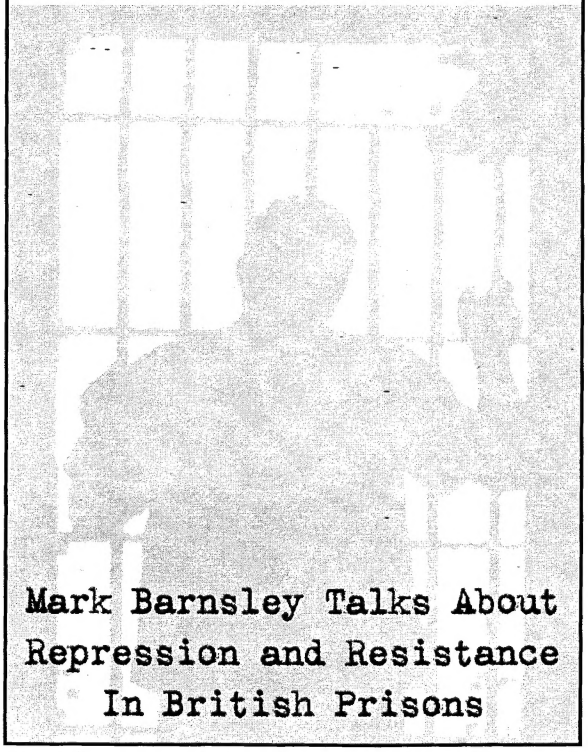
"I don't want to do my imprisonment 'easy', to succumb to a living death, I want to do it 'hard', even if it means that I am brutalized. Even in prison I want to know that I am living every day of my life, to fight back as best I can."

Mark Barnsley

IF IT WAS EASY, THEY WOULDN'T CALL IT 'STRUGGLE'

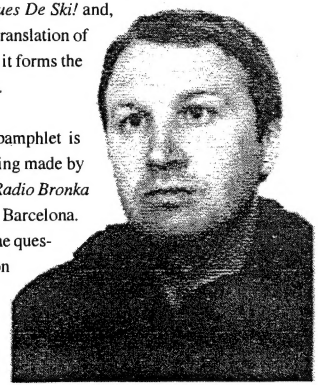


Mark Barnsley Talks About Repression and Resistance In British Prisons

Mark Barnsley has been involved in the Anarchist movement all his adult life, spending time fighting in Lebanon, editing *The Sheffield Anarchist*, supporting striking miners, confronting fascists, and spending 10 years in prison. Held in 20 different maximum or high security prisons, and 18 different segregation units, he has always taken the fight to the Enemy in jail. Released from prison in 2002, Mark continues to be as active as ever, speaking all over Europe, and being involved in the *Campaign Against Prison Slavery*, the *Anarchist Black Cross*, and many other political initiatives.

In the past couple of years, Mark has spoken in London, Leeds, Bradford, Nottingham, Hull, Newcastle, Glasgow, Amsterdam, Den Haag, Nijmegan, Leiden, Groningen, Hamburg, Cologne, Barcelona, Korneya, Valencia, Lille, Paris, Geneva, Zurich, Lausanne, Bern, Lugano, Gent, Antwerp, Dijon, Montpellier, Toulouse, and elsewhere. Only a few of these talks have been filmed or recorded, and only 3 have so far been transcribed.

Mark's talk in Lille, (which was originally translated a sentence or two at a time) was published by the French group *La Breche* under the title *Il Faut Porter Des Masques De Ski!* and, together with an English translation of *La Breche*'s introduction, it forms the first part of this pamphlet.



The second part of the pamphlet is transcribed from a recording made by the Catalan radio station *Radio Bronka* of one of Mark's talks in Barcelona. To avoid repetition only the question and answer session that followed Mark's talk is reproduced.

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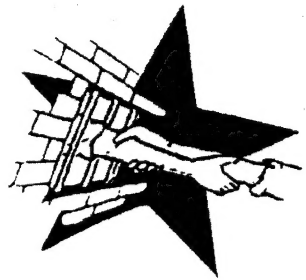

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INTRODUCTION

(From the *La Breche* pamphlet *Il Faut Porter Des Masques De Ski!*)

In our minds, Mark Barnsley was this guy who spent 10 years behind bars, just for being involved in a fight with some drunken students. One might as well say that he was the victim of the State's revenge, because he was known for his Anarchist convictions and involvement. Again this story reminded us silently of the fear of prison and it's brutality. It recalled to our consciousness the threat, both real and imagined, used by the State against those who refuse to accept the world as it is. Prison thus fulfilled its dual role: maintaining the present Order by punishing and isolating those considered agitators by society, and threatening the rest of a population always frightened when confronted by the power and despotism of the State.

But Mark is not the victim we thought he was. He's not the broken man we think about every time we hear this story, a story going on forever. Mark is this great big-hearted guy, a *grand gaillard,* who maintains a positive and militant stand against the world, even though he doesn't hide the scars of imprisonment. The story he came to tell us, his story this time, is not about all he suffered, but rather about what he made *them* undergo. His testimony is not about the humiliations he went through, about the harassment he endured, or about the horror that prison is. It is rather about his relentless will to live in a hostile world, which he nevertheless managed to make his own. His tale is not an indictment of revenge about what prison did to him, but an example full of hope and determination of what we can do with prison.

Certain abolitionists sometimes emphasize only the horrors of prison, with never-ending descriptions of degrading detention practices throughout. This denunciation of the inhumanities of prison serves to strengthen the fear that one feels towards jail, and reinforces its primary goal of intimidation. In contrast to this, Mark's story allows us not to be collaborators of the prison administration beyond the walls, and proves that it's possible to talk about prison without spreading the fear it creates. He gives us a positive tale quite different to the never-ending self-victimising or pessimistic attitudes which undermine our struggle, without on the other hand lapsing into the realms of the ethereal, or into revolutionary romanticism, because as Mark reminds us, if it was easy, they wouldn't call it 'struggle'.

La Breche, September 2004

Le Brankard, Lille, 20th May 2004

Hello. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Mark Barnsley. I'm not here to speak to you as an intellectual or as a clever person, I'm just an ordinary guy, an activist like yourselves. But I can speak about what I know, and unfortunately what I know is prison. I have spent half my adult life, 10 years, in prison as an Anarchist prisoner, either directly as a result of my political activities, or because I was fitted up by the State.

