

# A Challenge to the Prison Movement

## For a Clearer Perspective on Prisons

anon.

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*FE Note:* The following article was sent to us anonymously several months ago and has generated an enormous amount of discussion among us by its charges that prisoners who are “thugs, murderers, pimps, rapists, conmen of every sort” have been “elevated to the level of anarchist heroes” and that the prison support movement showers “slavish devotion” on them.

We initially hesitated to print it because it not only contradicted the experiences of many years of our dealing with prisoners, but also we were put off by its sweeping indictment of all prisoners and the entire prison movement. It's not that we didn't realize that people have experienced severe difficulties in dealing with prisoners, but most of the abuses we have heard over the years stemmed from those involved in marxist-leninist and pro-“armed struggle” groups centered on the West Coast.

However, after several months of extensive exchanges with friends of ours on the West Coast, ex-and current prisoners, including Carl Harp, who was ‘writing a response to the article before his death, we feel that the charges have substance enough to them to warrant a full and public discussion.

What is printed here represents only a portion of the much longer original article which we edited not only for reasons of space but out of objection to the incredibly hostile tone it carries with it. We have also omitted sections we felt to contain totally unsubstantiated charges against Carl Harp and George Jackson, who the authors use as examples of prisoners unworthy of the support they received while alive. The accusations against Jackson were gleaned from a vicious smear attack which appeared in a chic, liberal West Coast magazine whose sources were hearsay and police reports. The characterization of Harp so sharply contradicts our experiences with him as well as many others we have spoken with, that we could not in good conscience be a party to repeating what the authors charge. The article also declared Harp guilty of the criminal charges he was imprisoned for which, besides playing into the hands of the prison officials and guards, does not seem supportable from the facts available. (For those interested, a more complete version of the article is available from *Strike!* (formerly *North American Anarchist*), P.O. Box 2, Sta. O, Toronto, Ont. N4A 2M8, which also plans to publish replies to it in their next issue.)

Having nothing good to say about the article, doubting its veracity, even suspecting its motives, why are we bothering to print even portions of it? A good question and one which we debated for a while. Our decision was based mainly on the strength of the responses we are printing, and our desire for an even fuller discussion of the function of prisons, what the prison experience does to people, and the value of prison work.

We have no intention of abandoning those prisoners that we are in contact with, but we also want to examine, in excruciating detail, every set of relationships which comprise this twisted society so we are affected as little as possible by its plagues. Prisoners certainly represent an arena in which high mystification and little criticism occurs, so if this admittedly flawed article can help us get a clearer perspective on what we are involved in, it will have provided us with a valuable service.

## **A Challenge to the Prison Movement**

The history of the revolutionary struggle since the Industrial Revolution has always included active opposition to the steady development of modern penal institutions, and for very good reason. The prisons of the nineteenth and twentieth century have unquestionably been instruments of class coercion and terror, wielded selectively against the poor, the uneducated, the minorities, the people, in short, those most systematically victimized already by the structure and operation of economic and social institutions.

In recent years, it has become axiomatic among socialists, anarchists and communists alike, that prisoners represent the “most oppressed”, a potential vanguard group of “natural rebels” against class society. The entire spectrum of the left, even those who in theory reject the concepts of vanguards and hierarchies of oppression, have in practice devoted a disproportionately large amount of time, energy and resources to the prison movement, often to the exclusion of issues which more immediately affect their own lives.

The ideological underpinnings, or perhaps more correctly the rhetorical ones, for this devotion to prisoners can be located in the slogans of early twentieth century radicals. Nor are slogans such as Eugene Debs’ “as long as there is a soul in prison I’m not free”, or the Wobblies’ “we’re in here for you, and you’re out there for us” by their nature untrue.

However, in that era; when huge numbers of poor people who were actively engaged in the social struggle relating to -their own oppression were incarcerated, the relation between inside and outside—and the obligations owed by the movement to prisoners—were quite unambiguous. The same can be said of prisoners in Franco’s Spain, for example, or of any number of people imprisoned in the U.S. for objecting to the war in Vietnam.

This article is being written, however, because both social conditions and the nature of prison support work have changed in recent years. To put it bluntly, we are writing this because we can no longer silently accept the uncritical idolatry, the slavish devotion, the emotional and physical rape, the insane violence, manipulation and brutality which have come to characterize the prison movement in North America over the past decade.

