

Anarchist Organizing Across Prison Walls

In Conversation with Chicago Anarchist Black Cross

True Leap Editorial Collective (TLP): For readers that don't know, can you explain what the Anarchist Black Cross is? What has been the primary function of the federation over the years, and how long has the chapter in Chicago been active?

Chicago Anarchist Black Cross (C-ABC): Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) actually began as the “Anarchist Red Cross” in Tsarist Russia. The group existed to help support prisoners and organize for self-defense. During the Russian Civil War, the name was changed to Anarchist Black Cross, to stop the confusion between them and the “Red Cross” relief organization. The group then sort of died off in the 1930s, but resurfaced in the 1960s in Britain, where they helped aid Spanish revolutionaries fighting against Franco. It spread to North America in the eighties and now there are at least twenty chapters that we know of in North America alone, as well as chapters in Europe, South America, Australia and elsewhere.

Chicago ABC, specifically, has been around since 2006. It has served many different purposes over the years and the function has changed as needs change. Prison is meant to be a lonely and isolating experience. It is meant to break us down and disconnect us from the world outside. We work to break down this barrier by keeping communication with folks on the inside. We organize events to raise money for prisoners, do letter writing nights, organize noise demos outside of prisons, help prisoners organize themselves on the inside, distribute free literature on a weekly basis, run a pen-pal program, and a whole host of other things. We wish to both support those who are imprisoned and provide solidarity when prisoners rise up and resist on the inside.

However, I should clarify that Chicago ABC is not actually part of the Anarchist Black Cross Federation. The reason for this dates back many years to a rift that sort of developed over what constitutes a “political prisoner” and who we should be supporting. This rift has largely been settled since then, but resulting from this, we simply never became part of the federation. Our chapter believes that all prisoners are inherently political due to the nature of the prison industrial complex (PIC). Criminalizing communities and locking people up is always an inherently political act. As a result, we choose to support anyone who writes us to the best of our ability. The type of solidarity and support that we offer may differ, but we are always working towards freedom for all prisoners.

TLP: How does your group understand itself within the broader terrain of progressive-to-radical movements in Chicago? Can you share some key struggles that your organization has participated in over the years?

C-ABC: Well, liberals generally don't like us, because our name has the scary A-word in it, which is fine, we don't like them either. But we also haven't totally given up on them... [laughter] ...In addition to doing work with prisoners, we also do a lot of tabling at events to try and get information about anarchism, prison abolition, anti-fascist work, direct action tactics, and lots of other topics. At the end of the day, though, we are anarchists and we pick our friends accordingly. The most recent struggle which we put a lot of effort into was helping support prisoners organizing the September 9th prison strike. We recognize that exploitation of prisoners for their labor is one aspect of the continuation of racial chattel slavery. Slavery did not die in 1863, and these rebellions and strikes will continue to grow until it does. Over a year of planning went into making this nationally coordinated strike happen and it took a lot of communication between those on the "inside" and those on the "outside." The initiative was spearheaded by prisoners and facilitated largely by the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, a committee of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Many folks from various ABC chapters also participated in this organizing. The strike turned out to be the largest prison strike in US history, and showed the sort of collective power that prisoners can have when they organize.

TLP: While there is a lot that can be unpacked here, especially in terms of the continuities between slavery and the prison industrial complex, maybe for now we should stick with the point that you ended on: the fact that prisoners are organizing...and this has always been the case. A lot of self-described activists in the "free world" seem to miss this. It's fucking infuriating how so many people still have no idea that the strikes even took place last Fall. From hunger strikes to other more insurrectionary tactics being taken up by prisoners all over the country, this is some of the most dynamic and important political work going on! And it also should go without mentioning that the work of families and loved ones of prisoners, formerly imprisoned people, and radicals organizing with prisoners is certainly crucial in the equation. But this work takes place largely off the radar of most progressive organizations.

In this regard, it is incredibly important for readers to know about the work that groups like Anarchist Black Cross take up in order to build (and sustain) horizontal connections across prison walls. And this reminds me of a famous quote from George Jackson, which I'd like to recite briefly:

A good deal of this has to do with our ability [as prisoners] to communicate to the people on the street... Oh yeah we can fight, but if we're isolated, if the state is successful in accomplishing that, the results are usually not constructive in terms of proving our point. We fight and we die,

but that's not the point. The point is, however, the face of what we confront, to fight and win. That's the real objective: not just to make statements, no matter how noble, but to destroy the system that oppresses us. By any means available to us. And to do this, we must be connected, in contact with and communication with those in struggle on the outside. We must be mutually supporting because we're all in this together. It's all one struggle at base.

So, as Jackson is saying, whether the political work takes place “inside” or “outside,” it is really all one struggle at base, and Anarchist Black Cross provides one example of a model for actualizing this theoretical point. Now I’m curious to ask, what is your chapter’s take on direct action? What does that look like for ABC? What other tactical and strategic lines does Chicago Anarchist Black Cross engage or support?

C-ABC: Direct action gets the goods! We differ from liberal prisoner support groups in that we choose to directly support those who use militant tactics in the struggle for liberation. In the context of prison struggle, a recent example of solid praxis that comes to mind was in Pittsburgh at Alleghany County Jail. About eighty prisoners began a work refusal and released a list of demands that included more case workers, better medical services, and a legitimate grievance procedure. After those on the outside heard of this sit-in, they took to the jail in masks, smashed windows of the jail, a security camera, and several police vehicles. Similar models of solidarity occurred around the September 9th prison strike where people all over the US and even other continents took action in solidarity with those on the inside rising up. This took the form of noise demos and marches, as well as direct attacks on prisons and those who profit off prison labor. This is the type of solidarity that can produce results.