I was born in Sheffield in the north of England, to a working-class family, in 1961, and I grew up in very different times to today, the 1960's, in a great period of international struggle. When all around the world, our enemies, the ruling class, were under attack. Everywhere there were outbursts of working-class resistance; in America there was the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the Black Panthers, the Weather Underground; in England, the Angry Brigade; in France, you had Paris '68. You had the growth of the armed struggle in Germany and in Italy, resistance to the British occupation of Ireland. So I find it difficult to imagine that it was possible to grow up in those times without being politically motivated. Of course many people were not, but for me I was involved in political activity from my very earliest years, and active specifically as an Anarchist from the age of about 14. I began editing a schools anti-fascist/Anarchist bulletin, *Schools Out*, I became involved with the Sheffield Anarchists group, I was involved in very militant anti-fascist activity, in prisoner support work, in supporting striking workers, in a great many areas of struggle.

These were different times, during that period if you became involved in the Anarchist movement, sooner rather than later you would come into contact with the ideas of armed struggle. Perhaps now these ideas are considered marginal, and with the hindsight of 25 years it's possible easily to see the mistakes that were made, but during this period these ideas were mainstream...

In 1978, at the age of seventeen, I travelled with other Anarchist comrades to Lebanon. In large part this was to participate in the anti-fascist struggle there, and in the anti-Imperialist struggle. I was involved in the war there for 2 years...

In 1980, just before my nineteenth birthday, I was arrested in Dover, England, in possession of a small quantity of plastic explosives. I was arrested by a man known then as Detective Inspector Clarke, from the British political police, Special Branch...

I was sent to prison for the first time, and of course as a revolutionary, I didn't think it was a time to rest. There is always a real struggle taking place in any prison, a struggle which any revolutionary should be involved in, and despite my young age I was involved fully in that struggle.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST PRISON SLAVERY

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Slavery has NOT been abolished in Britain, behind high walls and locked doors it still flourishes. Working class people are being forced to toil in poor conditions, beyond the reach of health and safety inspectors, denied even the most basic employment and trade-union rights, and severely punished if they refuse to work.

In British prisons, there have been savage cuts in education budgets over the past half decade, any pretence at rehabilitating prisoners and empowering them with trade skills has been abandoned. They are now seen as a readily exploitable labour force, a Third World colony in Britain's own backyard, cheap, non-unionised, available, and literally compelled to work.

If prisoners refuse to work, or are not considered to be working hard enough, they are punished—placed in solitary confinement, brutalised, denied visits, having days added to their sentences. Private companies are making enormous profits from prison labour, £52.9 Million in 1999, and that figure is growing rapidly. They use it because it is CHEAP—prisoners may be paid less than £5 for a week's work - and for prisoners there are no 'sickies', no holidays, no union meetings, no transport problems, and if there's no work they can simply be locked back in their cells. Prisoners are treated as the bosses would like to treat all of us.

The issue of prison slavery is an issue for ALL working-class people, not least because it undermines workers' pay and conditions generally. Not because prisoners are somehow 'stealing' jobs, they have absolutely no choice in the matter, but because companies can drive down the wages of their own employees by using prison labour, and it brings with it the threat of short-time and redundancies. The employees of Dysons, the vacuum-cleaner manufacturer, for example, were thrown out of work when Dysons decided to use cheap non-unionised labour in Malaysia, but how many Dysons' workers knew that for some time the company had been using cheap, non-unionised labour at Full Sutton prison? Not surprisingly the latter-day slave-masters are desperate to keep their involvement secret, from their own employees, and from the wider public.

The Campaign Against Prison Slavery exists to challenge and bring about an end to forced prison labour, and to expose the companies that exploit it. In the 21st Century it is high-time that slavery in all its forms was ended for good.

tached from the prison struggle, spent their time posturing, did almost nothing for prisoners, and squandered the money raised for them on internal bureaucracy and egotistical propaganda. At least one of this clique was no better than a state asset. When I tried to develop a critical dialogue with them, their initial reaction was to attack me, I saw one document sent out that said I was not an Anarchist, and had never been involved in the movement, or in prisoner support work. Of course, buried though I was in prison, this attempt to discredit me failed, because obviously I had comrades who could speak up for me. In fact, the decent people within the ABC resigned, whole groups left. It's a shame it had to come to this, but the ABC network collapsed. But in fact nothing was lost, because this clique had been living off their own propaganda for some years.

I had fantastic support from ABC groups in other countries. Now there is only one ABC group in England, a group that was not involved in this; Brighton ABC, who do very much good work. There are also other prisoner support groups that are independent.

Unfortunately, when we look at our history as a movement, the story of prisoner solidarity is not always as good as we would like to think. I can think of occasions, even going back more than 20 years, where individuals, hiding within our movement, stole money from prisoners support. I think it's a shame this kind of thing is tolerated, and that people choose not to speak out about it, because somehow they think the exposure of this kind of behaviour will damage the movement as a whole. I'm very proud to be part of a movement that included such fine people as Emma Goldman, *El Quico* Sabate, Nestor Makhno, Alexander Berkman, and many others. I am very proud to be part of that movement, it means a lot to me. As Anarchists, we must maintain the highest principles, always, and challenge injustice wherever it arises.

Markbarnsley@mail.com

After I was released from prison, as has often been the case I know certainly that the prison authorities were very glad to get rid of me, I became involved again full-time in the Anarchist struggle: In squatting, in establishing Anarchist centres, in militant anti-fascism, in prisoner support work, and I also began editing *The Sheffield Anarchist*, the publication that was produced in Sheffield, originally from 1891.

Sheffield is a big town, at that time perhaps 500,000 people, but it's not so big that someone like me would go unnoticed by the police. It was inevitable that, particularly as I was now a convicted terrorist, the police would pay a lot of attention to me. I faced a lot of harassment, I would be stopped in the street, questioned, searched, my house would be visited, I would be arrested, beaten-up. In some periods this was an almost daily occurrence.

Then in 1994 something strange happened. When I was involved in the armed struggle, when I was on demonstrations and on picket-lines, I viewed arrest as an occupational hazard. But in 1994 I went out just for a walk with my youngest daughter, pushing her in her pushchair. I was attacked by 15 drunken middle-class students. I was hit over the head with a bottle, cut with a knife, I had 2 ribs broken, a broken nose, I lost teeth, basically I was very badly beaten-up. But 5 of my attackers were also injured, and when the police came to make some arrests, I was the only person arrested.

It was no coincidence that I had previously brought civil proceedings against the police station that dealt with the prosecution. Another coincidence was that the man in charge of this Sheffield police station was the very same person who had arrested me in Dover 14 years earlier.

I was sent to prison again, and after more than a year in prison I faced trial. Despite the many witnesses to the incident I was charged with attacking the 15 students, and the police, the prosecution, used every dirty trick possible. While I was acquitted on 3 of the charges, I was convicted on two. Normally in England this would mean probation or a short prison sentence, but as an Anarchist I was sent to prison for 12 years.

