ABCF Guide to Political Prisoners & Prisoners of War Support

How and why to build principled support relationships with political prisoners and prisoners of war

ABC Federation
PO Box 11223
Whittier, CA 90603

INTRODUCTION:

What is the ABC, the ABCF? Who are Political Prisoners?

Beginning prior to 1917 to defend Political Prisoners in czarist Russia, the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) became the banner under which many anarchists did prison support. Since then the ABC has ebbed and flowed to the present day. In the mid-80's the first ABC collective began in North America as the result Black anarchist and then Political Prisoner, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin's efforts. Anarchists in North America started collectives and, since its origins in the earlier part of the century, the ABC broadened to cover a wide variety of prison related issues.

U.S. ABCs remained totally autonomous, and therefore were never really able to unify or grow collectively. As a result, we feel it stagnated, became isolated and ineffective, offering virtually no organized support to Political Prisoners or Prisoners of War (PP/POWs)... or anyone. For instance, to the disgrace of the ABC mission, in December 1986 a New Afrikan anarchist POW, Kuwasi Balagoon died in prison of AIDS with no support from the ABC. Though ABC came to support a broad spectrum of prison issues, the one thing we all agree upon, (in theory at least) is the defense and support of PP/POWs. This was the very foundation upon which the ABC was born in the early 1900's.

So in 1995, NJ ABC along with New Afrikan anarchist POW, Ojore Lutalo, proposed the formation of an ABC Federation. As is required to build a federation, the groups who were uniting needed a common goal. That common goal was the support and defense of PP/POWs.

The first question to be asked before supporting PP/POWs should be who a Political Prisoner or Prisoner of War is. The Anarchist Black Cross Federation (ABCF) along with many other groups, individuals and PP/POW supporters from around the world use the following definitions to determine who we support for a variety of historical, strategic and practical reasons:

Political Prisoner: A person incarcerated for actions carried out in support of legitimate struggles for self determination* or for opposing the illegal policies of the government and/or its political sub-divisions. (Special International Tribunal on the Violation of Human Rights of Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War in the United States Prisons and Jails, December, 1990)

Prisoner of War: Those combatants struggling against colonial and alien domination and racist regimes captured as prisoners are to be accorded the status of prisoner of war and their treatment should be in accordance with the provisions of the Geneva Conventions Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. (August 12, 1949, General Assembly Resolution 3103 [XXVIII])

***Self Determination:** the right by virtue of which all people's are entitled freely to determine their political status and to pursue their economic, social and cultural development. All peoples may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources without prejudice to any obligations arising out of international economic cooperation, based upon the principle of mutual benefit and international law. In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence. (Common Article 1(1) of the International Human Rights Covenants, 1966)

As is evident, these definitions were not our creation. We do take objections to the term "illegal" in the PP definition and know full well that the United States and all capitalist and imperialist governments have now and will always murder, oppress, and/or otherwise deny people the right to self determination under the guise and protection of "law". We also believe that the POW definition lacks recognition for those combatants struggling against institutionalized and "legal" economic and class oppression. However, as accountable members within an international community of activists, we feel it is our responsibility to respect these definitions that were collectively agreed upon at the 1990 Special International Tribunal on the Violation of Human Rights of Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War in the United States Prisons and Jails. We also feel it is our responsibility to develop our analysis and positions of these objections so as to best articulate them to this international community for acceptance in an

Support the Warchest

The ABCF has initiated a program designed to send monthly checks to PP/POWs who have been receiving insufficient, little, or no financial support during their imprisonment. PP/POWs requesting funds complete an application of financial questions. When the ABCF has collected sufficient funds to send out another monthly check, the applications are reviewed by a rotating body of PP/POWs called the Prisoner Committee, who make a judgement on which applicant is in the most financial need. There is also an emergency fund designed to immediately send checks to those PP/POWs in need of one-time or emergency assistance.

Founded in 1994, the Warchest has provided consistent and reliable financial aid, serving a much- neglected comradely function. Since its inception, the ABCF has raised over $50,000 with just this one program. All funds raised go directly to the political prisoners, for which the program is designed. Despite our success, our comrades are still in dire need of funds. Endorse this program by giving a monthly or one-time donation to increase the number of prisoners being supported monthly. A financial report is published that documents all money received and the prisoner it was sent to. The prisoners' addresses are also printed so that endorsers may write and hold us accountable.

