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‘Prison Abolition’ in a Neo-Colonial Ice Age

Claustrophobia Collective

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1997

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revolutionary Black prisoners were doing at the time. "... it created a new sense of unity among the prisoners as a class. The white prisoners began to check out books from the Black Culture library, to attend joint political study groups, and to try to understand in theoretical terms how racism was a way of enslaving us all — blacks and other non-whites as inferiors, whites as oppressors. Fascist politics became not only unpopular, but unsafe." (We recommend that everyone should find and read this article for the inspiration and history it provides.)

The unity Kom'boa talks about is a model for a first step towards building a revolutionary prison movement. But of course this isn't 1970. The revolutionary Black movement has been decimated by state repression and reforms, and is just now seriously consolidating and rebuilding itself; and from our experience, radical white prisoners seem alone and isolated most places. Obviously as outside activists, we can't do much real organizing in prisons, but it's important to identify what's going on, and where and who we should be focusing on supporting. Our free literature project is a good program; it helps basically anyone trying to organize inside the walls. But figuring out a way to specifically work to encourage/support/defend race treason inside prisons is on us.

groups. It would definitely be more difficult to apply with the same success ARA methods to ABC work. For example, the proximity of racists in skinhead and metal scenes is not paralleled by any white youth connection to prisons. There is nothing like the everyday threat of getting stomped by nazis cause you are anti-racist or anarchist. Prison is even more distant (and abstract) than the police as something to fight against. There are white kids in prison, of course, and maybe that's a place to start, but it seems so much more distant culturally. The reality of prisons are not so easily injected into the everyday terrain of white youth (that is, short of mass imprisonment of white youth). What we need to do is figure out at least the beginning of an "anti-prison practice" that people could take up.

Race Treason and White Prisoners

Speaking of Nazis, we all know that one of the places they do their most serious organizing is in the prisons. The recent string of killings at Lewisburg federal pen got started by some boneheads murdering an anti-racist white prisoner who got involved with a group of Sunni Muslims. This is a case where all of our beliefs about "race treason" get seriously put to the test. This is a man who was killed by white supremacists for just that — daring to break with the lie of "whiteness". One major responsibility we have as "free world" whites is to make contacts with people like that and figure out how we can support and defend them. We can't afford any more dead anti-racists...

In an article called "Back from Hell: Black Power and Treason to Whiteness Inside Prison Walls" (printed in *Race Traitor #3*), Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin described the prisoners' struggle at Terre Haute federal penitentiary in 1970 in which "even whites who had been following the Klan line for many years rose up with the blacks against the prison officials". He described a situation where a number of radical white prisoners were able to orient a large number of whites to identifying with, and allying themselves with, the work that the

Introduction

With the publication of our *Discussion Bulletin*, we had hoped to draw out some real strategic discussion regarding the position that all of us who make up the anarchist prison solidarity tendency find ourselves in. So far, very little of that has happened, and as a result, our politics and work have suffered. We've been able to do some good work in building up an Emergency Response Network and various local campaigns, but ABC still lacks the political clarity we'll need to figure out how to relate to anything broader than ourselves. This paper will attempt to congeal the discussions that we, and other groups in similar positions, have been trying to deal with into a solid form that can be discussed and responded to, and that we hope will move our dialogue in a more productive and strategically useful direction. Many of the issues which we've dealt with extensively in the past — the essentially rhetorical disagreements over prison abolition are a good example — seem to be limiting, unnecessarily divisive, and unable to provide us with any real strategic orientation. Those issues may prove to be important at some point, but we're not going to try to address them here. On the other hand, the definition of our orientation between solely PP/POW support and solidarity with the broader prison movement is an important question that will have to be answered through our experience and practice. To the extent we've articulated a position — either dividing the two conceptions or combining them — it's been done very mechanically, and without a clear orientation of how the question fits into the process of building revolutionary movements. Comments from political prisoners on this point (especially Bill Dunne's and Shaka Shakur's letters, which have been printed in past issues of this *Bulletin*) have been extremely helpful as a starting point. We'll try to add some comments to that discussion, while keeping in mind that the only answers possible are those that flow directly from experience and form part of our overall analysis and strategy.