This was not some kind of 'accidental' miscarriage of justice. It's inevitable, and we have seen this happen time and time again, that the State will use the law as a weapon to take out militants that it cannot convict by other means. This has happened to comrades before me, and also since. Really it should come as no surprise to us. Because, for example, the British State, in Ireland they've even killed lawyers, and what they did to me really does not compare to that. As an Anarchist I expect no quarter from the State, but I am prepared to give no quarter in return.

Before I talk about my prison experiences, I just want to explain a little about the

prison system in Britain. In many ways it's very old-fashioned, very archaic, also very austere and very brutal. The system is split up into the maximum security prisons, the high security prisons, medium security prisons, and low security prisons. Ordinarily I would have spent my time in medium security prisons, but in fact I spent my entire sentence in maximum or high security prisons, with 2 years in solitary confinement, and I was even released from a maximum security prison. So one minute I was held in maximum security conditions, and the next minute they just threw me out on the street.

It's inevitable that when people are confined in conditions of imprisonment that they resist. In any prison there will always be a struggle for better conditions and for humanity.

In terms of the history of the British prison struggle, the first significant event in modern times happened in 1969. A few years before, the government had established the 'dispersal' system, a maximum security system. Parkhurst was one of a small number of dispersal prisons, located on the Isle of Wight, the small island off the southern coast of England, and the State aimed to use its geographic remoteness as a way of isolating the prisoners there. Prison is deliberately kept a secret world, and Parkhurst was one of the most isolated prisons in the British penal system.

In 1969 there was a major uprising by prisoners at Parkurst. At this time the prison staff were not used to dealing with riots, this was the first major prison uprising in modern British history, and so they attempted to confront the prisoners. A number of prison guards were seriously injured, and this really frightened the prison establishment, it had a big impact for perhaps 20 years to come.

The next 10 years were full of militant activity in the British prisons. Struggle in prison often reflects the class struggle outside prison, and during the 1970's there was a high level of class struggle in Britain. Prisoners formed organisations and fought hard for better conditions, there were a large number of other uprisings and protests. The maximum security prisons really became almost autonomous zones for prisoners where the State was forced to liberalize, and where the prisoners enjoyed a great deal of personal autonomy. But while in the maximum security system the prisoners enjoyed greater freedoms, in the local prisons...there was still a great deal of misery. Brutality and deaths of prisoners were frequent, overcrowding was terrible, prisoners still had to piss in a bucket, with 3 or even 4 prisoners crammed into a cell built for one.

In 1990 the local prison in Manchester, Strangeways, erupted. Really they never expected a riot in this prison because the guards had such a tight control there, it was notorious for brutality, a high percentage of the guards there were active fascists, they even had their own branch of the National Front. But it did erupt, and the prisoners

was no racism involved, all the prisoners were actually good friends, it was just one response to that situation, perhaps using different skin colours in a positive way. But we don't have racial gangs, prisoners associate across colour boundaries.

The other day (at another talk) you told some really incredible anecdotes about solidarity between prisoners. Could you talk more about that?

Solidarity between prisoners is something that goes on all the time. I remember when I was a young man in prison, only 19 years old, I saw 2 guards assault a prisoner, and immediately I jumped in to assault the guards. The other prisoners in this jail were all much older than me, because unusually, I'd been placed in the adult prison system. After I attacked the guards, a big incident happened, but there wasn't a riot. Later I was locked in my cell, and I knew that the guards would come for me. The guards at the prison that day had a union meeting, and so every shift of the guards was present. When they came to my cell, I could see immediately 5 guards. I was a young man, a cocky prisoner, I jumped up immediately and I said, "So, it takes 5 of you does it?" I walked from the cell, but when I got outside the cell, there weren't 5 screws, every guard from the prison was there. They stood in rows, to attention, a show of force, and they walked me down this corridor all the way to the segregation unit. When I reached the segregation unit I was sure I would be assaulted, in the cell I picked up a table and smashed it against the wall to make a weapon, but strangely, I wasn't touched. I didn't understand why until a few weeks later when I was moved back to the wing, some of the older prisoners were doing life sentences and would never be released, they had told the guards, if you touch the boy we will kill one of you.

Prisoners are always willing to make sacrifices for other prisoners... Solidarity is the worst thing a prison guard fears. They can understand a prisoner that fights for his or her own rights, but when a prisoner fights for the rights of another it has to be punished. But inevitably solidarity endures.

When I was moved around the country from prison to prison, I found that I received solidarity wherever I went. If I was attacked, other prisoners would attack the guards. They would help to send messages outside for me. After their release, they would visit me and help my family. Some of the things they did I'm afraid I can't tell you about...

Every struggle has its errors, and are there errors that you've been able to see from inside the prison, especially errors that have an effect on political prisoners?

When I was first in prison and in need of support, the natural constituency that I should have been able to expect support from was the Anarchist movement, and in particular the British ABC (Anarchist Black Cross). But at this time, the ABC in Britain were in disarray, and controlled by a small clique. They were completely de-

As in America, it's not just the prison population that is rising, but imprisonment within society. More use is made of electronic-tagging for example, and more people are put on conditional release after they've finished their sentences. To develop a prisoner mentality, to internalise the imprisonment, and to keep you on a leash for life...

When it comes to supporting political prisoners, because people sometimes get long sentences, is it better to try and support one person, and support them throughout their sentence, or to try and support lots of people at the same time?

Like anyone else, prisoners respect honesty, so don't make empty promises. If you begin writing to a prisoner, and you think you may not be able to do that for the next 10 years, tell them that. But there are many things that you can get involved in that don't involve writing to prisoners, if you don't feel that's a long-term commitment that you can make, and there are existing networks that you can become involved in.

Sometimes we focus so much on political prisoners that we don't focus on all the prisoners, ordinary prisoners. Should we focus on political prisoners, or on trying to abolish prisons in general?

I think we should focus on opposing the Prison State, which includes the abolition of prisons, and this means that we don't have to 'pick and choose'. But that doesn't mean to say that we shouldn't be supporting prisoners directly. What I would say is this: Direct support to all political prisoners, and political support for all prisoners in struggle.

In Spain there's a growth in immigration, and because of this there's also a growth, obviously, in the number of people in prison that are immigrants. Is that happening also in Britain, and is there a lot of racism from other prisoners against immigrants in prison?