Send cash,checks or mos made to Tim fasnacht to:
Philly ABCF
P.O Box 42129
Philadelphia, PA 19101
timABCF@aol.com

"Thanks much for the support you've been organizing. I really appreciate it. After not having any or very little support for so long, it now seems like people have all of a sudden realized that I am alive."
- Sekou Odinga (New Afrikan POW)

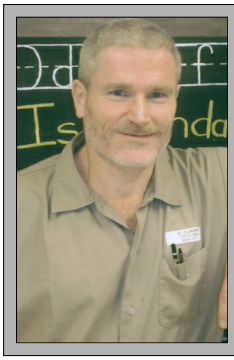
appropriate, inclusive forum. Changing these collectively agreed upon definitions without any or adequate dialogue or debate between the activists and prisoners these definitions will effect is unaccountable and irresponsible. It would also deny us the opportunity to hear possible objections or possible improvements to our positions.

While we believe that many people in prison are victims of an unjust political system, we do not believe that all prisoners are PP's or POW's. We believe it is a vital struggle for progressive and revolutionary people to build recognition that there are over 100 prisoners in this country who refused to become a victim of injustice and decided to organize, and consciously fight back. The struggle is to build recognition that there is indeed a conflict in this country in which people are organizing and have organized themselves to resist. And that of those people, many are dead, and many are in prison, and that those prisoners are PP's or POW's. The ABCF acts accountably toward that end.

Being declared a PP or a POW is not an attempt to grant some great status to people who have struggled politically to change or create a new society as some try to imply. As Sekou Odinga, a New Afrikan POW now imprisoned in a federal prison in Lompoc, CA for his political and military actions to build a revolutionary movement has stated, *"Although I consider fighting for my people a good thing, being declared a POW doesn't entitle me to any luxury (or great status). You become an enemy of the state."* The political reality of being an enemy of the state (such as a PP/POW) is much different than that of the victim of the state (such as a social prisoner). Indeed, as a class war POW Bill Dunne adds; "Being recognized as a PP or POW comes with greater liabilities than benefits and is done more out of responsibility and obligations to ones politics than for any desirability of the status." Social prisoners can and often do change their reality and imprisonment from that of a social nature to that of a political nature through their political experiences and activity in prison. We believe those prisoners who righteously struggle deserve the support to the extent the outside organizations are capable of supporting them. But these prisoners are not PP or POWs.

Furthermore, the reason we feel PP/POWs should be prioritized by those people claiming to be revolutionaries can be summed up in the following quote by Anarchist POW Ojore Lutalo; “Any movement that fails to support its political internees is a sham movement!” We feel that PP/POWs deserve priority support of the very political movements they came from, helped and continue to help build. We believe that for a movement to progress and support social prisoners, while its own PP/POWs are left with insufficient or in this case, virtually no support, is unprincipled and politically wrong.

While this introduction and the following guide is the position, and contains policies of the ABCF, we feel that it can be useful for anyone with the desire to support and defend PP/POWs. Indeed these positions and policies are not responsible or practical because they are ABCF policy. They are ABCF policy because they are responsible and practical for anyone.



“Being recognized as a PP or POW comes with a greater liabilities than benefits and is done more out of responsibil - ity and obligations to ones politics than for any desirabil - ity of the status”

- Bill Dunne

ABCF COLLECTIVES CAN BE REACHED AT:

Albuquerque ABCF • PO Box 27662 • Albuquerque, NM 87125
Email: abqabcf@fastmail.fm

Los Angeles ABCF • PO Box 11223 • Whittier, CA 90603
Email: la@abcf.net

New Jersey ABCF • PO Box 2350 • Elizabeth, NJ 07207
Email: bkerness@afsc.org

New York City ABCF • PO Box 110034 • Brooklyn, NY 11211
Email: nycabc@riseup.net

Philadelphia ABCF • PO Box 42129 • Philadelphia, PA 19101
Email: timabcf@aol.com

South Brooklyn ABCF • PO Box 132 • Brooklyn, NY 11218
Email: sbrooklynabcf@riseup.net