The bulk of this essay is a direct analysis and self-criticism drawn from our histories in Claustrophobia ABC and Baltimore ABC. However, the analysis we want to make can't be worked out in a vacuum, without discussing the broader currents, movements, and cultures we exist in. Specifically, we feel that a clear assessment of the current state of the anarchist and radical movements we're a part of, an analysis of the recent history of north american anti-imperialist and solidarity movements, and an overall sketch of the economic and political situation of the country today are necessary in order to inform our work. Each of these is much larger than the scope of this essay, yet on some points we can't avoid dealing with these questions. When we've had to offer our perspective on situations external to us, we've tried to do so as clearly and minimally as possible. However, much of this history has never been given a satisfactory treatment, and of course we don't expect to be able to do this. We apologize in advance to anyone whose positions we may misrepresent and hope that errors will be pointed out to us.

I: Revolution is the expression of communities, classes, and nations which understand they can live without patriarchy, capitalism, and in our case, parasitic dependency, and who build up the power to overthrow the state in order to make that life real. We need to evaluate our own practice relative to this understanding. Too often we've shown that we just don't get it. When we carry out politics without our self-defined social base in motion, but instead as individual activists fighting for some cause or another, we imitate the liberals and will only ever be reformist. There's a real difference between doing issue-based activism and acting as a conscious organized force within a mass movement. If we don't organize ourselves, the anarchist movement, into a new class force, where our movement becomes the expression, the life of a class in revolt, then we will be without consequence. But it must be clear we don't look for the class in revolt, we look for the revolts in our class and that way build movement among our people. We must become that class

formed a bloc identifying themselves as anti-racist and were planning to start a label for anti-racist bands. At the same time other bands were moving more clearly into the nazi camp (orchestrated by the St Paul bonehead band Bound for Glory). The polarization of a pretty apolitical scene around politics of anti-racism is a really positive development. It causes a fracture of white solidarity, and promotes a unity based on radical politics. In a less developed part of their work, ARA has begun to organize white kids against the police. This has almost completely taken the form of copwatch actions, which are street patrols in a neighborhood where cop actions are scrutinized by a big group of people. The aim is to get cops to let people go by making everything they do a big hassle for them and more importantly to develop an attitude, among white youth and within whatever neighborhood ARA patrols in, that is critical and hostile to the police. What interests us in all of this is the possibility that is latent in ARA work of developing an (anti)white youth culture that is anti-racist and against the police, and that these politics are given active and practical expression through the culture that they create. We haven't mentioned the anti-patriarchal work that ARA has begun to do (a queer kiss-in outside the house of two gay-bashers). This work has been even less developed than the anti-cop activity though it is growing fast and, due to women's strong presence in the Mpls ARA, it serious part of the ARA scene there. All of these transformations, if built into a way of life (a culture), constitute a base for revolutionary struggle which hasn't existed among too many white kids for several decades.

If ABC is to concern itself with the issue of prison as an increasingly powerful tool of social control in the context of global capitalist restructuring, then we must find a strategy and tactics which can meaningfully intervene. As we see it, the most profound development we could affect would be to find a path that could take masses of (anti)white youth into rebellion against law and prisons. And if this does become our strategy then much of our work would cross paths with that of at least the more radical and anarchist ARA

