

*How, even in
prison, can
I be useful
to the
revolutionary
process?*



Contribution from
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The International Red Aid was founded twenty-five years ago. It has extensive experience in supporting revolutionary prisoners. Twenty years ago, it spearheaded the campaign for the release of Georges Abdallah. The International Red Aid sees its work as an integral part of the revolutionary process, and its relationship with prisoners is therefore of a particular political nature.

Since the International Red Aid operates through its various branches, all of which face specific local and national realities, we, as the International Secretariat, are unable to answer the specific questions Material posed. However, due to its transnational nature and long experience, our organization has a unique perspective—global, political, and concrete—on the reality of revolutionary prisoners. It is this perspective, which transcends the diversity of national realities, strategic projects, and political cultures, that we will outline here.

Imprisonment as a Stage of Commitment

Imprisonment should not come as a surprise to revolutionaries. The timing and manner of arrest, the conditions of interrogation and confinement, the procedures of the trial, and the severity of the sentence—all these factors may lead to unexpected outcomes. But the prospect of being detained is one that the revolutionary has accepted upon entering the struggle.

By leaving the struggles waged on the street, in clandestinity, through guerrilla warfare conducted in jungles, in cities, or in mountains, the revolutionary entering his prison cell is merely changing trenches. While many people on the outside perceive this as a break, as a major disruption (all the more so if they are politically uneducated), revolutionaries see it as a continuity—the continuity of their commitment.

Revolutionary prisoners can be categorized in many ways: by their ideology and political project; by their country of origin; by their conditions of detention; the length of their sentence, and so on. But beyond all these differences, however significant they may be, a shared determination drives them—a determination that alone can explain their choices and positions. This determination is the will to remain political subjects.

A Single Imperative...

Therefore, the question that immediately arises for the imprisoned revolutionary is, “How, in this new situation, can I be useful to the revolutionary process?” Sometimes he or she is a member of an organization (or a tradition) that has already provided an answer; sometimes he or she must deduce it for themselves based on their concrete current conditions.

The imperative for prisoners is to refuse being reduced to objects, to victims of repression appealing for solidarity based on pity and compassion. They must once again become political subjects, influencing events, transforming reality, calling for solidarity rooted in the fraternity of struggle. This is the primary motivation, the most decisive of imperatives.

...With Different Approaches

How do imprisoned revolutionaries remain useful to the revolutionary process?

1. Publicly demonstrating a position of resistance

This involves refusing to collaborate or to betray one's principles. The public, ostentatious nature of this stance is

particularly important. If the position of resistance is known to the outside world, it strengthens the revolutionary cause. By presenting themselves as unbroken and unrepentant, prisoners counteract the negative impact of the announcement of their capture and weaken the deterrent effect of imprisonment on the wider movement. They transform what is, at first glance, a demoralizing event into a source of subjective strength.

2. Becoming a Better Revolutionary

Revolutionary prisoners read, study, educate themselves, learn foreign languages, etc. This explains why it is so important for them to receive books and newspapers, to be able to keep their notes, etc. They generally strive to maintain their physical condition, do sports, and it is not uncommon for them to quit smoking.

3. Contributing politically & theoretically to the struggles on the outside

Prisoners use the time available to them to read (and ideally discuss) with the aim of producing analyses useful to the revolutionary struggle. These can be assessments of their actions, statements explaining their organization's policies, calls to

mobilize, declarations of solidarity with other struggles, and so on.

For long-term prisoners whose organization has been dismantled, this also means carrying forward the proposals and achievements of that organization and leveraging its experience for the benefit of the entire revolutionary movement.

4. Organizing & politicizing “social” prisoners

This ranges from the politicization of a cellmate (and sometimes even prison guards!) to the organization of strikes, riots, prisoner unions, or simply acts of solidarity (sharing food with destitute prisoners, etc.). We know how effectively the Black Panthers were able to recruit and politicize “social” prisoners.¹

5. Organizing riots & escape attempts

We will mention two examples here:

The prisoners of the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front,² most of whom had been captured after the ambush that nearly cost General Pinochet’s life, were held at the Santiago prison in 1987. They set out to dig a tunnel in order to escape. It took them three years of work and overcoming countless

difficulties to finally succeed: 49 political prisoners escaped on January 30, 1990.