See the ABCF homepage for new groups and updates: www.abcf.net

represent can not be overlooked. Supporting PP/POWs not only fulfills a sorely neglected responsibility of our movements, but if done in the principled manner most prisoners will rightfully insist upon, it also teaches us the reliability, discipline and accountability necessary in our own characters to build a new revolutionary movement. If you are an outside individual or group, and you feel like you agree and and can offer this type of support to PP/POWs, we encourage you to contact us. If you would like to place a particular focus on supporting PP/POWs and would like to begin supporting them, consider joining the ABCF. By doing so we will all benefit from the collective sharing of each others ideas and experiences, and the expression of those experiences in each of our local collectives work. This local work can then fit into the entire ABCF's struggle to build a federation and new social movement to not only free PP/POWs, but to effect the changes needed to create a new society. We hope you find this information useful, and please feel free to contact us with your comments or suggestions to improve it.

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PREPARING TO SUPPORT PP/POWs

It is necessary to have sufficient knowledge of the prisoners you will be supporting. Not only who they are, but specifically what they went to prison for, and how those actions were an extension of the political movements they are a part of. Or, if the prisoner was framed to remove them from their participation in the outside struggle, what political work they did, and evidence to indicate they were framed. If you contact, or are contacted by a prisoner who you believe is a PP or POW, or claims to be one, it is ABCF policy to request documentation from them. This documentation must indicate that the prisoners incarceration meets the definitions listed in the first section. Documentation is essential before a support relationship can begin. It will enable supporters to be familiar with those they support, and to present their cases to others while trying to build further support. We need to be able answer the questions, "Why do you support them?" or "Why should I?" It is also ABCF policy to never print the name of a prisoner as a PP/POW unless one of our offices has received such documentation from the prisoner, or another supporter. When requesting documentation, suggest the following 4 acceptable forms:

1. Newspaper articles of the prisoners court case that reflect the political nature of the charges they were originally sent to prison on.
2. Government documents the prisoner has obtained through the Freedom of Information Act that reflect the political nature of the case they were sent to prison on.
3. Validation from an outside revolutionary organization that the prisoner was or is a part of, or who was aware of the prisoners activity. This validation must reflect that the charges the prisoner was sent to prison on had explicit and conscious political ends, or that the prisoner participated in political and revolutionary activity, and was framed as a result of that activity. If they were framed, we must also receive some kind of indication of prosecutorial misconduct.
4. Referral from another PP/POW that can provide documentation of their own case. PP/POWs referring other prisoners must be aware and able to provide sufficient facts about the political actions and nature of the referrals case.

These four are not the only acceptable forms of documentation. They are simply suggestions that can easily be provided by PP/POWs in most cases. In general, it is necessary that offered documentation must be something other than a prisoners word, it must be some kind of impartial factual report.

Further, the ABCF recognizes the subjectivity that may arise in evaluating prisoners. Our collective judgement will be based on the prisoners overall personal/political history and accountability in actions. (On the streets and once in prison.)

Finally, there has been much debate on the issue of the ABCF and the support of Earth Liberation (EL) and Animal Liberation (AL) political prisoners. The Federation, as a whole, has historically refrained from formally supporting EL and AL prisoners, allowing each chapter to provide support if they so choose. In recent years, the Federation has chosen to revisit this stance and has expanded its' support for EL and AL prisoners whose action have expanded to the larger social focus.

The criteria for support of Animal Liberation or Earth Liberation prisoners is that their aboveground work or communiqué(s) (for actions they have pleaded to) must contextualize them as part of the broader anarchist, socialist, anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist struggles.