Anti-Racist Action

Having taken a trip this fall out to the midwest (Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis), we got to check out the Anti-Racist Action movement which is growing pretty fast, especially compared to anything else with anti-authoritarian politics. Mostly we hung out with the ARA crew in Minneapolis, which is the basis for our perspective. We want to propose ARA's methods of struggle as a model in many ways for our own activities. So first let us describe briefly what interests us about ARA. It is interesting, first of all, that ARA which started in Toronto and Minneapolis grew out of a radical or leftist type skinhead scene. In the first years of ARA, all members were anti-racist skinheads (and not "pro-american" either) whose practice consisted of beating up nazi skins in those cities. It was a totally principled and sensible response to anti-racist ideas to fight those racists who were in your own scene, who were attempting to take over your own identity for nazi organizing. For this reason we disagree with Komboa's characterization and dismissal of the ARA groups as "vanguards fighting vanguards". ARA has placed itself within the currents of white youth culture in an effort to fight nazi organizers who are trying to organize in the same place. At the same time, ARA groups in many places have taken on struggles against institutional racism by taking action against police. The original skinhead ARA groups have since fallen apart with only a few of the original people still involved. Sexism and macho-man style broke up the group as well as alienating others from it. Now ARA has little connection to skinhead culture, but it continues to build anti-racist (and revolutionary anti-sexist, anti-authoritarian) politics within a number of mostly white youth scenes.

While we were in Mpls a lot of work was being done in the metal scene, largely in response to a shift by nazi boneheads towards that scene. Within a pretty short period of time a lot of contact had been made within the metal scene where a number of bands

in revolt. No matter how important it may seem sometimes to debate by-laws, federation structures, etc., we don't feel that structures and organizations are the crucial questions right now. We're far enough from a revolutionary situation in this country right now that basically we have to understand all of our organizations and networks as being provisional; that the main purpose of being organized today is to be building solid relationships, to be developing our political understanding and creating new philosophies of resistance, and to be learning skills and habits which we'll need to carry out revolutionary struggle — everything from running successful counter-institutions to self-defense training and security precautions to living non-authoritarian and non-parasitic relationships in our everyday lives. What that means is that the way we organize today doesn't have to be the way we organize ten or fifteen years from now: the nature of oppression is changing radically, the nature of resistance is and will have to change to counter it, and we need continually to reposition ourselves based on all those factors.

Look for example at the churches burning across the country, which have everyone confused, because it's obviously a full-scale assault on a major institution in the Black community, and yet except for a few Klansmen involved here and there, there are none of the recognizable signs of a *racist conspiracy* that we would expect. The state's strategy in response appears to be to offer just enough support to the southern Black clergy to be able to set the terms of debate, then use that position to keep ahead of any radical grassroots mobilization against the real bases of white supremacist organizing. Still, it's not hard at all to imagine a radical Black or mixed movement rising to defend the communities under attack, and when that happens, sooner or later it will have to confront the state. Are we going to be in a position to be there when it happens? What kind of support can we offer in that kind of situation, and how prepared are we? This is an especially clear example because of our relationship with the Anti-Racist Action (ARA) network and other similar work being done on the issue. If and when political

conflict — whatever issue it surfaces around — again reaches the point where large numbers of people are beginning to think seriously about armed struggle, there will definitely be an even greater need for a lot of people to take up political prisoner defense work. But that doesn't have to be in the form of ABC, it probably won't be using the same tactics we're focusing on today, and we might not necessarily be the people best situated to do it.

II: The first thing to look at is the state of the anarchist movement, which for most of us is both our roots and our base. There have been plenty of criticisms made of the arrogance of the movement and white chauvinism, middle-class dominance and pacifist lifestylism. The strongest of these have come from Black comrades, but similar struggles have come up [internally] as well. Much less clear have been the criticisms of the movement's patriarchy, though it's obvious that in most places, the scene is pretty thoroughly male-dominated. Much of the recent anarchist women's developments that contain at least an implicit critique of the male-oriented movement have happened in the specifically cultural realm, without any representation in the form of organizations or position papers — hence it's been that much easier to dismiss them. We would mark the rise of our tendency in the generation of youth, many of them punks, who were inspired by the commitment to direct action and the image of a multi-faceted 'dual power' movement — both community-building and offensive militance against the state — they saw in the European autonomen and squatter movements and tried to reproduce those scenes here. They distinguished themselves, first of all, from the pacifist anarchists that were active in the anti-nuclear struggles, as well as the pacifism of the Central America solidarity movement in which they were active. However, by the end of the '80s the context in which anarchist direct action had been carried out — the mass actions in solidarity with Central American and South African liberation struggles — had evaporated. Likewise, the punk scene as the dominant social base for this new youth movement was chang-