I wouldn't say so, no, I think that inter-prisoner racism in British prisons is relatively low. But there is a much higher proportion of black and Asian prisoners than demographically there should be, because the police target them in a racist way. But we don't see the sort of brutal racist gang-warfare that we see, for example in American prisons, generally prisoners of different races get on very well.

I remember when I was first in prison in 1994, I was in a local prison, which is not for long-term prisoners, who tend to be the most politicised. I was quite shocked by a situation I saw, a large group of prisoners wanted to play football, so they were going to split into two teams, but they didn't have any coloured shirts to wear. So one of the prisoners said, "Well let's play blacks versus whites. We can call it England versus Jamaica." At first I was shocked by this, but when I saw the situation progress, there

took over the prison and got rid of the guards. Eventually the siege turned into a rooftop protest, the prisoners occupied the roof for sometime, and this was played out in the full view of the international media. It was a huge embarrassment for the Prison Service and for the State, and really Strangeways was a line in the sand. While the State was forced to make some concessions, really these were just a holding exercise, and they began to develop strategies with the aim of ending the British prison struggle once and for all.

I went to prison in 1994, and the next 5 years really were, for prison militants, a very difficult time, in fact so were the next 8 years, but I was able to witness first-hand the wave of prison repression that came. The tactics and strategies used by the State to crush prison resistance were often very subtle, and almost entirely they were imported from the United States.

The first prison I was held in for any period of time was a private prison, Doncaster. In that prison, prior to the wave of repression beginning, militant prisoners were able to organise very effectively. The prison was massively understaffed and we took full advantage of that. As the prisoners representative I could do more than the governor of the prison because I had a very strong mandate. On my wing we had almost complete control, the guards were frightened to enter, we enjoyed as much autonomy as it's possible for a prisoner to achieve, and we achieved that through solidarity and through militant action.

In July 1994 there was an escape from Whitemoor prison, a maximum security prison. A small group of mainly IRA prisoners were held in a special unit there, a prison within a prison. They managed to escape, shooting a guard on the way, but were soon recaptured. This was a huge embarrassment for the State, particularly when it was discovered that the guards who were supposed to be watching the prisoners so closely, were in fact playing cards.

Six months later there was another escape from a maximum security prison, Parkhurst prison. In this prison there was a governor who had an unusual habit, he liked to point his key at prisoners as he spoke to them. One of the prisoners looked carefully at the key and copied it, and 3 prisoners walked out of this maximum security prison. Again, it was a huge embarrassment and the head of the Prison Service was sacked, the home secretary was under a lot of pressure to resign.

These two escapes signalled the beginning of the repressive programme which had been planned already, a whole blanket of repression was unrolled. There were a large number of strategies used, but really the two most important in terms of crushing the prison struggle were these:

The State introduced a class system, a divide and rule scheme, known as the

'Incentives and Earned Privileges' scheme. This split prisoners into 3 categories, the 'Enhanced', the 'Standard', and the 'Basic', and according to these classes a prisoner, for example in the 'Enhanced' bracket, might get one visit per week, but those in the 'Basic' category would get only one visit per month. At first the system was relatively subtle, with the differences between prisoners not being too great with regard to everything, and the State was careful not to introduce it early on into the maximum security prisons because they knew that is where the greatest resistance would be. But eventually the differences became very great, so that the scheme determined almost everything that happens to a prisoner; the amount of time they're in their cell, the work they have to do, their visits, the money they can spend, everything. To be in the 'Enhanced' bracket in many prisons now you have to basically be an informer, and in return you have most of the so-called 'privileges' that all prisoners used to have. By comparison, if you are placed in the 'Basic' group, you will probably be held in the segregation unit, where the conditions are always very bad.

There was though a great deal of resistance to this programme, but in trying to undermine prisoner militancy the State used another weapon. In 1995 they introduced compulsory 'piss-testing', urine analysis for drugs. In the 1970's and 1980's a culture of cannabis use had developed in the long-term prisons, and this had been tolerated and even encouraged... but cannabis will stay in the body for up to 45 days, whereas heroin is detectable for only 1 or 2. So by introducing these compulsory urine tests, together with other security measures, the State, entirely predictably, helped to encourage a culture of heroin use to replace a culture of cannabis use.

The British State had tried to introduce a class system into prisons before, with the same aim, but at this time prisoners were too militant. However, in the 1990's, particularly after heroin took hold, they were dealing with a different kind of prisoner, they were dealing with the children of Margaret Thatcher.

These two strategies together have had a hugely damaging effect upon the British prison struggle., and have been very effective from the State's point of view. In just a few years the State has retaken ground that prisoners fought very hard to conquer, and for militants in British prisons today we're really looking at building resistance from Day One. But it's inevitable that there will always be resistance to inhumanity, and already we're seeing signs that the prison struggle is beginning to renew itself.

I spoke earlier about my experiences in Doncaster prison. There the State used against me, for the first time since 1981, a weapon that British prisoners call 'ghosting'...It's a system that many State's use against their prisoners, it's like being kidnapped, basically you'll be taken from your cell in the middle of the night, in the early morning, or perhaps not even from your cell, perhaps you'll be snatched from a visit, or from the hospital or exercise yard. Anywhere you are isolated and other prisoners can't show you solidarity. You are taken immediately from there, via the segre-

Then they walked me to the gate, and that was it. But after that, for a year after my release I wasn't allowed to leave the country, this is the first time that I've been able to come to Barcelona, and there was certainly a lot of harassment. They tried to basically put me under house arrest, but because that was illegal I was able to challenge it.

How does segregation work, is it the same as isolation?

Yes, it's exactly the same, it's just a different word. How it works, you're held completely alone, sometimes I would be the only prisoner in the whole segregation unit. sometimes I would be next to other prisoners. The conditions are very bad, you are locked in the cell for at least 23 hours per day, sometimes 24. If you get exercise, it's usually alone, and in a cage. There's the constant threat of brutality, you're underfed, and the cold is used as a weapon. Sometimes you're not fed at all, or the guards will urinate or spit in your food. In the freezing cold cells you have only a thin shirt and one blanket. So it's not an easy situation, but whenever I was placed in segregation, immediately it was like a challenge. It was like they'd called it on, and I had to respond to that.

So when you first stepped out on the street after all that time in prison what was the first thing you thought?

It was very strange, because all the time I was in prison, even though I was moved many times, I never had a view that was over the wall. I'd never seen the horizon, or the sky that wasn't crossed with a cage. I wasn't used to being able to walk for more than a few feet without a gate being unlocked or without handcuffs. When I got out a lot of my supporters were there, I was very pleased to see them. I expected it would be far stranger than it was, I presume that the human mind develops mechanisms to cope with trauma, and in many ways it was like a different life for me...It was very strange...When I looked back, even after a few yards, when I looked back to the place that had held me for 8 years, that prison and other prisons like it, the prison seemed to look smaller, and it was hard to believe that so much human misery could be contained in such a small space.