"Because the need seems so great, some supporters feel compelled to promise way more than they can do, which only drives us crazy. Much bet - ter to be limited, be focused, be real, be consistent."
- David Gilbert

SUPPORT IS A TWO WAY STREET:

This piece could not be finished (and maybe it isn't anyway) without stressing the fact that any principled support relationship is a two way street. PP/POWs deserve the support their activities on the street and continued political activism once behind bars has earned them. Supporters deserve the same type of support that any principled support work they do has earned them. PP/POW supporters should feel free to ask the prisoners they support to help them in projects or events they are organizing. Statements from PP/POWs in support of the event, or project- requesting the prisoner solicit further support from any of their other supporters that you have no contact with etc. are things the prisoner can do to help you. Your support relationship may also develop into a friendship in which you will not only be able to discuss politics and learn politically from each other, but also provide each other with a degree of personal support.

Obviously there are many more things than are printed here that you can do to help the prisoner and the prisoner may be able to do to help you. As your relationship develops, the subjective conditions that exist between you will better be able to determine exactly what form the support will take. But be careful, we often hear that the only time "supporters" contact PP/POWs is when they want some kind of statement from them. This type of "support" is not a two way street. By the same token, it has not been unheard of for PP/POWs to "use" their supporters who too willingly offer "no-strings attached" support.

Support should not be unconditional, but the conditions that your support work proceeds under should be based on principles that usually transcend the various political ideologies that exist between the prisoners and their supporters. Should mutual respect, honesty and a solid straightforwardness be attained between you and the prisoner, you should find that a principled, two way support relationship will develop.

This is a simple guide to suggest practical and principled ways to support Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War. The need for this work is great, and the importance of developing a new revolutionary strategy while tapping into the living history PP/POWs

its without putting much energy into building a support relationship and indeed a friendship. Often this is due to a visitors romantic ideals about PP/POWs, which can be corrected in most cases by putting energy into building a relationship first.

FOOD AND CLOTHING PACKAGES:

State prisoners may receive food and clothing packages. If you can afford to and are able to bring a package with you on a visit or send one in the mail, check with the prisoner for restrictions on what they can receive, and what they would prefer for you to get. Because prisons usually have restrictions on the amount of clothes or pounds of food a prisoner can receive per month, and at a time, never surprise a prisoner with a packages, as it may conflict with packages they are expecting from someone else. Again, the prisoner may not receive frequent packages and may tell you to bring them anytime you can, but until they give you the freedom to do so, be principled, be considerate of them and their conditions.

"We feel that PP/POWs deserve priority support of the very political movements they came from, helped and continue to help build. We believe that for a movement to progress and support social prisoners, while its own PP/POWs are left with insufficient or in this case, virtually no support, is unprincipled and politically wrong."

CONTACTING PP/POWs:

Contacting PP/POWs is often "hit or miss." Some prisoners answer all their correspondences regularly and are interested in beginning new correspondences and further direct support. Others may not answer even repeated requests to begin a dialogue and a support relationship for whatever reason. One thing is certain, if one does not write back, try another, because someone, somewhere needs and would like to receive and develop a principled support relationship.

It is important to maintain a consistent mailing address. We recommend obtaining a Post Office Box somewhere in the neighborhood you live. A P.O. Box will remain a stable contact point between you and PP/POWs even if you move or travel frequently.

Once you have secured a reliable mailing address, there are several things you might consider before writing. First, date all your correspondences, and include a return address on the envelope and your letter as the envelope is sometimes discarded before the prisoner receives it. Always include a list of enclosures when sending items with the letter. Different prisons always have different restrictions on what can be sent in. If you send something and do not list it in the letter, it may never be seen again. If for some reason it is "unauthorized material," having it listed in your letter will offer a better chance of having it returned to you and/or giving the prisoner the opportunity to challenge its denial of acceptance.

Some PP/POWs receive a lot of mail and can not possibly afford to answer it all. Do not send stamps as most prisons will not allow prisoners to receive them, but in your first correspondence ask if they can. Most prisoners are indigent, so in your first correspondence, be considerate and include at least a $1 or $2 postal money order. Most prisons will allow you to send only postal money orders (available at any U.S. post office). Federal prisons do allow you to send personal checks, but will take 15-30 days to clear. So we suggest sending postal money orders. Make the money order out to the prisoner with his/her prison ID number. These funds will enable the prisoner to purchase

stamps to write back. Put your name on the “FROM” space provided so you can cash it in case the money order is returned to you for some reason. Some state prisons in TX (and possibly other mid-western states) will not allow you to send any funds directly to prisoners. Prisoners in these prisons will have to send you forms to fill out and include with the money order. Ask them to explain the details.

