

Jail Solidarity

From the School of the Americas Watch Handbook for Nonviolent Direct Action and Civil Disobedience
<http://members.tripod.com/SOAWatchLocal/LocalPages/handbook.htm>

Jail solidarity may be defined as complete unity of purpose of those incarcerated or imprisoned. The ultimate objective of that unity is for everyone committing the same act to be treated equally and fairly in jail and in sentencing. Refusing citations, bail, fines, community service or probation keeps us together as a community with the potential for collective bargaining to meet that objective.

For jail solidarity to be most effective, the issues surrounding it must be addressed and resolved to the greatest extent possible before reaching jail. Jail authorities are not going to patiently wait and conquer" tactics to weaken our bargaining power.

One divisive tactic used by the prison/legal system is different treatment for certain individuals or groups. These people risking harsher treatment usually include noncooperators, repeat offenders, known organizers, people of color, lesbians and gay men. Discussions of solidarity should always include the issue of how to give these people the extra protection they need.

Coming to agreements about solidarity goals and tactics is a powerful but difficult process. To reach true solidarity with the greatest number of participants, people must have enough information and time to make wise decisions. Solidarity tactics that are employed successfully are empowering. Ill-considered, unfocused uses of solidarity tactics are less successful and drain our energies.

Some of the issues that cause the most controversy around solidarity include interpretation of the nonviolence guidelines, and under what circumstances, if any, we will keep solidarity with those who have previous records, are on probation or have not followed the nonviolence guidelines for that action.

People's motivations for participating in CD will affect their attitudes toward the police and jail guards. Some people are motivated to CD as a protest against the multiple structures in society which work together to create a weapons industry. The prison/judicial system is seen as one of these structures.

The effect of this political viewpoint on behavior in jail can be very dramatic. Often people refuse to cooperate with the authorities at all. Some ways they do this are by going limp during arrest, not abiding by prison regulations, and refusing to participate in arraignment. Some of these acts serve personal moral goals; others are initiated as levers to make the legal system mete out equal and fair sentences to all.

Another group may reflect a different set of motivations and approaches. For some people for example, their fundamental reason for CD stems from an awareness of the destructive power of nuclear weaponry. Their fear and outrage over these weapons may be their only motivation to do civil disobedience. Often these people will stress more of the need to communicate with the human beings behind the helmets, uniforms and roles. They will talk to the police, perhaps befriend the prison guards, and try to use persuasion and dialogue to raise questions about these roles.

The differences between these two approaches will frequently lead to conflict. The stress of the jail experience tends to intensify conflict but by discussing differences beforehand their effect on jail solidarity can be minimized. Conflicts that arise in jail must be acknowledged and dealt with at the time or they may become divisive. Conflict is an expression of opposing viewpoints and should not be confused with violence.

Often it is not possible for everyone to agree to stay in jail for solidarity purposes. Sometimes there are people who question the need to struggle inside the jails when the action's primary goal is something else. Some people, because of outside responsibilities, cannot afford the time jail solidarity may demand. Others find jail conditions physically or emotionally intolerable. And still others take the political stand that we're more effective back on the streets encouraging other people to take a stand. Whatever the reason, for not participating in jail solidarity, individuals should make this information known beforehand since it may affect decisions of the group. Those who must leave jail are not betraying the group - there are many ways they can continue supporting those inside: by speaking to the media, to the movement and to the public about conditions inside by fulfilling responsibilities for those inside, by carrying messages to family, friends, and employers.

Jail solidarity must never become coercive. In jail, solidarity is our strength and the strength of our solidarity comes from the free agreement of all who take part in it.