

[The following is the proposed Preamble for the Campaign, written by people from Chicago--per decision of October 1 meeting.]

The Role of Prisons in the US Society: Political Prisoners and Prisons as Concentration Camps--It Cannot Happen Here or Can It?

For most of the last two hundred years, there have been only a handful of political prisoners in US prisons. Today, there are nearly two hundred. This increase takes place in a particular context: prisons are increasingly being used as tools of counter-insurgency and population control by a US government that faces serious economic, social, political and military crises.

I. Who's in Prison?

According to the Bureau of Justice, in April of 1987 the number of prisoners in this country reached 546,659--over one-half million people in prison. No other country in the world has that many prisoners. And this trend is expected to continue. From 1975 to 2000 the total prison population will quadruple, while the number of Black prisoners is expected to increase tenfold. If current trends continue, over the next decade the prison population, excluding jails and parole, will reach one million. The US is becoming a nation of prison houses.

A closer look at the statistics shows that rates of imprisonment began zooming upwards after the social upheavals of the late 1960s. (In 1969, 120 cities burned in black rebellions.) In 1925, when the US began keeping these statistics, the imprisonment rate was 79 (per 100,000). (Imprisonment rates are measured as the number of inmates per 100,000 people in the population.) The rate stayed more or less constant until 1972, when it started to rise dramatically. By mid-1986, more than a half-million people were in state and federal prisons. This number corresponds to an imprisonment rate of 219. After the urban rebellions, the US government poured resources into military methods of social control. From 1971 to 1974, spending on 'criminal justice' ballooned from \$10 billion to \$15 billion. Eight times more was spent on police in 1974 than ten years earlier.

But this overall imprisonment obscures an important difference. In 1983, the imprisonment rate was 713 for black people compared to 114 for white people. This means that a black person is six times more likely to go to prison than a white person. While white people in the US go to prison at a rate similar to that for most Western Europeans, the US black imprisonment rate is the highest in the world. *In fact, Blacks in the US go to prison at almost twice the rate than Blacks in South Africa.* A 1979 government survey revealed that about one out of every five black men would go to prison in his lifetime. The imprisonment rates have spiraled since then, and the proportion is now closer to one out of every four. The total number of black men in the US who have been in prison is about three million, roughly the size of the third largest city in the US.

II. Genocide

This reality is devastating for people of color, particularly for Blacks. Meanwhile outside the prison walls, people of color are trapped in deteriorating public housing projects, drop out of schools at alarming rates, lose their life to drugs, gangs, crime and violence. While the national unemployment rate is 6.9%, for Blacks it is 15%. Seventy-five percent of Black and poor youth are unemployed. Eighty percent of Black youth drop out of high school.

Is the charge of genocide an exaggeration? The United Nations included in part of its definition of genocide, 'Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or part.' The huge number of Blacks in their fertile years in prison significantly will reduce the population growth of Blacks. In 1987, of the nearly 2000 prisoners were on death row, nearly 50% were Third-World, in stark disproportion to their percentage of the population. Also, other evidence supporting the claim of genocide is the prison system's denial to address the AIDS epidemic in prisons beyond providing guards with training and plastic gloves to deal with prisoners with AIDS. Meanwhile, prisoners are contracting AIDS at alarming rates. For example, it is estimated that twenty-five percent of the prisoners in New York state prisons now have AIDS. If the policy of ignoring AIDS in prisons continues, a huge portion of people who have been in prison are going to die.

III. The War on Crime = War on the Oppressed

Feodor Dostoevsky once wrote that to understand a society, one should look within its prisons. In the mid-1960s, the US was facing stiff economic competition from its allies which created a decline in financial order, and threatened hegemonic power of the US in the world. Paralleling this threatening economic crisis, the US was facing an upsurge of national liberation struggles, such as the fight of the Indochinese people against which the US was waging a costly war. In addition, there was growing internal dissension at home, including the anti-Vietnam war youth movement, as well as opposition and demands of the oppressed nationalities.