Did you actually finish the sentence that they gave to you?

The way that a prison sentence is made up in Britain is that, after half you're entitled to apply for parole. You have to make representations for that, and I was not prepared to beg for what was mine by right. So I never applied for parole. After two thirds, 8 years in my case, release is automatic, but currently the home secretary, David Blunkett, is trying to change things. So, in future, on a 12 year sentence, you would do all of it, and afterwards you would be on, like a form of parole, for life.

Igot a lot of support from other prisoners outside the British prison system as well. One prisoner who used to write to me, Thomas Meyer-Falk in Germany, this guy has been in solitary for years, his cell is so cold he has to spend the time walking backwards and forwards to keep warm. When he wrote to me, he never complained, he would always ask how my conditions were, he would always give his sympathy, always try to raise my spirits. I think that's the sign of a good comrade.

Do you think you were treated differently in prison because of your politics?

I think I mentioned before that I got hold of my security file under the British Data Protection Act...and time and time again it concedes that I'm being held in maximum security prisons because I'm an Anarchist...Even after my release from a maximum security prison I got harassment because of my politics, the police and Probation Service held regular meetings about me, and these were explicitly political. One senior probation officer told me, "We have to be very careful since 9/11." I said, "What's 9/11 got to do with me, I was in prison for a pub fight?"

After you got out of prison have you kept in contact with the prisoners who were writing with you, and in what way?

Very much so, and I'm very involved in prisoner support work. By moving me all around the country, the State gave me a weapon, because I have contacts everywhere who respect me, which is very useful. It's a two-way thing, it's possible for me to get information out of those prisons, and also to help the prisoners in them. For example, when 3 prisoners I knew were being brutalised in a segregation unit, through another prisoner they managed to get a message to me. I quickly organised a protest, and we turned up to the prison to make a lot of noise and expose the brutality. We bought some industrial-strength fireworks, very large rockets, and we fired them over the segregation unit. When the first one went off, all the guards came running out of the prison because they thought they were being bombed. All the prisoners were moved as a result.

Prison is a closed world, and it's deliberately kept like that. If the walls were made of glass instead of concrete, the general public might question what was being done in their name. So, in connection with the prisoners I still know inside, I continually try to expose what happens...

When you got out of prison, it wasn't suddenly like the doors opened and you were in the street, there must have been some sort of observation or control, or something like that, that followed directly you being in prison.

Well, what happened was that I wasn't even certain when I was going to get out, because I refused to accept any conditions on my release, I had only a few days notice.

gation unit, usually with some brutality, and moved to another segregation unit many miles away. Often this continues for months, or even years, with a prisoner being continually moved with the aim of isolating them.

In Doncaster I was moved for the first time out of 22 successive times during the time I was in prison. In the next 8 years I would see every corner of the prison system.

After I was sentenced I was moved to Full Sutton maximum security prison. At this time, during 1996, the wave of repression I spoke about was being introduced, but inevitably there was resistance to that.

At the beginning of 1997 there was a major uprising and we took control of the prison. For any prisoner this is a very exciting time, the opportunity just not to be in your cell, to be with your friends after dark, and to be able to destroy the prison that's held you with your bare hands, it's a time for celebration. Two wings of the prison were destroyed, causing £2 Million in damage – It was a good night's work! But as we celebrated with resistance we knew that there would be collective punishment to follow, that we wouldn't see our comrades again for maybe years, or maybe never again. So an impromptu party of resistance was held. The secret prison files that were kept on everyone were taken, and a big fire created with them. A steel gate was ripped from its hinges and placed on top of the fire, and then food was taken from the freezers, and a barbecue was held! And after the barbecue, the prison itself was barbecued!

The damage to the prison was so incredible that, when the guards returned the following day, they were terrified. Even though there were hundreds of them in full riot gear they were afraid, and I remember walking out of the prison laughing as they were frightened to look me in the face. Even before that, I was in my cell with an IRA guy who couldn't get back to his own cell. We heard the guards coming along the landings in military formation, and even though we thought we were about to be brutalised, we couldn't help but laugh. The two of us rolled with laughter on my bed, and when the guards came to my door and opened the inspection flap, I cried out, "Thank god, we've been rescued!" Then we laughed again.

At the start of the riot the guards ran away so quickly, that they didn't know who was involved and who wasn't, and very sensibly many prisoners wore homemade ski-masks or balaclavas. Nonetheless, two years later, the State decided to fit-up some scapegoats, and charged an almost random group of around 15 prisoners with the riot. At the subsequent trial I was a prominent witness for the defence and all the men I gave evidence for were found 'not guilty'.

The State were even more angry than before, they had lost their flagship prison, prisoners were referring to it as 'Half Sutton' rather than 'Full Sutton', and nobody had

been made to pay for this damage. It was inevitable that I would be victimised for giving evidence, and soon after I was thrown back into segregation, and moved all around the country, even out of the country into Wales. The State didn't do this just to punish me, but to try to make an example, to send a message to other prisoners, 'If you stand against us, this is what will happen, we will break you." Because like all tyrants they hate solidarity more than anything, and they hoped that the lesson that would be learned by prisoners from this is that if you show solidarity with other prisoners, this is what will happen. So I thought it very important to subvert that message, and to turn it around, to send a counter-message, "I will not be broken." Because whenever I was in segregation I always felt very strong, and the State never succeeded in isolating me or in breaking me. Everywhere I went other prisoners would know my name, they would continue to show me what support they could, and 'outside' my support was not confined to one town, but spread across the country. Really, in moving me around so much, the State only allowed me to cause more trouble. I made contacts throughout the whole prison system, and I still take advantage of that, I still use that as a weapon. In the end the prison system ran out of prisons that would take me.

Today, I have access to a large part of my prison file under the British Data Protection Act, it stands about a metre high, and some of it makes very amusing reading. For example, it contains all these letters from Prison Service HQ to individual prison governors saying, "Please take this man, he's not too bad really, you may have heard bad things, but maybe you could take him for just one month." It was as if I were trying to get into some exclusive gentleman's club. Every prison I left they were very glad to see me go, but I think that is the best way to have it, because these are prisons after all, you don't want the governor saying, "Oh, come back any time."