Neoliberalism/Neocolonialism: Understanding the World We Struggle

In order to develop politics relating to prison we need to have a better understanding of the whole deal. We need to be watching the whole world. That needs to be the basis for how we take action. We are not going to try to begin that analysis here but we want that to become a bigger part of how we understand what we are doing. We are interested in the politics that the EZLN has been advancing and the possibility of an international coming up around them. The idea of a new international ("against neoliberalism and for humanity") was first put out this summer at the intercontinental encounter held in Chiapas. The idea excites us as well because it breaks from the model of solidarity groups that have been generated world wide in support of the Zapatistas, or at least it could and we hope it does. The Zapatistas have started from an analysis that is in part new but more importantly they are part of a world liberation struggle that has acknowledged the new terrain (known as neoliberalism or neo-colonialism) and is attempting to find a way out. We are not trying to argue that the EZLN have made the most advanced analysis or the strongest blow against this revised capitalist system which rules the world, and so everyone needs to fall in behind their lead. In fact, there are a number of questions and criticisms that we have. So we are not so much interested in a Zapatista international so much as an international in which new and anti-authoritarian forms of struggle can be carried out (including that of the Zapatistas), that these struggles be linked and that they be self-conscious of the new possibilities they embody. What we need in order to participate in this "network without hierarchies" which is still only an idea, is a much clearer idea of our own politics and perspective/analysis. Of course there is also a question of how we would participate: representing prison struggles or as a political tendency or whatever we might come to be by next fall. That is all up in the air.

that are important for us to investigate. As well there are many others: we haven't seen much analysis of "crime" in white communities; of different settler class relations to law and order hysteria; of the mechanism by which law and order politics get spread. These and many other questions are important for us if we are to combat the genocide and neoliberalism of prisons. Helping to deepen the analysis of the prison movement as well as other revolutionary struggles, and contributing to an understanding of how to win is what we mean by political support. Developing politics with strategy and tactics that arise from our own analysis of the situation and an understanding of our place in that situation, is both more difficult and more useful than the reproduction and propagation of politics, no matter how advanced, which are not our own. Of course, the theory of the New Afrikan/Black movement which we borrow comes out of the struggles of New Afrikan/Black revolutionaries to understand the reality they are moving in. We need to do this for ourselves. We also need to move our analysis into strategic ideas of intervention from which an even more profound struggle can occur. From here we go into some ideas for a strategic reorientation. There are a number of questions for research which could point us in this direction. One obvious one is a more thorough analysis of patriarchy and how the struggle against it can be effectively tied into our work. Within the context of the new patriarchal attacks on women, such as cuts in welfare, what is the meaning of the rapid rise in imprisonment of women? How does it fit in to everything else? What part does it play in genocide against Blacks/New Africans? What is the demographics in terms of nation? Where are "white" women in relation to this? How does a male-focused prison movement deal with this? And as always more work in "cultural" circles would help us out a lot. It always seems like people's problems and frustrations get expressed through their lifestyles, their music, & everyday rebellion long before the so-called "left" picks up on them, and much more honestly than the left deals with them.

ing, taking on a less antagonistic, less rebellious ethic. Of course, both these changes have their roots deeper in transformations that were reshaping the whole world.