On June 19, 1986, political prisoners from the Communist Party of Peru (PCP) rose up and took control of the prisons in Frontón, Lurigancho, and Callao. Armed with knives, firearms, and homemade bombs, they fiercely resisted the assaults of the Peruvian army, which subsequently carried out summary executions, bringing the total number of prisoners killed to over 300.

6. Fighting for amnesty

In some countries, such as Spain, the tradition of fighting for amnesty is deeply rooted in the traditions of the labor and revolutionary movements. However, this demand has not been taken up by prisoners belonging to movements that refuse to appeal to the authorities (which would amount to acknowledging their legitimacy), such as the RAF prisoners in Germany,³ who did not even fill out forms requesting their release. Thus, in some countries, prisoners fight for their own release provided it can be achieved under specific conditions (such as not renouncing their beliefs, etc.). In other cases, prisoners may fight for the liberation of prisoners other than themselves, making the effort purely political. One can think of the various movements led by Kurdish prisoners for the release of Öcalan.⁴

A Battle of Symbols

The example of the demand for amnesty shows that prisoners' choices depend (and must depend) on the political culture of their class and their country, because the front lines of the prison struggle are often shaped by symbolic issues. The same symbol can have a strong ideological impact in some societies and none at all in others, which explains why the same factor can lead to a fight to the death here and be of no meaning whatsoever elsewhere. For example, wearing a prison uniform is unacceptable for prisoners in Turkey or Ireland, but of no consequence to prisoners in Belgium or the United States. Another example is speaking to the court during a trial: unacceptable for prisoners belonging to the Red Brigades in Italy (since, symbolically, within the Italian revolutionary movement, this amounts to collaboration—an acknowledgment of the court's legitimacy) and customary for prisoners of Revolutionary Struggle in Greece (where, within the Greek revolutionary movement, one must defend the revolutionary cause through speech). If we try to understand these differences in terms of "more radical/less radical," or "more just/less just," we are missing the point entirely. The battle of symbols can only be judged in direct relation to the specific political culture to which it resonates, and within which it serves as an echo.

The prisoners (and thus their resistance) themselves have symbolic value. And this value sometimes extends far

beyond the struggle of their organization or their specific political choices. This is how Leonard Peltier⁵ became the symbol of the oppression of Native American peoples, how Mumia⁶ is the symbol of systemic racism within the US police and justice system, and how Öcalan has come to symbolize the Kurdish nation as a whole. In general, even when they are committed to a specific revolutionary project (that of their organization), prisoners become a symbolic rallying point for the revolutionary cause in the broadest sense of the term.

Hunger Strikes

It is only in light of all these imperatives and all these determinations that we can understand prisoners' struggles and, in particular, hunger strikes. Let us consider three historical examples: the hunger strikes of the Red Army Faction prisoners, that of the Irish Republican prisoners in 1979, and the one of the revolutionary prisoners in Turkey in 2000.

The prisoners of the Red Army Faction carried out several collective hunger strikes, two of which cost the lives of prisoners: Holger Meins on November 9, 1974, and Sigurd Debus on April 16, 1981. The goal of these strikes was to end solitary confinement. This was seen as a necessary condition for political activity (and particularly for the collective preparation for trials, which were viewed as a platform where the revolutionary project could be defended).

The hunger strike by Irish republican prisoners, which claimed the lives of seven IRA and three INLA inmates in 1981,⁷ was the culmination of a series of struggles centered on the “special status” of republican prisoners, which had begun with the struggle of the 300 “blanket men”: prisoners who remained naked under a blanket because they refused to wear the prison uniform. This special status distinguished them from common criminals and brought them closer to the status of prisoners of war, which held immense symbolic value in Ireland (as seen in the “military” forms adopted by the republican forces: uniforms, ranks, etc.). This hunger strike also placed the IRA within its historical continuity (several major figures of the Irish national liberation movement died in hunger strikes⁸). The prisoners also demanded access to mail and visits.

In 2000–2002, revolutionary prisoners in Turkey (belonging to several organizations) staged a major hunger strike to oppose their transfer to separate cells housing one to three people, whereas until then they had lived in large communal dormitories. It was an extremely deadly strike: 112 prisoners died (including 30 during the assault on the dormitories where they had barricaded themselves), and many were left disabled or had their lives cut short. The culture of sacrifice is strong in Turkey (as throughout the Muslim cultural sphere). The fact that a person gives their life for a cause directly elevates that cause within this cultural sphere. Hunger strikes that lead to death (and other forms of action resulting in the

revolutionary's voluntary sacrifice) have a political and ideological impact quite different from that in Europe. This struggle therefore had a dual purpose: to preserve the large prisoner communities, and to demonstrate the prisoners' spirit of resistance and sacrifice.