Instead of simply volunteering your support or asking them a broad question like “what kind of support do you need,” try to suggest some things you think you can do to help. PP/POWs for the most part need all kinds of support. List resources you have available, contacts you can offer, or talents you possess that could be useful. This will help the both of you to more easily and quickly discover the best kind of support you can offer, and they need.

The ABCF tries to have all support given to PP/POWs be reliable, consistent and stable, some things you might keep in mind before offering a type of support, and then not being able to provide it in a short while. This is not to say PP/POWs could not use short term or one time support of one kind or another. Whatever the case may be, it is very important to be honest and up front about what you can, and are prepared to do. If you can only offer some kind of support on a limited or inconsistent basis, tell them. If it is a type of support they can depend on regularly, tell them. At all stages of support try to keep the following quote by anti-imperialist PP David Gilbert in mind; *“Because the need seems so great, some supporters feel compelled to promise way more than they can do--which only drives us crazy. Much better to be limited, be focused, be real, be consistent."*

visitors list, (as far as we know, Pennsylvania is the only exception). You will go through a metal detector at any prison you visit. In addition to this, many state prisons require you to be pat searched. State prisons also often have much stricter dress codes.

Confirm visiting days through the mail (or by phone if they call you). Plan visits ahead of time and allow enough time to reschedule a visit if your schedules conflict. Try to propose visiting days at least two or three weeks ahead of time if you are scheduling it through the mail. Work out all the details and ask all questions with the prisoner through the mail (or by phone if they call you). Ask about visiting days and hours, dress codes, maximum number of visitors allowed per visit if you plan on bringing other supporters, about getting photos of your visit, and anything else you can think of.

You will not be allowed to visit without presenting a valid photo ID like a drivers license or county ID. Bring enough small bills or change for the vending machines in the visiting room so you and the prisoner can eat.

Upon entering, and often after leaving a visit with a PP/POW, supporters often feel a sense of depression or some kind of sorrow for the prisoner. Visits often clearly illustrate to us that these prisoners are not abstractions, or pieces of history that we read about in books, but living beings surviving in the indeed virtual hell of the United States Prison System. However these feelings often come from subjectiveness and it is important to keep the objective in mind. As Puerto Rican POW Carmen Valentín reminds us, “Though our imprisonment is surely a form of torture, and at times very depressing for anyone to fathom, it is vital for fellow revolutionaries on the streets to be mindful that enduring our imprisonment is our responsibility as revolutionaries at this time. Our supporters responsibility is to build a movement strong enough to offer principled support, and eventually free us. Any sad or depressing feelings of leaving us here after a visit should be transformed into this reality.”

Several PP/POWs have also expressed the feeling of some visitors being like visitors at the zoo coming to see the PP/POW in their cage. This is likely to occur when supporters jump to vis-

VISITING PP/POWs

If geographically possible, you may also consider visiting PP/POWs. Some prisoners enjoy visits more than others, some prisoners receive frequent visits, while others receive few or none. After you have established a relationship with a prisoner and you decide to request a visit, here are some things that could be helpful.

Restrictions and criteria for visiting Federal and State prisons are different. Generally, it is easier to visit state prisoners. Visiting conditions are usually better at Federal prisons. Listed below are some of the different guidelines for visiting Federal/State prisoners, and some guidelines useful to visit any prisoner. Because prisons often have restrictions on how many visits prisoners may receive per month, avoid surprising prisoners with visits as it may conflict with visits they are already expecting. Also, if arranging visits by mail, try to be specific about the day you will visit. By being vague and saying you'll visit "some time that week", you may tie up the prisoners whole week if someone else wants to visit them the same week. If two people visit on the same day, one of you will have to be turned away at the front desk. Prisons so rarely bend any rules, especially for PP/POWs, that we might as well say they never do. Prisoners who receive very few visits may tell you to visit any time. But until they give you the freedom to do so, be principled, be considerate.