A number of people who'd done a few years in this period retired when it became clear that new ideas needed to be developed, that the old ones could no longer succeed. But the younger comrades stuck around, having built a network around the Love and Rage newspaper, and a general political unity. L&R was important in that period because it developed connections between those who wanted a revolutionary anarchism that fought against racism, sexism, and homophobia and was in solidarity with anti-imperial struggles around the world. The split which came at the winter 1993 conference in San Diego broke down the unity of this tendency. A number of important issues were the source of the split, each of these influencing the forms taken up next. These issues included charges of internal hierarchies and male-dominance, being directed at those who wanted to remake L&R into a cadre-type group. From activity generated around the Gulf War and the splintering of L&R, a new terrain emerged. Two of the first ABC groups in the new period — Nightcrawlers and New Jersey — were in L&R at this time. Nightcrawlers went with the splitters, while NJ stayed and has maintained a pretty marginal position in the new L&R Federation. Since then other ABCs (with the exception of Minneapolis and BCAC) have had little interaction with L&R. Thus ABC has created its own independent pole of activity in the diffused and disconnected anarchist movement. A series of infoshops, another tactic taken from the European experience, have defined much of this new period in which the current ABC also arose. Within a few years there were infoshops/autonomous zones in almost any city with some anarchist scene. Starting with a gathering at the Detroit Trumbullplex in May 1994, another pole was developed around the infoshop scene, with (Dis)connection as its medium for discussion. Similarly, an independent pole has developed around Anti-Racist Action groups. This aspect of the current movement —

where work is carried on around individual issues, without connection to a broader dialogue in the revolutionary anarchist movement, needs to be changed. The isolationist style we have taken in our issue politics, including the creation of organizational structures, has led to a lack of revolutionary strategy and orientation in our work. Discussions have been developing around several poles recently; we see the dialogue going on among ABC collectives as a parallel, rather than oppositional, development to, for example, L&R or the Network of Anarchist Collectives.

III: It was out of the apparent vacuum of strategy in the early '90s, and motivated by contact with anarchist and other comrades who were still imprisoned for their involvement in the armed struggle of the '70s and '80s, that the current Anarchist Black Cross network began to take shape. We hoped to learn some lessons from connecting our struggle with the revolutionary movements of the recent past and the political prisoners who took part in those movements. We did learn a lot which we can begin to pass on to other people in our situation. We also found ourselves falling into a lot of neo-colonial traps through the alliances we thought we could make, and we isolated ourselves to a degree from the people we most needed to reach by failing to keep our focus on organizing ourselves into a revolutionary force. This paper is an attempt to draw out the important lessons from our experience, and to provide a constructive criticism of our mistakes: to lay out some additional groundwork for north american anti-authoritarians like ourselves who are active in the anti-prison movement. So that we can begin to shift our weight off the backs of the people who are holding us now and onto a foundation of our own.

The main impetus for most of the collectives that came together over the last few years within the anarchist prison solidarity movement can be traced to Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: his speaking tours, his book, and his *Draft Proposal for an Anarchist Black Cross Network* were what immediately led us to take the situation of political prisoners seriously as a strategic issue to focus on. The Claustro-

ter, there were all along two conceptions of what this would mean. On one hand, there was the strategy of building a new movement around the PP/POWs of the last wave of the movement, expressed by the program of making financial support to PP/POWs central and using the education of their histories as outreach to lay the groundwork for building a new movement. **And on our side, we saw ourselves as part of a new emerging movement that was going to have to define itself on its own terms, independent of both the 70s/80s left and the orthodox anarchist tradition alike. So we saw our primary responsibility as being toward that movement, to participate in it and help it shape itself.** Our work with political prisoners was seen in the context of (1) making links between "outside" and "inside" revolutionary movements, (2) using the experiences of longtime revolutionaries to help us critique our current work, and (3) finally, fulfilling a moral duty that every movement has towards its PP/POWs. This is still essentially how we define our politics, and we're still searching for solutions to put that into practice. The situation after the federation split, with two or more separate networks doing similar and interconnected work with little cooperation and less political dialogue, doesn't bode well. **We need to work out the political basis for unity we have, then act on that...**

