Animal liberation, and other radical movements. Different collectives have different priorities, but they share the underlying ethic of resistance to all forms of oppression. In recent decades there has been a growing awareness of what it means to be a political prisoner, which has led to newer formations such as Black and Pink which focuses on supporting trans prisoners.

Throughout history, where there has been oppression there has been resistance. The more effective the resistance, the harsher the repression that follows tends to be. And when this repression inevitably occurs, revolutionaries must rise to the support and defense of their captured comrades. ■

A Brief Guide to Writing Political Prisoners

When writing political prisoners (or any person held in a cage) it is important to keep a few things in mind. First of all, think of where they live. Cops are going to read these letters. We also know that PPs experience higher levels of surveillance given the nature of their incarceration so we recommend staying away of the fire to the prisons type language – it would be awful to get someone in trouble for something you wrote trying to prove to them that you support whatever radical politics landed them inside. This is unsafe for them, for you, and for our communities.

Do not talk to the person about their case, **ESPECIALLY IF THEY ARE PRE-TRIAL**. This can come back to bite them, we have seen letters read aloud in court. Do not help the state get theirs by further compromising an individual's case.

Along the same lines, don't talk about anything illegal. Anywhere, actually. You never know who is listening or what device has its microphone on. This should be fairly obvious when it comes to writing people inside, but we know that it can be relatively easy to forget the bear that we're dealing with.

So what do you write? Well... anything else. Prison is drab, dreadful, and hellish. We often hear that prisoners love details. Be descriptive! Talk about the clouds in the sky or the tree in front of your apartment. Describe your commute to work or your favorite park. If you are going to be asking a lot of questions about the person, be sure to include lots of information about yourself. It is important to not valorize anyone and that includes not treating your letter like an interview. One of the best parts of writing letters is forming meaningful friendships with comrades inside. Ideally these initial letters can turn into correspondences and eventually, if desired, visits!

Now, let's talk about guidelines. Prisons are the state's playground for aggressively micromanaging every single second of a person's life. While a couple of these rules may apply only to folk held in a Bureau of Prison run facility (the federal system), some state prisons have rules that are equally as strict and most of what we lay out is a rule across the board. To make sure your letter has the best chance of reaching its intended recipient, we suggest following all of these guidelines regardless of where the person is held.

Guidelines:

- All letters must be written on plain white computer or lined paper and sent in a plain white envelope.
- No stickers, gel pens, paint, etc. It is best to write in blue or black ink pen.
- Nothing torn out of a newspaper or magazine. Articles or pictures printed from the internet or photocopied onto a piece of computer paper are allowed.
- Include your return address inside the letter as well as on the envelope.
- Paginate: number each page such as 1 of 3, 2 of 3, et cetera.
- Don't valorize the person you are writing. Keep in mind that these folks are coming from the same movements and communities that you are. They aren't looking for adoration, but rather a correspondence.
- Be careful about making promises and only commit to what you are certain that you can do. If you can't maintain a correspondence, let them know up front. If you want to maintain an ongoing correspondence, let them know that as well.
- Do not talk to someone about their case. This is especially important if the person is pre-trial, as it can come be used against them later.
- **DO NOT WRITE ABOUT ANYTHING ILLEGAL**. Assume that intelligence and law enforcement agencies are reading your letter.
- Last but not least... **HAVE FUN!** Letter writing nights are a great way to build community within and across movements.

Thank you to NYC ABC for these guidelines. For more information please visit nycabc.wordpress.com

Page One Collective focuses on spreading the word/s of and about political prisoners past and present. Our name comes from the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) justification for rejecting a letter sent to a U.S. held political prisoner:

"Page one calls for solidarity"

Write to us!

pageonecollective@protonmail.com

twitter: [@page1collective](https://twitter.com/page1collective)