In recognizing the gravity of the struggles we are engaged in, we must recognize that a diverse range of tactics must be used if we want to win. We don’t believe in codes of non-violence because violence is already here and is constantly held over our heads every day. The police and the state are violent institutions. They maintain their control through the threat of violence. Peaceful codes on non-violence are not going to get us out of the situation we are in. The state holds up non-violent protest as a model to strive for precisely because it does not challenge their power. So often in history, liberal groups will seek to co-opt revolutionary movements by seeking to police the tactics used and bring individuals back into the political system. Many NGOs and liberal groups today work as pressure valves in this way, driving people who are righteously angry back into the system, rather than organizing to fight against it. We must resist this cooptation and organize autonomously and militantly. This inevitably means coming up against the state as they struggle to maintain control. We recognize this and believe this solidifies the importance of groups like the Anarchist Black Cross.

TLP: We appreciate how Anarchist Black Cross chapters over the years have emphasized a type of solidarity with prisoners that is measured in action not just in rhetoric. Organizing and materially supporting folks inside is difficult work to sustain, and—depending on one’s organizational capacity—can also be quite exhausting. But it is so important to showcase groups such as ABC, because you also provide working examples of how radical organizations can operate and sustain themselves without liberal donor funding or registering for “non-profit” status. There are a handful of groups that could provide models, but what is important here to showcase is how there are outlets and methods to doing abolitionist work that are still “grassroots” and not totally institutionalized—work that is not based on relentless grant writing or housed solely in universities. Could you maybe speak a little about some of the failures and successes you have experienced in trying to sustain an organization without much external financial support? I think a lot of people looking to engage in political work that is not connected to the academic and non-profit industrial complexes would benefit a great deal from hearing about some of your group’s experiences.

C-ABC: How to secure funds is certainly one of the great questions in anarchist organizing. Luckily for us our costs are relatively low. Right now the majority of our money goes towards postage. We sustain ourselves by having a benefit show or two a year, and through donations when tabling at events. Being connected to a network of radicals definitely helps a ton in securing materials. Someone almost always has a friend with a hookup on the things you need. If not, there is almost always a way to get the things you need for free if you try hard enough.

TLP: What do you think the purpose, goals, and strategies of an anarchist organization should be? What kind of form or infrastructure do you think it should embody?

C-ABC: Anarchist organizations take on a ton of different forms. All of them can be useful in some way if they pose a threat to our enemies. We generally operate rather informally and like this type of organizing as opposed to rigid membership type groups, but we work with these types of groups as well. I would say I am personally less concerned with formalizing everything, than I am with taking action. All types of organizing are useful, in so far as they produce action. We can’t sit around and wait for a magic number of members to take action. The fight is happening here and now!

TLP: Has exhaustion or burnout ever been an issue for members of your organization? How have ya’ll dealt with these things?

C-ABC: Burnout is definitely something real that we face. We have seen quite a few people put a lot of energy into this and simply get tired of doing it. It can be

exhausting and stressful at times and I honestly don't think we have any good solutions to this. The best we can do is try and make things fun and flexible. Being able to experience fun and joy together is something I think is really important for groups to be able to exist long term. So much of the work we do in these movements can be boring and tedious. We need to make sure to have time to experience joy together. Mobile street dance parties come to mind as something that brings people out in a way that is both conflictual and also just really fun. We probably can and should do more in this area to help folks avoid burnout, but the reality is that a lot of the work is not always exciting.

TLP: Thanks for taking the time to do this interview. Maybe we'll wrap this interview up with one last question. What do you understand to be the most important role that the Anarchist Black Cross can play in the current political moment...both nationally...and in local struggles against racist state terror in Chicago?

C-ABC: We find ourselves in an obviously important historical moment. Anarchists are starting to find themselves on the front page of the *New York Times*, in viral videos on the internet, and in many other places we are maybe not used to being. The tactics that we use are becoming more widely acceptable. While this is really wonderful to see, we also know that this means that repression is inevitable. The state won't simply give up control and when a threat is perceived to be growing, history tells us they will do everything they can to squash it. While this speaks to the importance of groups like ABC, we also need to be doing our best to organize for self-defense in our communities. We need to be able to defend ourselves not only against the state, but also against far-Right groups as well. Sometimes defending ourselves also means going on the offensive against these groups. We can't simply wait around for the fight to come to us. We know that the state and the far-Right want to see our movements destroyed and we must be proactive about it.

We also need to work to build ways to keep our movements alive within prison. If we take it as evident that we will experience a wave of repression, we must work to understand how we can see prison as an extension of our struggle rather than the end of it. How can we continue to build our movements within prisons? How can we help prison rebellions grow and support those who engage in resistance? These things take a lot of effort and a lot of organizing but we should think about these strategies as we gear up for the fight ahead. There are more people pissed off and looking for ways to plug in now than maybe ever before. We must be willing to build and grow with these folks and create a force capable of withstanding oppression. This regime is not going to go peacefully and we must prepare for the fight ahead.