Community & Communication

The issue of prisoner solidarity (and thus the struggle against solitary confinement, the separation of prisoners across different facilities, etc.), and the issue of communication (receiving books, mail, and visits), recur in nearly all struggles waged by revolutionary prisoners. Community and communication are indeed the prerequisites for nearly all political activity. They are political demands in and of themselves, rather than requests related to comfort, the humanization of detention, etc.

The Enemy's Intentions

When dealing with revolutionary prisoners, the authorities, in addition to security concerns applicable to common criminals (preventing riots, breakouts, etc.), have a specific additional objective: to prevent "contagion." Revolutionary prisoners are therefore confronted with an enemy

who assesses the stakes in much the same way as they do, and who will tend to cut them off, if not from the rest of the world, then at least from the rest of the prison.

There is sometimes a tendency to overestimate how the enemy plans detention, imagining a large group of decision-makers and specialists scientifically devising a program that impacts every detail of the prisoner's life in order to destroy their political consciousness.

Conversely, there is also a tendency to underestimate this planning by attributing it to a "villain in charge" hostile to revolutionaries, or to a prison warden seeking to maintain order by isolating potential troublemakers. The reality lies somewhere between these two extremes; it varies by country and era, and requires a specific analysis in each case, without negligence or paranoia.

It is true that counter-revolutionaries have carried out studies and developed highly elaborate programs to break prisoners. Their foundational program dates back to 1963. That year, based on research in experimental psychology, the CIA formulated a scientific program⁹ aimed at breaking prisoners by inducing a state of psychological regression to bring them under control. This program combined isolation, sensory deprivation and over-stimulation, sophisticated interrogation techniques, etc.

But the police, judicial, and prison systems are like any other state apparatus, similar to the postal service or the

railways: it certainly has zealous and intelligent decision-makers, but it also contains idiots and negligent individuals; there are vast resources but also bureaucratic red tape; there are flawless PowerPoint presentations but also prison overcrowding that needs to be managed on a daily basis; there are precise instructions for officials but there is also their sloppy enforcement when they are burdensome or tiring for those same officials; and so on. Once again, each situation deserves a specific analysis.

Unity as a Tendency & a Choice

Outside prison, the revolutionary movement is generally fragmented into different factions, tendencies, and political and strategic positions. But when it comes to confronting repression as revolutionary prisoners, a tendency toward unity quickly emerges. The terrain of struggle is simplified; choices are less complex than on the outside; there are fewer “opportunities” to disagree; and the reasons to fight alongside one another are more numerous and more obvious.

This explains why the struggles of revolutionary prisoners (and, on the outside, support for these struggles) exhibit a higher level of unity than other fronts of struggle. The three examples of hunger strikes we gave above illustrate this well: Sigurd Debus died during a hunger strike by RAF prisoners, but he was not a member of said organization; the

Irish prisoners' strike brought together members of the two major republican organizations, the IRA and the INLA. As for the strike in Turkey against Type F prisons,¹⁰ it brought together prisoners from a dozen different organizations, which on the outside were sometimes at each other's throats.

Revolutionary prisoners thus play, by virtue of their objective situation, a role as catalysts during moments of unity and in processes of rapprochement between revolutionary forces.

The most successful example of this trend toward unity is the "June 19, 1999 Platform,"¹¹ in which more than a hundred revolutionary prisoners—communists, anarchists, anti-fascists, and anti-imperialists—from a dozen countries affirmed their common principles of resistance and defined themselves as a community of struggle. The International Red Aid was formed in response to this process of unification among prisoners.

Support for Revolutionary Prisoners

The primary duty of those supporting revolutionary prisoners is therefore to recognize and respect their identity. This involves understanding the priorities of their demands and providing them with the means to continue acting politically. It involves removing obstacles to this political activity (and notably solitary confinement), supplying prisoners with political

information, and amplifying their voices. This does not imply endorsing their theoretical or strategic choices, their positions, or their methods. Yet, to refrain from speaking on behalf of a revolutionary prisoner due to a political disagreement would be the most criminal manifestation of sectarianism.