Strategic Suggestions

"Revolution is about finding a way, or making one"
— Gregory Hunt

Towards Political Solidarity

One of the issues raised in the last section that we need to clarify is what we mean by **political support** rather than support which is just technical and material. At the end, we raised some questions

ranged with the police and the coalition never took any kind of anti-cop stand, the group always stayed comfortably within the liberal/left scene and never reached out to more militant Black groups. This position seemed to be a source of conflict within the core support committee, although the positions were never clarified to the coalition. A similar criticism was made at one point that Eddie had played only minor roles in the most important and militant prison struggles since his incarceration, and that holding him up as a political prisoner and symbol of the prison movement was in effect taking an unprincipled stand in relation to the people who had fought and suffered for those struggles, especially the group of Sunni Muslims who had been the core of a number of struggles over the years. For most of us in the coalition, there was really no way to work out all the facts behind criticisms like this, so what should have been important was to keep clear politics at the forefront of who we were and what our relationship to Eddie's freedom campaign should be. Unfortunately, no one in the coalition had taken the time to work those issues out from the start, since all the groups involved were essentially operating from a dishonest viewpoint: thinking that we could simply follow the support committee's line and be absolved of the responsibility of figuring shit out for ourselves. What we should have done in this coalition was to put all of our energy into building solid relationships based on politics with the other people from our generation in the coalition. Since that was never done, there was never anything we could do productively in the group and we ended up essentially as observers the whole time. And now out of 30–40 people who were attending meetings at first, basically nothing remains as far as regular activity.

The Split in the ABC Federation

When groups were first discussing the idea of getting together in the federation to coordinate political prisoner support work bet-

phobia collective, as one example, came together after setting up a speaking date for Kom'boa three years ago and discussing the Draft Proposal with each other afterward. We saw ABC and prison work as a chance to get with serious work. In this sense it was a positive step — a conscious break with a largely hopeless subcultural scene — though of course it had within it several serious contradictions as well. It was definitely Kom'boa's involvement, as much as our own political understanding, that motivated us at the time. First of all, he was a Black revolutionary with an intense history of struggle and a wealth of energy and knowledge who (from our perspective at the time) consciously sought out our movement (i.e. the mostly white and seriously flawed anarchist scene we were a part of) and dealt with us with a lot more patience than someone from his position could have been expected to show. Secondly, because his involvement legitimized us for a while in that we could appear that much more serious in our political difference with other white leftists. Both of these facts were important to us at the time, given our general lack of political development. This is where we should make clear that the way we chose to struggle against our racism and classism — by turning our backs on the only communities in which we had real roots and using our relationship to Black comrades to give us political legitimacy — contained plenty of obvious contradictions that were expressed from the beginning. However, it wasn't until we had overcome at least some of our lack of political development that we became fully aware of more complex contradictions we were promulgating.

As the ABC began building various relationships in support of political prisoners whose movements we had no clear relationship to, and as we took up activism in the broader prison movement following the principles and programs of the Draft Proposal, we worked ourselves into a confused and unworkable position. For the most part, we had not developed a political analysis or strategic orientation of our own concerning PP/POW work or any of the specific struggles which made up the prison movement. This was a

natural outcome of coming from the anarchist movement, which is fragmented, has a limited social base, and has an underdeveloped political-strategic dialogue. What these facts added up to was the development of a politically dependent and parasitic relationship to the New Afrikan/Black movement, which is the core of and the driving force behind the prison movement. This parasitism can be characterized as a buyer-seller relationship in which we take the news, understanding, and terminology which legitimate us from the New Afrikan prison revolutionaries we're in contact with, and offer material and technical — rather than political — support in return. This amounts to buying politics rather than struggling them out. It also has to be understood as an ultimately useless and even harmful form of internationalism. There are a number of examples from the past few years which can help clarify this. All of those issues are pretty evident just from looking at an issue of Claustrophobia. The first thing you notice is that it has adopted much of the language of the New Afrikan struggle. Our readership among prisoners was almost completely New Afrikan/Black radicals. A not insignificant number of people wrote to us assuming that we were Black ourselves and actively working in Black communities outside prison. Of course there was nothing in Claustrophobia to contradict such a conclusion. While in some ways the journal is moving in a lot of positive directions, there still is no unified analysis of the role prisons play in the state's strategies for control, repression, and genocide, barely even any mention of the relationship of the state to gender struggles now, and not even a word — although we have been starting to think about this — about what role a young, inexperienced movement without clear politics can play in opposing the genocide going on around us.