We are tired of being threatened and denounced as “counter-revolutionary” when we refuse to drop everything to wait on “political prisoners” whose political practice goes no deeper than writing endless reams of empty rhetoric in their daily missives to the outside.

To be a “political prisoner” requires more than a glib pen and an easy familiarity with the jargon of a particular political tendency. The kind of support people in for political “crimes” deserve may be quite different from the support given to other prisoners. If we are honest with ourselves we must admit that there is a difference between an Alexander Berkman and -some perennial stick-up man who gets caught robbing a gas station and then ‘converts’ to anarchism or some other political tendency while in prison.

We do support aid to prisoners whose crimes were politically motivated in a clear-cut way (not including shooting into crowds on the freeway or bombing supermarkets full of people trying to get groceries for dinner). We also recognize the possibility that even the worst individual might come to a real political awakening in prison, although this would surely include an understanding of his own crimes and not simply excuses for them framed in political terms. And we think that all prisoners—from shoplifters to murderers—must be treated in the most humane way we can force the state to treat them in its institutions now.

But it is also time to realize that prisoners whose crimes have victims rather than being “natural rebels”, are the types of individuals who in a classless, prisonless society would be exiled at the very least, and more likely put out of their misery by the victims or survivors of their brutality. Nor is this entirely untrue for the perpetrators of ‘victimless’ or ‘revolutionary’ crimes. Far too often, for example, “expropriation” of goods has meant also endangering the lives and security of others considered “comrades”, without even informing them that they might be at risk.

Putting aside all the liberal romanticism about prisoners as simple victims of class injustice, we must cope with the fact that most prisoners are inside for acts which they did in fact commit. Without for a moment recognizing the legitimacy of the state and its legal system that judges these acts, we must nevertheless recognize that many of the “comrades” who appeal so fervently to our compassion and sense of justice, have never themselves had the slightest concern for the rights, feelings, desires or even lives of others.

In a society where “dog-eat-dog” is elevated to national policy, these “rebels” represent the most abysmally inept yet enthusiastic practitioners of the morality of that order. Thus it is only natural that when they are put in prison, stripped of all power, they naturally seek to regain it by the only means available: imposing their wills on outside supporters.

This article, however, is not intended to focus; solely on the role of the prisoners, because by themselves their significance is limited. It is extremely important to examine the psychological relationship of prisoners to authority, since in general it is quite the opposite of the “natural rebel” mythology. Equally important, though, are the factors which have created the base for the prison movement outside, and the many disturbing factors which have become apparent within it.

Until about 1977 virtually all prison movement ideology was Marxist-Leninist, with its standard baggage of Third World vanguardism and the added component of ‘prisoner leadership’. Much of the urban guerrilla movement in the U.S., from the formation of the B.L.A. in the late ‘60s, through the S.L.A., N.W.L.F., and onto the G.J.B. in the mid-‘70s, was also based on this-basic analysis.

Then, around 1977, when the Marxist-Leninists were drifting into a period of internal dissolution and the urban guerrilla groups were increasingly taking on the characteristics of street gangs, *The Open Road* appeared. For the first time in many years in North America, there was a widely circulated anarchist journal which gave enthusiastic support to prisoners and urban guerrillas. Furthermore, Joe Remiro and Russ Little, who were widely respected by both those inside and outside who were inclined toward the guerrilla solution to prisons, came out as anarchists. So it was only natural that prisoners and the prison movement, sensing that anarchism might be the leftist political tendency on the ascent, began to cultivate “anarchist” ideas and language in order to maintain maximum outside contacts and support.

The prison movement is a dead end. We don’t deny prisoners the right to any support they can get, but that is not a solution to the problems of this society and the revolution that is necessary to solve them.

It is time for those of us on the outside to look at the society in which we live and work. Indeed, if we do have an obligation to prisoners, it is to stop playing servant or wife to them, and instead seek revolutionary changes in the outside world that can bring the prison walls down once and for all, and thereby prevent yet another generation of these cripples, the broken refuse of this sick society. All else is reformism, the abandonment of our own dreams in favor of the twisted and tormented nightmares of the imprisoned.

We must seek our solutions elsewhere.

## Related

See responses in “The Challenge Accepted” in this issue.



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