

... prisoners, roughly a third of the population, are to be transferred. It is unlikely that any will find themselves in improved circumstances. Officials are quick to decry such hard line tactics "over there", but seek to justify their use of the same and worse by describing this situation as a riot exclusively the fault of the nasty prisoners. The real responsibility, however, is directly attributed to official policies and practices of repression, but those of the prisonocracy and the larger political apparatus that feeds it. Without substantive change — change the present system is incapable of providing — we can only expect more Camp Hills. ☹

## Freedom When?

The National Campaign for Amnesty and Human Rights for Political Prisoners, which goes by the short title "Freedom Now!" is having its share of difficulties in getting organized. Given the lack of cohesion, limited commitment and competing currents within the U.S. left, this is understandable for any national endeavor, particularly one that requires the melding of such disparate forces as does the issue of political prisoners. But when the difficulties encountered by a nascent organization rise to the point of preventing effective action and/or, risking counterproductive results, it is time to retrench: to recognize that "going public" was premature and to take the effort back into privacy where its problems can be resolved for a stronger start later. This is especially true for an organization such as Freedom Now! (FN) that apparently purports to set movement policy in so vital an area as the representation of political prisoners generally.

FN's inclination/ability to communicate has not been good, particularly with the prisoners who are supposed to be the subject

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of its work. Verily, it decided to eliminate the "commission" intended to represent them from its bureaucracy. Hence it is impossible to know in the depths of dungeon Marion from the organization itself whether the following accurately portrays the circumstances. But much of the information of which the conclusions and analysis are the logical product come from credible sources to whom it apparently travelled by word of mouth. Some of it came from the document included in FN mailings. In a vacuum, one has to work with the material available.

FN seems to have decided upon some unduly narrow and exclusionary definition of what constitutes a political prisoner. It did so largely in isolation and without approval of the majority of the people involved in the issue, let alone a consensus. Moreover, FN is planning to take unilateral action on the basis of its definition, most egregiously, the deletion of some people from future editions of *Can't Jail the Spirit*, a compilation of biographies of political prisoners. That might be alright if FN were establishing a defense or representation committee for particular people it wants to support and billing it as such. But it isn't. By "certifying" or "adopting" some prisoners as political and "decertifying" others (contrary to FN's protests that it is not decertifying anyone, it is defacto), it is attempting to write out of existence things and people that exist. That makes not only FN look silly, but also those who are associated with it through the issue. By this action, FN is also attempting to define what constitutes acceptable line and means of struggle and making those opinions determinative of whether a victim of the repressive apparatus is a political prisoner or a criminal. It has no brief or legitimacy to do that, to say that its politics are the only politics, for anyone but itself. It needs to incorporate into its work the realization that recognition of political prisoners does not necessarily require support and acceptance of their deeds, tactics or politics, just acknowledgement of their political status.

The problem with *Can't Jail the Spirit* is even more immediate. The elimination of anyone other than at his or her request would be a serious insult, a denigration of the risk that person had assumed in being included and a slap at the segment of the broad movement for the most equitable social reality with which the person is

identified. The very inclusion of the people in the first and second editions indicate that there is at least enough debate about their status to warrant their inclusion. Their decertification would also be a bad advertisement, a demonstration of the lack of seriousness with which our side of the barricade (and FN is avowedly left, albeit decreasingly radical) views its activists, its most valuable resource.

FN is having other problems, too. It was unable to send anyone to the UN conference on political prisoners in Geneva, something that would seem an elementary move for such an organization, even if it meant collecting recyclable cans for the fare. The implications of its rare and untimely mailings are of chronic financial insufficiency down to its most basic necessities and locational, structural and active indecision stemming largely from it. Political uncertainty allows credibility damaging (or possibly otherwise harmful) inconsistency like the apparent liberal drift exemplified by FN's desire to emulate Amnesty International. That would certainly be deradicalizing and more likely to lead to the deligitimization of some essential forms of struggle, especially armed struggle. And it would tend to support the state's criminalization of people imprisoned as those form's alleged practioners and supporters more than it would raise consciousness of political prisoners in the American Gulag Archipelago. Another extremely important consequence of the political weakness is that it attracts and engenders the divisive bickering for which the American left is so notorious and by which it is so fragmented and debilitated. By trying to limp along in a vehicle so overburdened, FN risks producing a net loss.

FN is pursuing a laudable and much neglected objective. There is nothing to suggest that the intent of its people is not commendable and demonstrative of commitment. The questions that arise concern their execution of the organizational tasks requisite to realizing the issue's potential without damaging the struggle, not their motivation. The evidence indicates that FN needs to strengthen its base, establish better connections with its target community, develop its theory and structure and assemble the economic and material ante for its activity. It is thus that i can build to the summit it has

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test what they said to their health and safety caused by the overcrowding of provincial jails by up to 25 per cent.

The job actions spread quickly to other areas of the province as guards booked in sick, worked to rule or refused to work under the Health and Safety Act which allows all workers but prison guards to refuse to work under unsafe conditions. The government locked-out the Hamilton-Wentworth guards and suspended others after being granted an injunction which ruled that the lockdown of the prisoners and the other job actions constituted a strike which is forbidden the guards under provincial law. They have been working without a contract since last December.

The prisoners, who were generally forgotten during this whole episode, protested the lock-down by blocking toilets, setting small fires and generally making lots of noise. Tensions have been running high throughout the whole provincial system. There were several small riots and work refusals during the summer as increased commissary prices made life inside even bleaker. It seems only inevitable that it will take a major riot to make any impact on the system. The guards, walking a dangerous line, used the threat of riots in their struggle with their employer.

Overcrowding is a danger to both prisoners and guards. In the early eighties, the union local at the infamous Toronto Don Jail released a report on overcrowding which recommended that the solution was not to build more jails, but to release prisoners who were there for non-violent crimes and to quit locking them up. Unfortunately there was no evidence of such a progressive attitude this time. The guards were concerned only with their own interests. They even went so far as to say that they were doing a life sentence as well, a thirty year stretch. They say that the stress of the job results in them

The union and the province buried the problem momentarily in the usual way by agreeing to study the matter further. But meetings between government and union bureaucrats will not get at the real problem. The union understands quite clearly that the war on drugs has added to the already intolerable situation inside the jails. This "war" is little more than a race war directed against the African-Caribbean people. Taking advantage of the anti-drug hysteria which has seeped across the border from the U.S., the police, media and politicians have all decided that the imprisonment of thousands of more people was a small price to pay for the greater glory and profits of saving society from the twin evils of drugs and Black youth. The guards are just one more element in a whole system of repression that is involved in this war and they want a chunk of the spoils: better pay and more jobs for their members. ∞

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staked out for itself rather than just leaping for it. Circumstances indicate that it is presently incapable of attending to the issue of political prisoners as a national organization in an effective manner without doing so.

If FN insists on following its current marginal and meandering course of adhering to a narrow and exclusionary view of political prisoners, the least that principle demands is that it cease using political prisoner as a generic term as if those it "adopts" are the only ones in the American Gulag who qualify for the status; it identify itself as a partisan organization representing its political prisoners, not all of them; it either refrain from dropping anyone from any future editions of *Can't Jail the Spirit* or change the name of the book to reflect the fact that it is a new and different publication based on FN's and only FN's new description of political prisoners. ∞