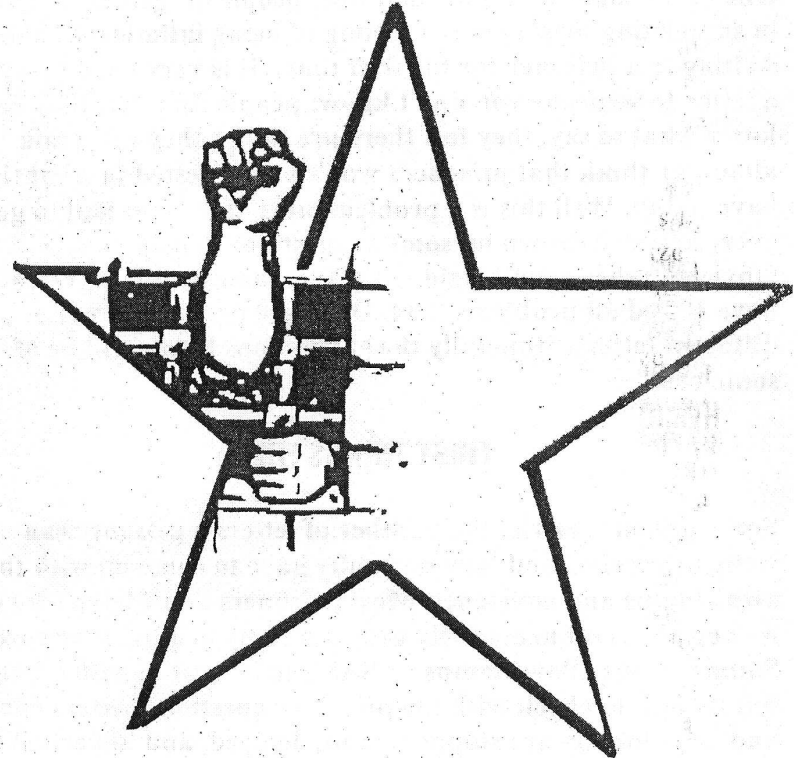


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A practical guide to prisoner support.

WRITING TO PRISONERS

One of the main problems that puts people off getting involved in supporting prisoners is a feeling of being intimidated about writing to a prisoner for the first time. It is very hard to write a letter to someone you don't know: people find that they don't know what to say, they feel there are things they can't talk about, or think that prisoners won't be interested in what they have to say. Well this is a problem most of us have had to get over, so we've drawn up some suggestions to help you.

Obviously they aren't rigid guidelines, and we don't pretend to have solved all problems here. Different people will write different letters. Hopefully the suggestions below will be of some use.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Some prisons restrict the number of letters a prisoner can write or receive, and they normally have to come up with their own stamps and envelopes. Most prisoners don't have a lot of money. So don't necessarily expect a reply to a letter or card. Some prisons allow stamps or SASE to be sent in with a letter, but its best to check with the prison in question. Letters can be and occasionally are stopped, read, delayed, and 'diverted' by prison authorities. If you suspect your letters have been or will be nicked by the screws, you can send it certified mail, which unfortunately costs more but then if the prisoner says he/she never got it you can track it and see who signed for it. You should always use some sort of return address (on the letter itself as well as the envelope), not just so the prisoner can reply, but also because some prisons don't allow letters in without one. Of course it doesn't have to be your address, but be careful about using PO Box numbers as some prisons won't accept that either. Generally it's a good idea to ask the

For more information on political prisoners, the anti-prison movement, and general prisoner support contact, lookup, or read one of the following groups, websites, and books below.

GROUPS

Jacksonville ABC-BG
P.O. Box 350392
Jacksonville, FL
32235-0392
Email- jax@abcf.net
Website- WWW.abcf.net

Women's Prison Book Project
C/O Arise Bookstore
2441 Lyndale Ave S
Minneapolis, MN 55405
www.prisonactivist.org/wpbp
Email - wpbp@gurilm ail.com

Prison Activist Resource Center
(PARC)
PO Box 339
Berkeley CA 94701
Phone: (510) 893-4648
Fax: (510) 893-4607
Email- parc@prisonactivist.org
Website- www.prisonactivist.org

Prisoners Advocacy Network
(PAN-Ohio)
P.O. Box 218453
Columbus, Ohio 43221
Email- Panohio3@aol.com
Website - www.panohio.org

BOOKS

1. The celling of America
By Daniel Burton Rose
2. All things censored
By Mumia Abu- Jamal
3. Assatta
By Assatta Shakur
4. In the spirit of crazy
horse. By Peter Mathiessen
5. Prison memoirs of an
Anarchist By Alexander
Berkman
6. Snitch Culture
By Jim Redden

*All the above books can be
found at www.akpress.org.*

WEBSITES

1. www.prisonsucks.com
2. www.savepacific.net
3. www.ainfos.ca
4. www.crimethinc.com
5. www.prisonactivist.org
6. www.mumia.org
7. www.judibari.org

"Revolution is never begun anew,
only continued where others left off."

--Tom Manning U.S. Political Prisoner

make time for. If 1 letter of support is all you can manage that's perfectly fine.