Soon after they began to ghost me around the country, I was moved to a prison very far away from my home, in the south-west of England. My supporters wrote to the prisons minister to complain, and he responded by saying that I would be there "until I started behaving myself." I wrote back and said that if he was going to be waiting for that, he'd be waiting a long time. I was in that prison only 2 months, and part of it has still not been re-built.

I received a lot of solidarity from other prisoners, even when I did not know them in person. For example when I was sent to Parkhurst prison, Britain's *Alcatraz*, on the Isle of Wight, I was taken to the segregation unit where I knew nobody, but the other prisoners had heard of me and began to call to me. In Britain, and I'm sure elsewhere, prisoners pass items between the cells on 'lines', on pieces of string. So one prisoner shouted to me, "Do you want a newspaper, I have today's newspaper here?" Then another shouted, "Do you want tobacco, I have some tobacco here?" Another shouted, "Do you want a book, I have a good book here I've finished reading?" Yet another shouted, "Do you want a sandwich, I have a sandwich left from lunch?" And

particularly we need to offer them support when they're in struggle, to be able to send demonstrations to the prison in support of those prisoners inside, to show the State that when our comrades are brutalised, this will not be tolerated.

In Alexander Berkman's day, comrades risked their lives to try and help him escape. It's some mark of prisoner solidarity today that in Britain the so-called 'Anarchist Federation' has a policy of not even sending stamps to prisoners. Everyone has to decide what they can do, but prisoners solidarity needs to be a long-term commitment, too often prisoner support groups appear and disappear like mushrooms in the night. Really that does not provide help to prisoners.

I received some fantastic solidarity when I was in prison, and it meant a lot to me that comrades in Barcelona were willing to take actions on my behalf...

I think an example of what I call revolutionary solidarity can be taken from Ireland. In the north of that country, in the early 1980's, the British had the most brutal prison system in Europe. Prisoners were being routinely tortured and brutalised, and even the hunger-strike by IRA and INLA prisoners, in which many died, did not end that situation. What ended that situation was that a large number of prison guards were executed...

I agree that we have to be serious about dismantling the State, and all the bullshit that goes with it, but if we're serious about it, and the actions we take about it are serious, then we have to be prepared to go to prison. What do you think is the single most important thing we can do to prepare ourselves for the trauma that we're going to go through?

Stop smoking! It sounds trivial, but it's true. The State will use any vices that you have against you. In prison I always refused to work, when they threw me in the segregation unit, I'd say, "Close the door."...

I know one prison comrade who only drinks water, he never drinks coffee or tea, so that the guards have nothing to take away from him. This guy told me, he was in segregation for a long time, this man is a real fighter, and he won't back down to any extent, even in the segregation unit he fought back. The guards tried everything to break him. One day, after a long time, one of the senior guards came to see him, and he said to him, "Listen, when you were first down here in segregation, we carefully monitored what you spent." Every week, my friend had made one phone call to his family, and he bought one Mars bar. The guard said to him, "Why not start conforming, and you can have that again?" My friend stood away from the door, he pointed to the window-ledge, and he said, "A Mars bar? Like that one there?" It had been there for nine months, he didn't eat it as a sign of resistance. He told me that the next thing 10 guards ran into the cell with riot shields to seize the Mars bar! ...

time they are bankrolling the Draconian policies of Tony Blair. We've seen this system spread right across the country, and now it's spreading, often through these same companies into Europe.

Private prisons are big business, and in many ways they represent the ideal capitalist economy in a microcosm. The private prison companies are paid for holding the prisoners by the State, but they have this captive workforce, so they can make them work and produce goods that can be sold, for more profit. These prisoners are always there to produce for the company, they're not allowed holidays, and rarely even days off sick, they're always there. Now these prisoners are given a small amount as token remuneration for their work, but where can they spend it? Only in the shop that the company also owns. This same system was used in the early days of capitalism...for example in Argentina, where immigrants would be moved to remote *estancias*, to big ranches, where there was only one company store. The company store is something that crops up in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath*, it crops up time and again in the songs of Woodie Guthrie and others. So what these private prison companies are doing is nothing new.

Here in Spain, the guards and the people who work in the prisons are all employees of the State. So how does it work, are all the employees in these prisons like security guards?

They're all private employees, they work for the company, not for the State. We've seen tremendous corruption in private prisons, they're selling drugs, booze, everything that is forbidden, they'll even sell you things they just took from you, because the private prison companies pay their guards even less than the State pays them. As in America they ideally open in areas with massive unemployment, so they can hire workers for the lowest wage. Private prisons also tend to make more use of technology, such as CCTV cameras, so they employ far fewer guards. These guards generally get 2 weeks training, if that, and there's often more brutality even than in the State prisons, and the way that the prisons are run causes deaths, if not through brutality, through other things. The highest suicide rates, for example, are in private prisons.

I know you had a lot of concrete support, as an ex-prisoner what can you tell us about prisoner support?

I think for most prisoner support groups that exist in the UK, they tend to concentrate on writing letters to prisoners. This is important, it helps to stop comrades being isolated, and it also shows the guards that these prisoners are part of a movement, that they're not alone, but really letter writing should only be a starting point for prisoner solidarity. There are many other things that we can do, collecting funds to help a prisoner's family to visit them, sending them books, and funds if that's necessary, but

then this guy shouted to me, "Do you want a cup of tea?" I was puzzled, I said, "How will you send me a cup of tea?" He said, "I have some hot water here in a flask, and I can send tea-bags and a cup on the line." So 10 minutes after I arrived in the segregation unit with nothing, I was sat reading the newspaper, eating a sandwich, and drinking a cup of tea. Really it wasn't so bad.

Of course, in the time I spent in segregation, I had many difficult times, but I always continued to fight back. I think it's important to remember that if it was easy, they wouldn't call it 'struggle'.

I think it's very important, particularly if you go to prison as an Anarchist, that you maintain your integrity. That in this system of inhumanity, you try to retain something of yourself, as much as possible. Integrity though sometimes comes down to a series of small choices, and it's something that you can lose very easily, if you compromise. For example, the very first time I went into prison, at this time when you were a new prisoner, the first thing that was said to you was that you must call all the guards 'Sir'. It's a simple word, in English only 3 letters, but I'm an Anarchist, and I call nobody 'Sir'. So I suffered the consequences.

Another time, in a segregation unit, I was forced onto a 'blanket protest' because they had tried to make me wear the prison uniform. So I was naked and just wore a blanket, actually I looked a little like Pontius Pilate. At first the guards tried to intimidate me, to threaten me, to say, "Put on the uniform or we will beat you up." But this didn't work. So they tried another tactic, they came to me speaking quite reasonably, saying, "Why don't you put on the uniform? There's nobody here in the segregation unit who knows you, nobody will know you even put it on." And really I was freezing in this unit. But the important thing was not what other people would know, if I had made this compromise the screws would have known, and I would have known. That was all that was important.

