Black Cross

A Proposal for an Abolitionist Prisoner Support Group

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With the Terror Bill now becoming Terror Law, we can expect an increase of arrests and suppression from the State. Indeed just one day after the signing of the Terror law, eleven protesters were warrantlessly arrested and became known as the Cabuyao 11. It is in this climate that having an abolitionist prisoner support group may be necessity. What follows is a sketch of a Black Cross organization, a proposal for an organization that would do prisoner support and advocate for prison and police abolition. The abolitionist advocacy would be what differentiates the Black Cross from other prisoner support groups.

The Black Cross, or *Krus na Itim* in Tagalog, is a kind of organization that already exists in other countries and dates back to the Czarist Russia and the Russian Revolution. The Black Cross is an organization primarily for the support of prisoners, especially political prisoners. It is an institution for supporting us in the face of State tyranny. It is not a centralized international organization like its older brother the Red Cross, but rather a decentralized network of Black Crosses that all work independently of another, though they may confederate into one body if they so choose. The Black Cross is primarily a toolkit for us to use and organize in our own local contexts.

This proposal is by no means concrete or fixed in stone. What the form of the abolitionist prisoner support group would take—or even if it is named "Black Cross" or "*Krus na Itim*"—would be up to the founders of the organization. This proposal contains guides and suggestions for what an abolitionist prisoner support group could do and achieve in the fight for a better world. (For brevity I shall refer to the proposed organization as "Black Cross.")

The Proposal in Brief

- We need a prisoner support group as infrastructure in the face of State repression especially with the Terror Law. This prisoner support group could be called Black Cross or *Krus na Itim*.
- This Black Cross would differentiate itself from other prisoner support groups by also advocating for police and prison abolition. Abolition is an urgent demand in the face of severe state repression.
- The urgent task for prisoner support will include organizing a general bail fund and a legal defense fund for all people to be detained by the State.
- Material support to prisoners can include but is not limited to sending letters, books, and other materials to prisoners, solidarity actions in support of people on the inside, and visitation of prisoners.
- Prisoner support also includes supporting struggles on the inside such as hunger strikes or work strikes.
- Prisoner support must be non-sectarian in nature.
- This Black Cross must work with the larger prisoner support network including human rights and legal assistance groups.
- Being against policing and against prisons, the Black Cross ought organize like the future liberated society we envision. This would mean a commitment to organizing non-hierarchically and free from coercion.
- While Black Crosses in other countries are anarchist in tendency, the Black Cross or *Krus na Itim* for the Philippines ought be open to everyone who believes in the abolition of police and prisons.

Prisoner Support

The primary task of the Black Cross is support for prisoners—particularly the political prisoners—that will be targeted as "terrorists" by the State. Because our political work and advocacy is targeted for State repression, it is up to us to build the infrastructure that will be resilient in the face of that repression. This infrastructure to support prisoners will be part and parcel for the fight for a liberated future.

A general bail fund and a legal defense fund. The Black Cross can have a general bail fund which local and international sympathizers could donate to. This general bail fund would be part of the resistance to incarceration and would be part of how we get people out of prison. The beneficiaries of the bail fund would be political and labor prisoners who would receive money to be used for their bail. Currently bail funds are created as needed rather than permanent fixtures. A permanently existing bail fund has its uses such that it would be a single point of reference for both local and international donations which would make it easier to donate to regularly. A general bail fund would also likely be easier to account for than several dozens of *ad hoc* bail funds. Of course the finances of the general bail fund ought be public and transparent so donors and the public would know the money really goes to the release of the detainees. A general legal defense fund can also be organized under similar lines and for similar reasons.

Material support for prisoners. Aside from bails and legal defense, material support ought be given to prisoners. This can be done through the sending of letters and books to prisoners to actually visiting them at their detention facilities. For detainees who are women, they would likely need hygiene kits such as menstrual pads and the like. Makeup and lipstick are also good things to donate as these help the detained improve their dignity while on the inside. For detainees who are trans, if we cannot have them freed we must push for their gender to be affirmed. Of course freedom is better than being detained, but it would be a disaster for say a transwoman to be placed in an all-men detention facility.

Solidarity campaigns. Above all we must call for the release of prisoners and detainees whether through dropped charges, no charges, bail, or parole. This can be done through the use of solidarity campaigns that would provide information about prisoners to the general public and build support for their release. In the meantime, we must also call for improving their living conditions. We can easily recall how police regularly mistreat detainees, at one point stuffing multiple detainees in a small hidden room during the height of the disastrous "War on Drugs." In a recent anecdote from a member of the Cosmic 10, they noticed how their cell got lighting only because their warrantless arrest was closely scrutinized and noted how their cellmates were without lighting for days before. Constantly emphasizing the institutional dehumanization inside prisons will drive some support for abolition.