Similarly, support for prisoners must not be conceived as “caring for the wounded.” Prison itself is a battlefield, and it has direct repercussions and influences on the broader battlefields of proletarian and people’s struggles. Depending on the course of the struggle within prison, the struggles outside will be strengthened or weakened. Prison does not serve merely to neutralize revolutionaries; it also and above all serves to intimidate our class. Moreover, it is a weapon of deterrence.

Allowing prisoners to act as revolutionary agents strips prison of its dark, mysterious, and frightening nature. The revolutionary process is marked by cycles of “struggle / repression / resistance.” The ability of revolutionary forces, inside or outside prison, to emerge victorious and strengthened from this third phase of the struggle, is crucial for the future of the general process. Prisoners play a central role in this phase.

Notes:

1. The Black Panther Party revolutionized the concept of the “social prisoner” by theorizing that the incarcerated Lumpenproletariat were victims of a colonial judicial system. Through the leadership of figures like George Jackson, the Party transformed prisons into “cadre schools,” politicizing gang members and “common” criminals into revolutionary militants.

2. The Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front (FPMR) was the armed wing of the Chilean Communist Party, established in 1983 to overthrow the Pinochet dictatorship. Drawing from the “Mass Rebellion” strategy, the Front gained legendary status through high-profile actions like the 1986 assassination attempt on Pinochet, and the 1996 “Flight of the Century” prison break.

3. The Red Army Faction (RAF), or Baader-Meinhof Group, emerged from the 1968 West German student movement as an urban guerrilla formation aiming to trigger a revolutionary break through armed struggle. RAF prisoners launched collective hunger strikes against isolation torture (“Isolationshaft”). These strikes were not merely humanitarian pleas but tactical mobilizations to bridge the “wall of silence” between the urban guerrilla and the mass movement, forcing the state to reveal its repressive character.

4. Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), has been held in total isolation on the prison island of İmralı (Turkey) since 1999. In prison, he transitioned from Marxist-Leninism to Democratic Confederalism. Since 2021, he has faced a “blackout” of incommunicado detention, though 2025–2026 has seen

a tentative shift as he called for a “peace law” and disarmament, calling for a de facto liquidation of the Kurdish national liberation struggle.

5. Leonard Peltier, a leading militant of the American Indian Movement (AIM), has been imprisoned since 1977 following a biased trial for the deaths of two FBI agents during the 1975 Wounded Knee siege. His incarceration is seen as a “political kidnapping” by the settler-colonial state to decapitate the indigenous sovereignty movement and secure corporate access to tribal mineral resources. His sentence was commuted to home confinement by the outgoing Biden administration in January 2025.

6. Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former Black Panther, has been incarcerated since 1981 following a trial widely condemned for racial bias and judicial misconduct. While his death sentence was commuted to life without parole in 2011, he still faces “death by incarceration” through systemic medical neglect that has left him nearly blind and in failing cardiac health.

7. Led by Bobby Sands, the 1981 Hunger Strike was the culmination of a five-year struggle by IRA and INLA prisoners to regain “Special Category Status,” rejecting the British state’s attempt to criminalize the Irish republican movement. The martyrs’ sacrifice fundamentally delegitimized British “normalization” policies, catalyzed a massive electoral shift toward Sinn Féin, and demonstrated the prison’s role as a primary front in the anti-colonial struggle against the Thatcher government.

8. Fasting to the death has been widely used as a weapon against British criminalization throughout the history of the Irish national liberation struggle, notably exemplified by Thomas Ashe (1917) and Terence MacSwiney (1920). MacSwiney’s death after 74 days in Brixton Prison transformed the Irish struggle into a global

cause, theorizing the hunger strike as a means to “conquer not by those who can inflict the most, but those who can suffer the most.”

9. The 1963 KUBARK manual codified the CIA’s shift toward “scientific” torture, using sensory deprivation and psychological regression. By weaponizing isolation and disorientation rather than just physical pain, the state aims to shatter the subject’s identity and ideological resistance—a foundational counter-insurgency blueprint still mirrored in today’s high-security isolation regimes.

10. Type F prisons are Turkey’s high-security “isolation cells” introduced in 2000 to dismantle the collective resistance of political prisoners. By replacing large wards with small-group isolation, the state sought to break the ideological cohesion of revolutionary groups like the DHKP-C.

11. “Plate-forme du 19 juin 1999,” Libérons Georges Abdallah, Samizdat.net, April 14, 2014, accessed 2025, <https://liberonsgeorges.samizdat.net/non-classe/plate-forme-du-19-juin-1999/>.