I survived prison. But of course it's not possible to go through that experience without being damaged at all. No prisoner survives long-term imprisonment without physical and psychological scars. The average age of natural death of a British prisoner is only 47, the brutality and bad food, the isolation, takes it's toll, I have many physical scars. There's a great deal of stress, many people do not survive, they are driven to madness or desperation, they hang themselves from pipes only inches above the ground, or they cut open their arms. Even for those who do survive, ex-prisoners do not live to a good age.

In the UK some ex-prisoners have had brain-scans, and it's possible to see the physical damage to the brain, the damage appears in a similar way to the damage to a boxer's brain, literally there are holes in it. But psychologists know that the most damaging effect of long-term imprisonment is disempowerment , that you surrender

control of yourself, of your own life. I spoke before about integrity, and this is another reason that it's important to maintain it. Because by continuing to resist you do not surrender, even in the segregation unit, you are never completely disempowered, and so perhaps you are spared the worst psychological effects of imprisonment. It's important to hang onto your integrity, because when the State has finished with you and throws you back onto the street, your integrity may be all you have left.

I spoke earlier about the repression methods, and about the way that many of the strategies and techniques that were used were imported directly from the United States. Really since World War 2 at least, America has acted like a cancer throughout the world, but with obvious exceptions, in Europe we have not been conquered by force of arms. But through what some may call cultural imperialism, and what is more accurately described as a form of ideological imperialism. In every high street, in every town in Europe, there is a MacDonalds, a Burger King, a Starbucks. American labour practices are already endemic, and we are increasingly importing American policing methods and penal policies.

America has the biggest prison population in the world, 5% of men over 18, and 1 black person in five, are either in prison, on probation, or on parole. One third of adult males have a criminal record. It not only has the highest prison population in the world, but it has one of the highest crime rates, and it has a high recidivism rate. At first glance it seems a strange place to look in terms of producing a successful penal blueprint. But the choice of America only seems illogical if we think prison is about curing crime, that is not it's true function, and it never has been.

Prison is about social control, it is about punishing working-class people who step out of line, and it is a 'big stick' to hold over the rest of us. Also, it's increasingly about wringing a profit out of a class of people capitalism sees as otherwise worthless.

In terms of introducing these ideas into mainland Europe, America has been able to rely on it's 51st state, the country the writer George Orwell referred to as 'Airstrip One', so-called 'Great Britain'. Britain has acted as America's *Trojan Horse* in terms of introducing American penal policies into Europe. It's no coincidence that Britain now has the highest per capita rate of imprisonment in Europe. We have introduced American-style mandatory sentencing, and whereas America has a notorious '3 strikes' system, Britain actually has a '2 strikes' system. British prisons are full of people doing Life who never killed, or even harmed, anyone.

One of the reasons that the British prison population has grown so quickly, and continues to rise dramatically, is prison privatisation, another idea imported directly from America. Often the very same American companies are involved. The first privatised prison was opened in 1991, and at that time New Labour, Tony Blair's party, were in opposition, and committed to the abolition of private prisons. In fact under New La-

you have to think ahead, you know, always carry a ski-mask...

Ateneo Libertario Del Besos, Barcelona, 27th April 2004

From a certain point of view the slogan "Prison Works" does work, because it's an industry and it's producing, and it's making a lot of money.*

That's the only sense in which it does work, and we need to expose that, because more and more working-class people are being sent to prison. I know of even former prison governors, they're not Anarchists in any sense of the imagination, but even they oppose prison, because they know it doesn't work, it makes good people bad, and bad people worse. As Anarchists we're often presented with monolithic arguments, we're told we must have the State because we've always had the State, that we must have capitalism because we've always had capitalism, that we need money because we've always had money, and that we need prisons because we've always had them. But in terms of the history of humanity, all these things are very recent, and the idea of mass incarceration as a punishment is very new indeed.

Would you talk a little more about private prisons, about how they work?

The first private prisons in Britain were built by the State and leased to the companies, to the same American companies, such as Group 4 and Wakenhut, companies that make profit from human misery. What's happened in recent years is that they now build their own prisons...because they can make much more profit, and at the same

** Prison Works' was an election slogan used by the British Conservative Party – Well if 'Prison Works' in terms of 'curing crime', why is the prison population continually going up, rather than down?*

cise-yard, refusals to lock up, riots if it was possible, I would block up the locks on the doors so they couldn't be used,...anything I could think of. I would constantly take legal action to challenge things, I would write constantly about the prison system, show solidarity to other prisoners, and inform other prisoners of their rights. So constantly, constantly, to challenge the system...

Didn't you sometimes prefer just to take a rest, to avoid confrontation?

They left me no choice. Because the alternative is you lie on your bed, you know. For me, it was never a choice, some prisoners they're happy just to watch TV. But not me, and I don't want to do my imprisonment 'easy', to succumb to a living death, I want to do it 'hard', even if it means that I am brutalised. Even in prison I want to know that I am living every day of my life, to fight back as best I can.

I'm not alone, I have other comrades who resist in the same way, and really what I saw with long-term prisoners, is that after 10 years some of them are 'dead', but those who continued to resist, despite the brutality and the segregation, they were still alive. Because they're still human beings.

Are many prisoners willing to challenge the system?

Yes, but not as many as in the past. When I was first in prison it was very easy to organise a big work strike, or a big protest, but by the end of my imprisonment I was increasingly having to use guerrilla warfare, with just a few comrades I could count on. The thing is, if you look back to the 1980's, the prisons were very militant, but it's easy to be a rebel when everybody's a rebel. Because most prisoners didn't have a genuine level of political consciousness, it was easy to take that rebelliousness away. As revolutionaries we need to be more than just rebels. It's easy to say "No!" when everybody says "No!" But sometimes you're just on your own. So you have to have the courage and the integrity to say "No!" when it's just you.

Do you think the actions you were involved in while you were in prison made your sentence longer?

They have a system in Britain, now, since I was released, it's been declared unlawful, this system, but they had a system like a kangaroo court, a small court in the prison. So there's not even a proper trial, because you have no lawyer, that's why it was declared unlawful. My sentence was extended like that, but every time my sentence was extended I would challenge it through legal actions. So time and time again, because the Prison Service are so stupid, they would lose these cases, and I won every single case. So by the end of my sentence, I think I spent only about another 3 weeks in prison. But sometimes they will take a prisoner to an outside court, and many prisoners are doing long sentences because of this. It's like outside, you have to be clever,

bour the private prison system has expanded dramatically, and is leading directly to a rise in the prison population. In America we have seen that the private prison companies are prepared to directly influence legislation. So far this hasn't really happened in the UK, but it isn't necessary in terms of the prison population expanding, the very existence of these private prisons will lead directly, inevitably, to a growth in the prison population.