To visit Federal prisoners, you must first be approved by filling out a form that the prisoner must send you in advance. In most federal prisons only people who say they had a relationship to a federal prisoner prior to their imprisonment are likely to be approved. They will ask you to describe the relationship you had and where it began. Usually, the prison will not approve people who say they visit other prisoners. Once you complete and mail the form to the prisoners counselor (the address will be provided on the visiting form sent to you be the prisoner), the prisoner will tell you if you have been approved or denied. In any case, each prisoner can tell you specifics of the prison they are held in.

State prisons do not require you to be placed on an approved

BEGINNING TO SUPPORT PP/POWs

Once correspondence has been established and you have sufficient knowledge and documentation of the prisoners, principled support should be safe to commence. One of the most difficult realities of being in prison is having to become dependent on others for almost every aspect of their continued political and personal life (especially when you consider the reason they are in prison is for struggling for independence.) No matter what type of support you offer, from copying documents, to sending books or magazines, to completing a job for them, it is important to keep on top of what you have committed to do and complete it in a reasonable and timely basis.

Some popular ways ABCF groups support PP/POWs is by organizing benefits, printing and selling merchandise, printing and distributing flyers and leaflets, all featuring the PP/POWs we support. This raises visibility and awareness about the prisoners, who they are, the movements they came from and often explains the very reasons why we do support work. When fund raising is involved, ABCF groups also use these funds to either financially support PP/POWs or to support the work we are engaged in.

However, it is necessary for supporters to contact the PP/POWs who this support work focuses on. It is irresponsible and unaccountable for groups to start work on behalf of specific PP/POWs without their knowledge. It is ABCF policy to first receive sanction from the prisoners who will be featured in these activities. We cannot proceed until we receive such sanction, and if they do not offer it, we cannot proceed against their wishes.

If prisoners agree, it is also ABCF policy to describe our plans in detail and ask for input and suggestions. Making sure PP/POWs are a part of their own support is crucial. Sometimes prisoners will give you the freedom to proceed without much of their input. But even still, it is ABCF policy to keep them updated on our progress and make them aware of all final decisions before we begin. Again, if funds are involved, details of what will be done with the funds raised must also be discussed before

they are collected. Some prisoners will allow you to use all funds raised in your support work without sending them any portion. But they must be given the right to offer the money that will be raised in their name, for their commitments, and their sacrifices. When producing merchandise to be sold, it is customary for the ABCF to offer a 60% to the prisoner, 40% to the support group split of the proceeds (funds raised after the cost.) For example, the proceeds of a pamphlet that costs .25¢ to make sells for $2, is $1.75. A 60%-40% split of $1.75 would be $1.05 (60%) to the prisoner, and .70$ (40%) to the supporters. These same guidelines should be used when producing merchandise for any political organization.

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our responsibility as revolutionar - ies at this time. Our supporters responsibilities is to build a movement strong enough to offer principled support, and eventually free us". - Carmen Valentin

PHONE CONTACT

After you get to know each other, and only if you can afford it, you may consider asking the prisoner to call you. Just as the mailing address, and every thing else involved in support work, consistency is always a great advantage. Offer a reliable phone number and suggest convenient times for them to call.

Connecting with the prisoner(s) you support by phone can greatly reduce the time it takes to get things done. Having that direct line of communication is more expedient than a dialogue through mail. Details of support work can often be discusses more easily through phone communication.

Different prisons have different restrictions on calls. Some control unit prisons offer extremely limited phone time, and this may prevent this form of connection from occurring. However, some prisoners have better opportunities to use the phone and may enjoy the chance to have a more direct form of communication with their supporters.

Conditions of phone usage vary from prison to prison. Some are allowed only to make collect phone calls, others are required to pay for all of their own calls. Some offer both. If a prisoner can only make collect phone calls, seriously consider the cost and let them know if it is a financial burden to you if they call too frequently. Keep in mind that collect calling rates may fluctuate greatly depending on the time of day/night they call. If prisoners must pay for their own phone calls, remember that most prisoners are indigent and may not be able to afford the "luxury" of making calls. In this case, consider sending the prisoner a money order they can use to put on their phone account.