Baltimore fall apart due to the sectarianism and incompetence of all the essentially white left groups involved (ourselves not excepted), and we hoped that a support campaign which was Black-led and directly and locally in touch with the prisoner it focused on could avoid all these problems.

Starting out into this campaign, we came from a position that our focus should always be on using this case to deal with the role of prisons in society today, and to raise the issues that building a movement entails: security, defense of comrades, strategy for dealing with state repression, etc. This might not have ever been consciously stated, but it was pretty much implicit in the directions we were starting to move. We knew that the Panthers were long dead as a political force, however much inspiration their example may still provide. There was no revolutionary organization for Eddie to join and build if he was released, we didn't see supporting him as necessarily being supporting the Black revolutionary movement. What we were hoping to do was to get a bunch of younger activists to start talking with each other about the analysis of prisons as a central part of the state's strategy for repression and genocide in the 90s, and to start looking seriously at the lessons of the 60s/70s movement and what they mean for us if we're serious about building a comparable movement in our generation. Of course we felt a moral obligation to support Eddie and all the other political prisoners who have basically been left to rot in prison as the movement died, but we never wanted that to be our primary attitude in organizing. You can't get very far trying to organize if you're always looking backward.

The politics of the coalition were somewhat vague as far as the alliances it made. Due primarily to Eddie's input, there was a strong link to a prisoners' initiative against recent legislation denying parole for lifers. At the same time, since the overall strategy was always a petition to the governor, the coalition always shrank from the prospect of taking too militant a stand on issues which might have won it broader grassroots support. Demonstrations were ar-

Friends of Marshall Eddie Conway Support Committee

During the winter of '96, a campaign was built in support of wrongly convicted Baltimore Black Panther veteran Marshall Eddie Conway, which we involved ourselves in on an individual level (by that point splits in the Baltimore ABC collective were already solidly manifesting themselves and work as a collective was basically impossible.) The campaign was basically built around a core support committee consisting of fellow BPP veterans and other radicals in the local Black community, with a broader coalition which, despite some honest efforts to get beyond sectarianism, never managed to escape the “white left ghetto” which swallowed it almost immediately, and within a few months, the coalition fell apart as weightlessly and quietly as it was built up. This experience should force us to take a deeper look at the role we expected to play in this type of coalition and ask what went wrong... The timing of the campaign was based around a chance to gain a commutation of sentence from the governor, and the fertile ground shown by the “Free Mumia” campaign for organizing college and high-school students — of all colors and nationalities — behind support for a radical political prisoner, and especially one affiliated with the BPP. At some point it became obvious that our generation was starting to identify with the Panthers to the degree that thousands of people could be mobilized real easily for a demonstration, and a number of Black radicals here decided to try and mobilize that sentiment into sympathy with Eddie Conway’s case, with the goal of maintaining some street-level awareness and outreach to accompany a proposal to the governor’s office for parole or commutation of Eddie’s sentence. For our part, we welcomed the campaign as a chance to bring some of the issues raised by support work for Mumia down to a local level and teach our generation of radicals that the resistance of the 60s/70s was something happening everywhere, here, and not something which can be abstracted to one hero. Also, we had watched all efforts to build a support coalition for Mumia in