Support for prisoner strikes. Solidarity actions would also include raising support for detainee and prisoner struggles on the inside. Prisoners' struggles like work strikes or hunger strikes ought be publicized with solidarity actions. Such acts of collective action can render State violence inutile in the face of such ardent resistance.

Collaboration with the rest of civil society. This prisoner support must be done in collaboration with other prisoner support groups like Free Legal Assistance Group (FLAG), Task Force Detainees, and human rights groups. All collaboration must keep in mind the abolitionist framework of the Black Cross. This means that while the Black Cross would, for example, conditionally support police reform, the ultimate stance ought be towards its abolition; in concrete terms, this would see the defunding of the police rather than say instituting piecemeal reforms that pour more money into policing like body cams. Similarly, prison reform should be geared towards drastically lessening the prison population and rejecting incarceration as a default mode of punishment.

Non-sectarian support. It is important that the prisoner support be non-sectarian in nature. Even while we may have political and programmatic differences between groups, our support to prisoners ought be on the basis of being against the systems of policing and incarceration rather than on the basis of political allegiance. Unconditional support to all political prisoners on the basis of abolitionism is a totally different matter from endorsing their political positions or from political alliances like popular fronts or united fronts. Should the Black Cross default to a tendency-based support, its abolitionist perspective would be a sham. Our support to prisoners ought be based on a universal belief that no one ought be incarcerated. Monikers like anarchist, social democrat, or national democrat are all the same to the State apparatus of policing and abolition. In the face of State tyranny our weapon is our solidarity.

Prison and Police Abolition

What would make the Black Cross different from other prisoner support and solidarity groups is that its underlying and uniting ideology is *prison and police abolition*.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen the State use the institutions of policing and incarceration as the first response. Instead of treating the pandemic as a health issue the State treats it as a security issue. The result is that police

incarcerate scores of people with little regard to the fact that the pandemic spreads easier inside detention facilities. Scores have been beaten by the police and a few even shot to death by police during the Quarantine of 2020. An unknown number of detainees and prisoners are dying of unknown causes during the pandemic and the State cares not if they die. There is no quarantine behind bars and the State does not care.

Prevent the State from defaulting to coercion. We must remove the institutions of policing and incarceration from the toolkit of the State. That way the State is forced to deal with issues without coercion and must instead actively build consent and collaboration instead of simply commanding obedience. By removing the institutions of coercion that the State relies on, we would be creating the foundations of a better society based more on consent and collaboration rather than coercion. This could also be the beginning of concrete steps towards the "withering away" of the State in the Marxian sense, creating the possibility of giving way to noncoercive forms of social organization.

Why police abolition? The Philippines is among the highest in the world in terms of police killings. Police do not protect us, they protect Capital and the State. The police are not there to protect you from crime, though they do pretend that is their function. Indeed, the police sometimes commit the crimes themselves as in the case of the rape and assassination of Fabel Pineda in Ilocos Sur. The function of police is to break strikes, to assault protesters, to evict families, to shoot people. These are not socially useful functions to society. All over the world the experience of the oppressed with the police is always that of *brutality*. The police are an institution of control and domination. *It is an armed occupying force occupying on behalf of the State*. The Philippine National Police is a direct descendant of colonial policing like the Spanish-era Guardia Civil or the American-era Philippine Constabulary and their function is always the same: to protect Capital and the State. There will always be a double standard with regards who is policed; one can just look how thousands of Filipinos are rounded up for the smallest of "quarantine violations" while Senator Koko Pimentel who willfully endangered people by strolling about while COVID-19-positive remains a free man. Whatever positive function that the police may have can be done by other institutions like the fire department or medical frontliners. Community security can be better organized by communities themselves rather than by a violent gang of cops. Our safety ought be the responsibility of our communities rather than by a consistently violent police force. More can be said and I will leave it up to the future Black Cross to say so. It will suffice for our needs that this concept is introduced.