So in 1965, President Johnson launched the war on crime. He said, 'We must arrest and reverse the trend toward lawlessness because crime has become a malignant enemy in America's midst.' Congress responded by adopting the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act. The adoption of this law ushered in a new form of crime control. Not only would the war on crime be fought by legislation, presidential commissions, policy research, etc., but the law set in motion the involvement of the whole population in the fight against crime. The system adopted euphemisms to obscure the reality of the prison system and win the support of the general public. The 'criminal justice system' has replaced the 'penal system;' 'inmates' used to be called 'prisoners;' 'penitentiaries' have been

replaced by 'federal correctional facilities.' But the ultimate aim was to contain people: population control.

Since 1965 there has been a series of studies and documents which have augmented the ideas outlined in the crime law of 1965. In 1967, faced with growing rebellions in the cities in the US, Zbigniew Brzinsky wrote a series of articles in which he proposed the creation of concentration camps to contain black people because US cities were becoming ungovernable. In 1968 the Kerner Commission, created by President Johnson, concluded that the US was moving into two separate societies. Significantly, one of the Kerner Commission's members developed a concept of spatial deconcentration, or deconcentrating the people of color who are clustered in the hearts of the cities. In other words, driving the masses out of the inner cities to the outer cities, into more easily manageable pockets of people. The areas around these pockets were intended to be tax-free enterprise zones which would provide the demand for cheap labor.

IV. Counter-insurgency

The Crisis of Democracy, written principally by Samuel Huntington and issued by the Trilateral Commission in 1973, reported that America is facing a crisis in the 1960s and 1970s of large groups of people, or ungovernable sectors, making demands on society and society does not have the means to respond. The report recommends moving away from the demands of society to become a more authoritarian society. The 'ungovernables' referred to are obviously the Blacks, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Native Americans, and women are also mentioned. Even more threatening to those in power is that by the year 2080, the Kerner Commission projected the majority of people in the US will be people of color, if projections continue as they have been.

In addition, in the 1970s the Kitsonian model is widely studied, which is based on the idea of the need for permanent low-intensity repressive operations to contain peoples movements before they get off the ground. This will prevent the problem of the masses gaining consciousness and converging with a revolutionary movement. In such a model, prisons serve as a counter-insurgency tactic to house political leaders and organizers.

Recent studies support the understanding of prisons as tools for population control, for detaining the 'undesirables.' William Nagel, a well-known criminologist, analyzed many factors in each state to determine which were related to rapidly increasing imprisonment rates. He found no relationship between the crime rate (or violent crime rate) and the imprisonment rate, and no relationship between the crime rate (or violent crime rate) and the proportion of black people in a state.

However, he discovered a very strong relationship between the imprisonment rate and the the proportion of black people. In other words, people go to prison in increasing numbers because they are black, not because of a rise in the crime rate. Two British criminologists, Steven Box and Chris Hale, found similar results and concluded that people are sent to prison during times of economic stability, not because of an increase in crime, but because they are perceived as a threat by those who hold power in society. Thus, prisons have become a tool of the those in power to contain and control Blacks, as well as Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans.

What makes this government's program for social 'stability' work? Law and order. More police. More prisons. Longer prison terms. The death penalty. The 'ungovernables'—those who cannot be controlled, those who will not submit to living in the areas designated for Third World peoples, those who refuse to work for low wages, and those who rebel and try to organize their people—will end up in prison where they can be controlled. In the 1980s, prisons no longer pretend to rehabilitate—they are simply warehouses. While the federal and state governments spend more money on more prisons, guard towers, barbed wire, they cut educational and vocational programs. They say that crime is caused by bad individuals, the undesirables, rather than focusing on the social, political and economic roots of crime.

V. Political Prisoners

In the 1960s, as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements grew, the number of Black political prisoners swelled and the prison struggle became a major part of the Black liberation struggle. Political prisoners like George Jackson stated clearly that prisons are an important tool in the government's effort to contain and destroy Black people's freedom.