Do not romanticize prisons or prisoners. Many activists have idea about who prisoners are, why they're locked up, the system, etc. while its correct to have political clarity about incarceration and the criminal justice system, its not correct to romanticize a prisoner, anything they might be locked up for (especially a "social crime") and their lives. They're People just like you and have strengths and weaknesses. It is dangerous to assume anyone (free or jailed) can overcome all their personal weaknesses, or to be completely truthful are not dealing with stressful situations in negative ways. Be mindful that over the years some prisoners have learned manipulative and abusive behaviors.

Do not discuss potentially illegal political action with a prisoner. Prisoners can and have been implicated for outside actions that violate the law. If authorities find such information in the prisoners poeseion they could get administrative punishment (locked in the "hole", loss of privileges, etc.) and/or added time.

Do not attempt to place political judgments on prisoners' experiences. Some prisoners write publications to get pen pals and may not agree completely with the views of the paper, but read it for information. Some may have been converted to Islam or Christianity. Some have views that may seem backward. Rather than attack a prisoner, its best to be polite but firm and avoid topics you find objectionable. Do not argue with or insult a prisoner because of their religion (or lack of), preferences, or experiences. Its best to just break off contact if your unable to continue constructive dialog due to extreme differences in viewpoint (ex. the prisoner declares he he/she is a white supremacist). It is a very bad idea to get into/trade insults or threats with a prisoner.

The following information was compiled from several Anarchist Black Cross-sources.

prisoner in your first letter if there's any mail restrictions you should be aware of.

WRITING FOR THE FIRST TIME

Say who you are, and if it's relevant that you're from such and such a group. Some people reckon it's better to be upfront about your politics as well, to give prisoners the choice to stay in contact with you or not.

Say where you heard about them and their case.

Keep your first letter reasonably short and to the point, its best not to overwhelm people. Also some prisons restrict the size of letters that can be sent in. Obviously when you get to know people better you'll have more to talk about.

If you are writing to a "framed" prisoner, and you believe them to be innocent, it helps to say so, as it gives people confidence to know that you believe them.

Some people, when they write to prisoners, are afraid of talking about their lives, what they are up to, thinking this may depress people banged up for years or that they are not interested in your life. In some cases this may be true, but on the whole a letter is the brightest point of the day for most prisoners. Prison life is dead boring, and any news that livens it up, whether its about people they know or not, is generally welcome. Especially if you didn't know them before they went to prison, they want to know about you, what your life is like etc. Use common sense, don't write about anything that is likely to get the prisoner in shit with the screws, or get you or anyone else in trouble with the cops.



THEY'RE IN THERE FOR US, WE'RE OUT HERE FOR THEM

For people imprisoned from our movements and struggles, i.e. strikers, prisoners, social uprising rioters (example in April of 2001 nearly 100 poor folks got prison time for actions during the Cincinnati rebellion that followed the police shooting of an unarmed black youth), and in some cases members of revolutionary groups; basically politicians, it's vital to keep them involved or in some instances to introduce them to ongoing resistance. Telling them about actions, sending them newspapers if they want them, and discussing ideas and strategies with them. Use your head though. Some people will not want to hear about the class war, but want to keep their heads down and finish their sentence. 'Politicos', prison rebels, and jailhouse lawyers tend to get singled out the most for harassment and physical attacks by screws.

If you are offering support or to campaign for a prisoner, it is best to be realistic about what you can achieve. To someone serving a long sentence in prison, you can seem like a powerful ray of hope - its important to keep hope alive but not create illusions about you being able to spring them or necessarily clear their name'. If a prisoner believes you can do more for them than is possible, it can lead to disillusion and depression if you do not 'come up with the goods'

THROUGH THE WALLS

At the end of the day, writing to prisoners is about common sense and using your head. Most prisoners are not the mad beasts corporate media would have us believe they are ordinary folks just like you. Prison is there to isolate people, so we must be actively keeping the link to the outside world open. Direct contact via letters is one of the most vital ways of making sure prisoners are not abandoned to the control of the

A few dos and don'ts on writing prisoners whose backgrounds/politics you may not know.

Use a neutral address, such as a P.O. Box, for correspondence. Do not divulge sensitive personal info. (i.e. your home address, phone number, credit card or bank details, peoples full names, etc.) to a prisoner, particularly one you have never dealt with before. This is for your security as well as the prisoner. Remember prison authorities often intercept a prisoner's mail. Occasionally, prisoners have misused this information as well. Unless a family member no one under 18 should be writing a prisoner.

Be patient Prisoners may not write back or it may take awhile. They may occasionally sound cynical, angry or disinterested in their words - keep in mind many "supporters" or people who've written before may have stopped writing them, Made/broken promises, lied to them, or they just had a tough day and they're venting on paper. Responding to an angry letter with more anger is not helpful.

If a prisoner is getting out in the near future, do not offer your place to stay (no matter how desperate they sound) unless you have corresponded for a significant amount of time and are in contact with both a parole officer and a prison intermediary(e.g. prison chaplain, or councilor). Even in cases like this, its far more helpful to a prisoner to help them secure employment and develop a support base (weather its through his/her church, family, friends, etc.). With nearly all parole releases there's a legal process that will need to be followed by both you and the prisoner. Don't land yourself in a bad position that could get you in trouble and/or the x-convict put back in jail.

Do not make promises. Many well-meaning people write letters of support to a prisoner, or make offers to help out of good will. Unfortunately most never follow through and build up false hope in a prisoner. Be honest with what you are able to do for a prisoner. Don't take on more than you are able to