In the 1980's, in Britain, the prisons were very overcrowded, really they were full to bursting point. Prisoners were being held in police cells and even camps around the country, because every prison was full. The Conservative home secretary at the time was in a desperate situation, he had to make a choice contrary to all his 'natural' right-wing principles. He told judges and magistrates to consider prison only as a last resort, and also he extended time for 'good behaviour', remission, on sentences of under 4 years, splitting them in half. It was only because of this that the prison population was reduced. Now again, in the 21st Century, British prisons are full to bursting point, but the New Labour home secretary doesn't have to make this choice. He can keep on criminalising more people, and calling for longer and longer sentences. Because every time he really needs a new prison, the private prison companies are happy to build him one. They enjoy a symbiotic relationship with the State, making huge profits from the incarceration of working-class people, while in the short-term they are bankrolling New Labour's Draconian policies.

All European countries will come under immense pressure to build private prisons, we are seeing evidence of this already right across Europe, and when those private prisons come it's inevitable that the prison population will continue to increase. Particularly in these times of repression.

Not only does America have the highest prison population in the world, but it also spreads the prison outwards into society. That is happening in Britain, and it is happening across Europe. Our rulers want us on a leash. They had a narrow escape in the 60's and they're determined that those times will not come again.

In the early years of the Prison State, the panopticon system was created. It's a system that is used in most prison architecture, which allows a minimal staff to watch the most people. What was quickly discovered was that when people believe they *may* be being watched, they will behave as if they *are* being watched, so they become self-policing. What we have seen in recent years is the establishment of the Panopticon Society.

In Britain more and more people are being put on forms of parole after prison, electronic tagging is being used even for people who are unconvicted, compulsory urine testing is being used by employers, it's being used against school children. Britain has more CCTV even than America, helicopters roam the skies. More recently the

police began, from a distance, X-ray scanning of pedestrians, supposedly looking for drugs or weapons. Police sniffer dogs are used in schools and high streets, a system of facial recognition is being developed, so that potential criminals can be identified from a distance. DNA databases are being built up, and for the first time the government plans to introduce compulsory ID cards, which will contain biometric material.

I talked about the stress that is caused to prisoners and the damage it does to them, the psychological damage caused by living in these conditions, where you are watched all the time, is well documented. Just a few years ago the European Parliament had a report submitted to them looking at this very issue, the introduction of American penal practices into Europe, and particularly the use of technology as a weapon. The damage that this would cause was recognised. As in prison, the necessity of resistance cannot be overestimated.

Since September 11th 2001 we have seen State repression increase. What happened in America has been used as an excuse by many governments to introduce Police State measures. The liberties our mothers and fathers and our grandparents fought to achieve are being swept away, and often it's the case that people are complicit in that, that they are allowing it to happen to themselves. That the insecurity developed by State propaganda is making people live in conditions of fear, and fooling them into surrendering their liberties...

Is work compulsory for prisoners in British prisons?

Work is compulsory in British prisons, absolutely, but in the past prison labour was non-productive, it was merely for punishment. So, for example, prisoners broke rocks into smaller rocks, or they had to spend their days on a treadmill, or they turned a heavy handle all day on a machine called a crank. In fact, in Britain the guards are called 'screws', it's a very old name, because in the old days the guard could turn a screw to make the crank harder to operate. Even when I was first in prison most work was non-productive, for example prisoners sewed sacks for the mail, but these were of an antiquated design that the Post Office didn't use. So, for example, in one prison I was in where these were made, the prisoners made these mailbags in a workshop called the 'mailbag shop', from there they were taken to another workshop called 'mailbag repairs', where the prisoners took them apart. Then they went back to the first shop again.

I always refused to work, and in the end because of the trouble I was able to cause, they actually paid me the top wage not to go to work. When I say 'the top wage', it was only 3 or 4 euros a week, but it shows the possibility of resistance, even during that period when, like today, there was more pressure on prisoners to work. For example, in the workshops it's obligatory for them to have washing facilities and toilets. So I would go into the toilets and smash them all, and then I'd go to the civilian in

charge of the workshop and say, "We can't work here, there's no toilets." He'd say, "What do you mean, there's toilets there?" I'd say, "No, not anymore." So in the end they just left me alone, and the same happened during my last sentence eventually.

So historically, while prisoners were forced to work, the State were not audacious enough to think that they could actually profit from prison labour, because prisoners were regarded as too unreliable. But because of the wave of repression that's fallen over the last 10 years, because the prison struggle has been subdued, the private prison companies in particular have seen that there is a captive labour force there. Like a Third World colony in their own backyard; non-unionised, low-paid, always there ready to work, and really these prisoners are in the position capitalism would like all its workers. They don't get pensions, they don't get holidays, and of course the few euros that they earn also go back to the company, they can only spend it in the shop that the company also owns.

Two years ago I was involved in establishing a campaign against prison slavery, and it's now quite a large campaign in the UK. We are targeting the companies that exploit prisoners, and exposing them to the public. Because this is not just a moral issue, it's a labour issue, the use of prison labour undermines the pay and conditions of workers generally. We have seen some companies who have sacked all their workers, and put work into prisons. Again this is based on what has already happened in America, and it's certainly something that we'll see more of.

The main company that we're targeting in Britain is called Wilkinson. No, it's not the people who make the razor-blades. They're a big company who have a shop in nearly every town, and so we're picketing their stores, and we're using a range of tactics against this company...

I was released from prison two years ago, and I still suffer a good deal of harassment from the police. For the first year I was out of prison I couldn't leave the country, but I'm involved in as much political activity as ever, even though the punishment for my arrest again is potentially a Life sentence. I'm not going to be intimidated by that, because the political activity that I'm involved in is not just something that I do, and that I always have done. For me now it takes on an extra aspect, it's an act of revenge, of vengeance, against the State that stole 10 years from my life.

What did you do to fight the system when you were in prison?

Everything! Everything! Everyday I would wake up and think what can I do to make life difficult for these people. When I'm in a prison, and I'm being separated from my children, I don't want to hear those screws coming into work whistling, with smiles on their faces, I want them to come in thinking, 'Oh fuck! Not that place again.' So, if I was in the general population, I would organise work-strikes, protests on the exer-