Although the government refuses to admit it, there are nearly 200 political prisoners and prisoners of war in US prisons today. They come from the Puerto Rican, Black/New Afrikan and Native American liberation movements. They include progressive Christians, white anti-imperialists, draft resisters, and grand jury resisters. The movements that these people represent honor, love and respect them. Yet the government contends that they are criminals or terrorists, and reserves for them, as well as prisoners showing leadership and political direction, the harshest treatment in the form of isolation and control units. Control units are designed to totally control the lives of the prisoners in the them, and to ultimately break the spirit of the prisoners. In the case of political prisoners and prisoners of war, the control units are part of a calculated strategy to weaken the movements and to intimidate others from taking a stand.

VI. Control Units

Marion prison in southern Illinois is the most maximum security prison in the country, serving as an experimental laboratory and trend-setter for the whole prison system (twenty states now have control units under construction.) There, the Bureau of Prisons established the first control unit where prisoners are subjected to sensory deprivation and solitary confinement. In the early years of the prison, officials experimented with the use of drugs on Control Unit prisoners. Marion also uses "boxcars"—small, enclosed, soundproof boxes in which prisoners are placed—as a means of psychological torture. In October, 1983, the entire prison was locked down and has been ever since. For 23 hours a day, prisoners are locked in individual cells, denied contact with each other and forced into total idleness; prisoners have been shackled naked to their cement beds and guards in riot gear are used to control prisoners, totally defenseless; no contact visits are allowed; and no work programs, group educational activities and congregational religious services exist there. The BOP tries to perpetuate the myth that Marion contains "the most vicious, predatory prisoners in the system." The truth is the criteria for placement at and for being transferred out of Marion are intentionally vague, and that 80% of the men there are eligible for placement at less restrictive prisons. Although some infamous felons are placed there, the prison also houses people sentenced to short terms for victimless crimes, people imprisoned for their political beliefs and activities, and prisoner leaders.

A control unit for women was built at the Lexington Federal Correctional Institute in Kentucky in October, 1986. At the Control Unit was a behavior modification unit in which the BOP used sensory deprivation, extreme isolation and degradation to control the women in the unit. The director of the BOP said the the conditions in the unit were necessary to provide adequate security for the women. He said their radical politics made them a threat to the community and "escape prone." Other prison officials have told the women that their only avenue out of the unit was to renounce their political associations, to repudiate a lifetime of political principle. After a national campaign about the unit and growing public concern and protest, in October, 1987, the BOP announced that it would close the unit, stating it was not big enough to house all the women political "terrorists" in the country. In June, 1988, three of the prisoners sued the BOP for being imprisoned in the unit; the federal judge charged the BOP with political persecution of the political prisoners and ruled that they be transferred out of the unit immediately. By August, 1988, all of the women had been finally moved out of the unit and it was closed. In August, 1988, the BOP opened the new federal prison in Marianna, FL, with a special women's unit, which prison officials said would continue the mission of the Lexington program.

VII. Women in Prison

The number of women in prison has increased 138% in the last ten years to 40,000. Most women in prison are Black, Latino and Native Americans, and 90% of all women prisoners are single mothers. Most of the women in prison are there for economic crimes. Of the few imprisoned for violent crimes, the vast majority were convicted for defending themselves or their children from abuse. Their imprisonment is not a reflection of their criminal characters, but rather of the role of women in this society.

All over the world and in the US, the last two decades have seen a dramatic rise in the proportion of women involved in revolutionary and progressive movements. This has been reflected in the growing proportion of women political prisoners. In the US, roughly 25% of political prisoners are women. How can these women leaders be controlled and prevented from acting as examples to others? The women's control unit is the answer to contain women who step out of line. In addition, the BOP has a particular strategy for dealing with women political prisoners, which includes psychological manipulation and sexual degradation and abuse. Strip searches and finger probes by male guards, and the threat of rape by male guards or prisoners, are the most direct forms of sexual degradation. The Lexington Control Unit was an experiment of the BOP for this strategy, and the Marianna federal prison is intended to be an extension of the strategy.