Why prison abolition? The Philippines has the 10th largest prison population in the world. Prisons are not build for people like Imelda Marcos (who is convicted of plunder), they are built for controlling working class people and marginalized groups. Besides, putting the plunderers and oligarchs in prison is not the same as the destruction of their power that allows them to continue plundering. Even the imprisonment of dirty cops would not be concrete efforts towards the dismantling of an inherently violent institutions. If so, then prisons are not institutions made to hold the truly dangerous people in our society like the plunderers or cops. Prisons are built for you and me as a threat to keep us in line. Some crimes are committed because of material circumstance, for example stealing food to eat or stealing things to make money. By imprisoning people who commit crimes because they are poor you do not solve the root cause of the problem which is poverty. Poverty cannot be solved by imprisoning people; indeed people are less able to provide for their families and loved ones while imprisoned so incarceration worsens poverty. Some crimes are committed because of mental illness or personality disorders. Imprisoning these people will not cure them of mental illnesses nor provide avenues to improve themselves. As political theorist and scientist Peter Kropotkin eloquently says, prisons are "universities of crime" where the harsh environment of prisons potentially make people worse rather than better people. More can be said and I will leave it up to the future Black Cross to say so. It will suffice for our needs that this concept is introduced.

Anti-Capitalism. As a final note, anti-Capitalism must be implicit in the organization as Capital is very much complicit in the construction of police and prisons. Capital uses the threat of homelessness and hunger in much the same way as the State uses the threat of police violence and prison sentences against the working class and marginalized groups. I do not think that prisons and policing can be abolished without also attacking Capital which benefits enormously from the institutions of policing and incarceration.

Organizing the Black Cross

Black Cross as an inter-organization abolitionist alliance. As I am presenting this proposal to a forum of youth radical groups gathered together in shared opposition to the Terror Law. Perhaps the Black Cross can be started as a collaborative project between groups, an abolitionist alliance with a mandate for prisoner support. The Black Cross can start as a coordinating body between organizations that would organize around the general bail fund and the legal defense fund. As a coordinating body, tasks and various functions (like treasury) could be rotated between organizations with members within member organizations also rotating to fulfill tasks. In this manner, the Black Cross as a non-sectarian abolitionist prisoner support alliance is made more feasible.

The Black Cross ought not be an anarchist-only project. In other countries, the Black Cross is known as the *Anarchist* Black Cross or ABC and is specifically anarchist. However because the anarchist milieu in the Archipelago is relatively small and *our tasks for prisoner support and prison and police abolition are urgent*, I would recommend that the Black Cross for the Philippines be open to all radicals who believe in prison and police abolition. Our task is too urgent to be limited to the anarchist milieu; this must be a project that all who desire liberation can participate in.

Organizing non-hierarchically. If we are to build a future free from domination and coercion, we must start so in our organizations like the Black Cross. The vision of a society free from the coercive apparatus of prisons and police ought guide how we organize ourselves now. Thus I think the Black Cross ought organize non-hierarchically. This means using tools such as consensus and consensus-building in making decisions. The rotation of tasks also helps in preventing the concentration of power into individual positions.

Avoid leaders. The Black Cross ought not have an easily definable leader. The tactic of organizing non-hierarchically also has a real benefit in terms of avoiding State repression. Leaders are a dangerous thing, not just for followers, but for the leaders themselves. The State is likely to target leaders for repression. It would be safer for all that the Black Cross organize non-hierarchically with tasks done in rotations and decisions done collectively rather than by a person or a cadre. That way, the rotation of tasks prevents a person from being too important that if they were captured by the State the organization can still function without them.

Confederalism. Should multiple Black Crosses form in various parts of the Archipelago, they would ideally confederate with each other. With confederation comes mutual support in the struggle against policing and incarceration. Confederation ought nor mean the end of autonomous organizing however, but rather as a coordination of autonomous struggles. Rather than a centralized leadership I would imagine a spokescouncil composed of revocable delegates from each chapter. Decisions ought remain with the chapters themselves with the delegates merely relaying the discussion.

A note on the name. Ought we call this organization the "Black Cross" or "*Krus na Itim*" or perhaps "*Krus Negra*"? The name matters not and what is urgent is the program of prisoner support and police and prison abolition. However I think the name Anarchist ought be excluded from the name as the Black Cross or *Krus na Itim* ought be open to all who believe in abolition. I will leave it up to the founders to choose what exact name is appropriate.

Concluding Remarks

The proposal for an abolitionist prisoner support group is made more urgent by the day as more and more are imprisoned and incarcerated for speaking truth to power. While prisoner support groups already exist, there is an urgent need for one that is specifically *abolitionist*, a framework the Archipelago still lacks.

Society has progressed beyond the need for police and prisons. The horrific backlash the police and prisons inflict upon society are its resistance to its abolition. I hope this proposal would assist in the construction of a larger prisoner support and abolitionist movement and I dream for a world where prisoner support would no longer be necessary with the abolition of policing and incarceration.

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