

Direct Action

Jail Solidarity

“Keep your focus on the meaning of what you are doing as your hands are cuffed behind you. Your challenge now and for a long time to come will be to remember, at each stage of what happens to you, that you have a choice: acquiesce

or resist. Choose your battles mindfully: there will be many of them and you cannot fight them all. Still, every instance of resistance slows the system down, prevents its functioning, lessens its power ... And when you get out of jail you will see where the jail



Red hand prints cover police station walls. Oaxaca, Mexico

is thinly concealed in the shopping mall, the school, the television program. You will know that at every moment you do truly have a choice: to acquiesce, to resist, to create something new.”

– Starhawk, *Making it Real*
‘initiation instructions’

Jails protect those with access to the system from those without, and are used to demoralize and dehumanize us. As a result of our struggle for a better world we are sometimes arrested, either for breaking the law, or often just to intimidate us or get us off the streets. Struggle does not end with arrest. By acting as a strong group, those arrested can have the power to transform jails into places where we continue to look after ourselves and others rather than succumbing to the disempowering system that wants to control us. Jail solidarity is one way of doing this.

Solidarity is protecting each

other and ourselves through group decision making. It is a philosophy and an approach, not a set of tactics, and it can prove extremely effective in jails and court houses, which are designed to make people feel alone and powerless. In some places jail solidarity has become synonymous with certain non-compliance tactics, such as withholding one’s name and identification. While this can be a powerful tactic, it is only one of many – the key is to work together to find out what is the best for everyone in the given situation.

A few of examples of successful jail solidarity are: Nelson Mandela organizing with other prisoners on Robben Island in South Africa to gain better conditions; arrested Suffragettes refusing to eat while in jail, until all women were released together; 150 anti-IMF protesters disobeying police and prison guards in Washington DC, negotiated a plea bargain in

which everyone's misdemeanour charges were reduced to a \$5 jaywalking ticket, and no one had to give their real name.

So what can jail and court solidarity look like?

» When you are arrested with other activists who you do not know, look around and check in with each other. Are there any medical emergencies, is everyone OK? Exchange names or nicknames, and get to know one another.

» Communicate those names or nicknames to someone not arrested. This can mean shouting out of a police vehicle to an activist with a notepad, to then share with a legal collective (see below) group, or your friends.

» As people may be at physical risk while under arrest it is crucial that all tactics are decided collectively, and that all voices are heard. It is important to have rotating facilitators so the police do not single out any one person as a 'leader'.

» Decide collectively how you will respond to certain situations. If the police try to separate one person from the group, which is common, people have used various tactics including piling on top of that person and insisting they are not removed.

» A tactic is something you do (eg: chant incessantly). A demand is something you want (eg: some water). You use tactics to get demands met (eg we're going to chant incessantly unless you bring us some water). Matching tactics to demands and appropriate escalation are keys to successfully accomplishing our collective goals. Make sure the cop, guard, judge, etc. one is talking to can meet the demands and is directly affected by the tactics.

» What can we do if our tactics aren't making them meet our demand? We can stop or escalate. If singing isn't working, try singing off key. Then try screaming; then screaming and pounding on the

door; etc. Make sure the tactic is still on the same level as the demand. We may also collectively choose to stop.

» Be ready to use solidarity tactics to protect people who are likely to be separated in jail and prosecuted more harshly in court. Non-citizens, people of colour, people who are seen as leaders, transgender or queer people, people with disabilities, people who dress 'punk' and people with prior arrests are examples of vulnerable people.

» Once out of jail and in the court system, we need to maintain solidarity. This can mean anything: organizing people to attend hearings, demanding collective trials, representing ourselves, creating theatre in the court to show the farce that it is.

» Legal collectives are helpful in any action. A legal collective can be a number of things. A trusted group of activists who work with lawyers to track us through the arrest, jail, and court process is invaluable. Legal

collectives are never to tell activists what to do, but help facilitate with communication, advance training, and interfacing with lawyers.

Resources:

US law collectives:

» People's Law:

www.PLC/~tao.ca

» Just Cause:

www.lawcollective.org

» Midnight Special:

www.midnightspecial.net

» In the US the National Lawyers Guild, often supports activists: www.nlg.org

UK legal help:

» The Activists' Legal Project - advice on running workshops for UK grassroots groups:

www.activistslegalproject.org.uk

» Liberty - your rights explained:

www.yourrights.org.uk/your-rights/index.shtml

» LDMG (Legal Defence and Monitoring Group):
ldmgmail@yahoo.co.uk