VIII. Immigrants

In addition, immigrants are a new group of "undesirables" that the government is trying to contain. During brighter economic times, immigrants, mostly Mexican, were considered desirable because they were cheap labor for industrial production. Now, however, the government perceives them as undesirables taking jobs away from US citizens. In addition, the government fears that some immigrants, such as Palestinians, Central Americans, Haitians, and Irish Republican, will spread the truth about the persecution in their homelands where liberation struggles are rising. And the government has tried to exclude immigrants from countries that are not allies of the US, such as Libya and Iran. To try to control these immigrant populations, the government passed the Immigration and Reform Act which stated that only immigrants who can prove that they have lived and worked in the US may apply for residency, and that it is illegal for employers to hire immigrants. As part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's REX '84, mechanisms were placed and exercised for detaining thousands of these immigrants, as well as North American dissidents, if the government deems it necessary.

IX. Factories With Fences

Of course, the government's "war against crime" has a price. While this country faces an economic

crisis and growing demands of the third-world and poor peoples in the US for job opportunities, better schools, medicare, etc., it has poured billions of dollars into the 'criminal justice system.' Currently it costs more to imprison a person for one year than to send him or her to Harvard University. New plans such as prison-for-profit options are being implemented. Warren Burger, former US Supreme Court Judge, has publicly called for the conversion of prisons into profitable enterprises. Using the slogan 'Factory with Fences,' Burger argues for the dismantling of present rules governing prisoner-made goods, the privatization of prisons, and the making of prisons into profit-generating enterprises. In the coming years, we may see factories, textile plants, foundries, and even high-tech industries springing forth in and around prisons. These industries will guarantee necessary industrial production, super-exploiting prisoners as laborers and yielding super-profits. (Federal prisoner wages begin at \$.22 per hour.) The system is taking the surplus labor force off the streets and putting it behind bars, as slave labor. Prisons are already contracting out prison labor to the state, military, and private industries, and using the profits to pay for the prisons, sometimes with profit leftover. The prisoners work because it provides them with an activity, and helps them to buy the meager supplies and 'luxuries,' such as toothpaste, cigarettes and books. In addition, the meager wages are the only means for many prisoners to pay the huge fines which have purposely been instituted to control the labor of prisoners. In 1984 after fourteen years of Congressional wrangling, the Sentencing Reform Act was passed to institute longer sentences and less, more regulated parole to stabilize the labor force in prisons, and to allow efficient planning and training of the work-force.

The profit of the prison industry is evidenced by the fact of the recent growth of the private prison industry. Businesses contract with a state to operate the prison at a lower price than it would cost the state to run the prison itself themselves. In return, the businesses are able to reduce expenses by providing inadequate, often inhumane, services and conditions for the prisoners. They are able to exploit the labor of the prisoners and further increase their profits.

The Bureau of Prisons intentionally builds walls of silence around its prisons in hopes that the public will never learn about the people living within the prison walls, nor the BOP's brutal policies. For this reason, many prisons are hidden in rural, not easily accessible areas. The walls of silence must be torn down.

Credits and Sources:

1. Committee to End the Marion Lockdown
2. 'US Criminal Justice in the Reagan Era,' Tony Platt
3. Jose Lopez, MLN
4. 'Re-introduction of Chattel Slavery in America,' Alberto Rodriguez, Libertad, Spring '88.

[The following was prepared by the Women's Commission as an addition for the Preamble--per decision of October 1 meeting.]

PREAMBLE SECTION ON WOMEN IN PRISON

Women in U.S. prisons experience many of the same conditions as men in prison, but there are also some real differences. Women are more likely than men to be sentenced to prison for non-violent convictions, to serve longer sentences for violent convictions and to do their time in higher security facilities. Women are punished for stepping out of their "passive" role expectations as well as being punished for their charges. Many women go to prison for self-defense against men who abuse them or their children and for crimes related to day-to-day survival of their families.

Once in prison, women prisoners face a kind of brutality that is more often psychological and sexual than physically violent. It includes sexual harassment by male guards and sexual blackmail (sex with guards in return for protection or special favors which, in prison, often means the necessities of life). Women prisoners are treated like children: they are called "girls," they are not offered even the inadequate kinds of job training available to men prisoners, and they are disrespected in every way. Lesbians and lesbian relationships are subject to additional manipulation and attack. Women prisoners lose not only their freedom but often face loss of contact with their children, sometimes forever.