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A Critique of Black & Pink

By Jennifer Gann

i'm a former Black & Pink - Leadership Circle (LC) member, and the founder of the California Prison Chapter. i'm also the coordinator for the Advocacy Campaign for Trans-prisoners (ACT!). So its in loving struggle that i offer this critical analysis of Black & Pink leadership structural changes, and their sex offender sympathizing.

Philanthropic Anarchism?

When i first joined Black & Pink around 2009, their original "Purpose and Analysis" described the group as "anarchist" and "queer liberationist". In deed, the group is named after the anarchist queer colors. This founding document also stated that Black & Pink was "against capitalism" and "we want revolution."¹

Thus, when the "Free World" LC first indicated its intentions to place Black & Pink under the fiscal sponsorship of a government registered non-profit organization so that they could legally seek financial grants from philanthropic foundations, i offered

Criticism and opposition. As an anarchist and anti-capitalist prisoner, I knew that such a strategic alliance was not compatible with the founding principles of Black & Pink. I also feared that this move was the beginning of the end of incarcerated LC decision-making power, and prisoner leadership of Black & Pink.

The bourgeois capitalist NGO industry was sinking its hooks into the Black & Pink leadership. Financial grants do not come without certain conditions and strings attached.

Can there really be such a thing as philanthropic anarchism? It should be noted that Black & Pink has since dropped the descriptive word "anarchist" from its Purpose and Analysis, no doubt at the behest of fiscal sponsors.

Hijacking Prisoner Leadership

In 2013, just as I feared, the Free World LC began discussion promoting a leadership structural change to disband the incarcerated LC altogether. Once again, it seemed that I was the lone voice of criticism and opposition.

The original Purpose and Analysis had a section titled "Family Structure" which established a 10 member Free World

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LC and a 10 member Incarcerated LC, with a consensus-based decision-making process. One vote could block a proposal, so votes had to be unanimous. The inclusion of prisoner leadership was based on the concept that any movement for queer and trans prisoners must be led by the people it claims to represent. The entire LC was elected by a vote of the membership of Black & Pink — one person, one vote.

My singular opposition against capitalist funding and the disbandment of the Incarcerated LC was considered an inconvenience. Kern Valley State Prison Facility B, Building 1 Free World LC. They wanted unilateral decision-making power, and most of the Incarcerated LC fell out of contact. However, the Free World LC, admittedly, failed to hold new elections and facilitate the Incarcerated LC by building prisoner leadership development.

They listened and considered my criticisms, but ultimately my vote didn't count. I was overruled. The Incarcerated LC was disbanded, prisoners were excluded from the leadership of Black & Pink and relegated to giving "Feedback".

i was told that my input was still welcome and valued by the Free World LC.

After the coup d'etat by the centralized leadership in Boston, i made a proposal to start an autonomous Black & Pink - California Prison Chapter with their approval and support. Thus, i organized with a Black trans sister, Ms. Jazzie Ferrari, and a Latina trans sister, Morena. We focused on local issues in California prisons, mainly trying to build support and solidarity amongst women and trans prisoners, and being more inclusive of people of color.

i also started a project called the Advocacy Campaign for Trans-women (ACT!), which the Free World LC helped facilitate.²

Eventually, we made big changes in California prisons for trans-women. Here at Kern Valley State Prison, we established a transgender representative subcommittee position on the Inmate Advisory Council (IAC).³ We also established a transgender support group under the sponsorship of mental health staff. It took a couple of years of protracted struggle to overcome transphobic opposition by prison administrators, but we

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credit the TGI Justice Project for their solidarity work.

Additionally, our sisters in struggle, Michelle Norsworthy and Shiloh Quine were successful in the federal courts obtaining a preliminary injunction and legal settlement which forced the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to implement a statewide medical policy for sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) evaluations⁴. This was a historic shift in public policy, with national implications!

So much for the "inconvenience" of prisoner leadership we did that DIY style! Thank you prisoner leaders working individually and collectively in autonomous direct action strategy! We had no funding from philanthropists.

Sex Offender Sympathy?

Over the 5 years of my involvement with the Black & Pink leadership, I've noticed more than a couple letters from child-molesters published in the Black & Pink newspaper, as well as a full-length article advocating the reasons why queers should sympathize with sex-offenders.

i found all this very disturbing and offensive. Yes, of course, we have been criminalized by anti-gay and anti-trans laws, and stereotyped as sexual deviants. California prison rules still prohibit "illegal sexual behavior".⁵ This does not equate queers with the victimizers of women and children.

As a radical trans feminist and sex abuse survivor myself, i find it incredibly irresponsible of Black & Pink leadership and newspaper editors to give a platform for sex offender sympathy. Sexual abuse behind bars is a widespread human rights crisis in American prisons and jails. 20% of inmates in men's prisons are sexually abused at some point in their incarceration.⁶

Queer and trans prisoners are the most vulnerable segment of the prison population to systemic sexual abuse. So, why welcome the fox into the henhouse?!

My strongest criticism and opposition to this pedophile propaganda was once again rebuffed by Black & Pink. This was the last straw for me which forced me to quit my membership and discontinue my subscription in early 2016.

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Conclusion

In spite of its name, Black & Pink can in no way be considered "anarchist", nor "revolutionary". though it may have members who are. There's no discussion or adherence to anarchist principles, no development of revolutionary theory or practice. Black & Pink is beholden to its fiscal sponsors and philanthropic donors.

Black & Pink no longer facilitates prisoner leadership development. The group which claims to represent LGBTQ prisoners is not led by any incarcerated leadership. All of the decisionmaking power lays in the hands of a small centralized vanguard leadership in Boston, a hierarchic leadership structure which claims to represent 10,000 members.

Black & Pink cannot even claim to be "feminist", because it allows an "open" family policy which includes sexually violent predators — the abusers of women and children! Just as the rape victim should not be housed with the rapist, us queer and trans prisoners who are sex abuse survivors should not be exposed

to post-traumatic stress from stumbling across bizarre pedophilia letters in our Black & Pink newspaper. The apologies of Jason are not enough!

For all of the above reasons, I left Black & Pink to work with TGI Justice Project here in California, and various anarchist circles internationally. This is not to say that I don't give credit where it's due. I can still say that Black & Pink is the best resource for queer and trans prisoners, and the largest social justice group focusing on LGBTQ prisoner issues.

Finally, I hope this critique will be taken as constructive criticism by my comrades at Black & Pink, and not as an attack on the family. Trust and believe, I remain loyal to the struggle.

For total trans liberation and the abolition of prisons!

Long live Anarchy! ☺

Notes

1. Black & Pink, "Purpose and Analysis" (2010)
2. Jennifer Gann, "Advocacy Campaign for Trans Women (ACT!)", (2014).
3. Memorandum dated March 2016 by Jennifer Gann, C. Bruce, DeShone Bruce,

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and J. Perez.

4. California Correctional Health Care Services, "Guidelines for Review of Requests for Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS)", Supplement to the CCHCS/DHCS Care Guide; Gender Dysphoria (May 2015).

5. e.g. California Code of Regulations, Title 15, Section 3007 - Sexual Behavior.

6. Just Detention International, "The Basics About Sexual Abuse in U.S. Detention", Fact Sheet (January 2009).

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Red Roses - Amazon Tribe