Histories and Snapshots

Free Mumia! coalition

The campaign to free Mumia has been a major part of anarchist prison work since at least early 1995. In DC, Claustrophobia did more towards Mumia’s defense than we did for any other project we have been involved with. Because it has been similarly central to many other collectives, and because it is a major part (probably the most visible part) of the current prison movement, we will share our perspective on our experience in this struggle. Early in 1995 a group of activists who had been involved in Mumia’s defense campaign started to get together to plan for what was then clearly an impending death warrant. This all white group of activists came from a variety of left groups in DC. The group solidified as the DC Coalition to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal shortly before the death warrant was signed on June 2. Though the membership of the group shifted around a little bit, its basic character remained the same. It had its base in the mostly white and well confined leftist groups in the city. This was the case despite the committed and constant participation of the several Black/New Afrikan members of the coalition. Due to the looming execution date, the basic tactic at this time was frequent broadly directed public actions such as marches, street flyering and postering, car caravans and public forums. These actions were done as broadcast calls for solidarity, directed more or less at anyone we thought might listen. We spoke from an undefined place, or rather from no place at all; we did not speak as middle class white liberals, nor as communist cadre, nor as a working class community group, nor as New Afrikan or Black nationalists, nor as anti-racist white feminists nor as a coalition of any of these voices; and thus it was hard for anyone to know how to hear us. Most of our actions were directed at the working class Black neighborhoods where we lived or close-by. In a pretty anonymous and ghostly way we traversed the streets posting flyers for

our next demonstration. We wanted masses of people out to terrify the state. Some of us wanted to propagate the principle that if Mumia dies, there will be fire in the skies!, seeing this as perhaps the only real power that could intercede. So we put this out as well.

The reality of it was however that only the network of people connected to various small left groups came out, and our marches passed through the streets in the middle of day with an equally phantasmic presence, never really touching the ground, or at least not the same ground that everyone else around was walking on. The most obscene example of the coalition's impossible presence was our "car caravan" which consisted of driving a bunch of cars decked out with signs and a van with a loudspeaker through a dozen neighborhoods on a Saturday morning. As the caravan passed slowly down the street or stopped at a busy spot, someone on the mic would put out the word on Mumia, usually by way of slogans, and other people would walk nearby passing out flyers. Whether or not this could be done without giving the impression that we were a strange cult about to take over the city is not our issue here. In any case we proved we were not the ones to do it when we drove down the street in a Latino neighborhood invoking the name of a man whose shooting by the police had brought riots a few years before. People definitely took notice as a group of mostly white non-Latinos blared across a loudspeaker "in the name of Daniel Gomez, Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!". What did we know about the situation, and why was it so easy for us to opportunistically invoke someone else's struggle? The same tactic, different names was used in other neighborhoods recalling well known Black victims of police brutality. Of course it is important and totally necessary to make links to local situations, but then how come it didn't work? Cause no one bought it from us. And no one bought it from us because we were phantoms who had no real relation to those we spoke to, and were not clear about who we were.

This was not primarily a question of the "racial" make-up of the coalition, but how we organized. During this period leading up to the execution date and stay, we were aware of some of the problems w/ our strategy and afterwards we attempted to address them. Starting that fall we attempted to orient to various segments of the population that were already constituted in some type of organization: unions, churches, schools, etc. and to connect with people who would carryout work within their different communities or scenes. This idea made better sense, but was coupled with previous "rouse the masses" strategies, and did not arise out of much of a strategic dialog. As a result it never got implemented. More recently, a New Afrikan member of the coalition made the suggestion that white folks in the coalition would do better to figure out how we could get whites to support Mumia's freedom, while Blacks/New Afrikans worked in their own community. This principle was never discussed among the whole coalition because of the group's chronic inability to struggle over politics and strategy, however, it was de facto put into practice in ambiguous form through an alliance with the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. In the 'White Quarter', this strategy might have led to the development of a base among groups of whites around politics associated with Mumia's struggle. The particulars of this would need to be worked out in the process. On the other hand, the strategy could also lead white members of the coalition back into the familiar territory of middle class left activism that is the white left's substitute for struggle. What choice white members of the coalition made is unknown to us since we moved out of town in the middle of these changes and have not been in close contact since. At the time that this change was going on Claustrophobia was becoming somewhat more aware of the former possibility at the same time that we were totally frustrated with the group and uncertain about how to participate in it.