

**STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES
PRISON ACTION CONFERENCE
"THE STRUGGLE INSIDE,"
Berkeley, January 28-30, 1972**

TEAR DOWN THE WALLS

Many people ask if our goal is or should be to abolish all prisons. "Tear down the walls" has become the theme for a lot of people who believe that, now that the horrors of the prison system have been revealed, the answer is to abolish prisons completely.

It would be very nice to live in a society that required no prisons. But we do not live in an ideal society yet. Realistically, then, what can the slogan "tear down the walls" mean for us?

The prison system is cruel and unjust because it is part of an economic and social system that forces certain classes of people into positions where they will violate the laws or standards of that society, and then punishes them for doing so. If a man or woman, because of economic class or race (or more often a combination of these) is kept uneducated, unemployed, poorly housed and ill-fed and clothed, it is not surprising that that person will steal to get what others have, will take drugs to forget his misery or sell her body to survive. To punish people for these "crimes" is hypocritical and cruel; to rehabilitate them at the present time means to teach them to conform to the norms of society that is criminal. What is needed is the rehabilitation of the entire social order. As long as that doesn't take place, the most well-intentioned attempts to rehabilitate are bound to fail.

Assuming we could reorganize our society, change the economic system, redistribute the work and the wealth so all share equally in the enjoyment of the goods they produce—the effects produced by growing up in this dog-eat-dog, self-indulgent society would linger on. Greed, selfishness, competition and exploitation would not disappear overnight. Some people would still steal from each other, some would get into fights and knife or shoot each other, some men would try to rape some women, some would try to get rich while taking it easy and living off other people's work. Society would still have to deal with all these people. Jails would not disappear in a day. But their functions would be different. With a new economic and social system, rehabilitation could become a meaningful term. If everyone through his or her work has the same opportunity as everyone else to benefit from the goods produced in this society, then it is valid to teach people not steal from each other, and valid to require those who refuse to learn this to work to repay what they have stolen. In that new, non-exploitative society we would still consider certain actions as crimes. Many activities considered lawful today might then be considered unlawful. How might we deal with the slumlord whose negligence in repairing his building caused his tenants to die in an electrical fire? Or the rich heroin dealer who doesn't have a habit of his own, but rakes in the money from people who don't eat, who steal and sell their bodies to feed a \$100-a-day habit? Or the wealthy business tycoon who calls for law and order while laying off hundreds of thousands of employees, and at the same time pocketing millions through graft, corruption and tax-loopholes? Until now the victims of these people have filled our jails; the perpetrators of these real crimes against society are privileged members of the community. Should they continue to go unpunished in the name of a "free society"?

Murder, rape, unprovoked assault are crimes in any society. We would not condone such acts under a new system; we would try to prevent them. If there is meaningful work for all, if there are no privileged classes, if people learn to relate to every other person on a human level, the aggressive and perverted crimes of our competitive society would begin to disappear. And those that remained could be dealt with through re-education.

"Tear down the Walls" should be our goal. But the first step in our struggle to tear down the prison walls is to tear down the walls in the outside society that keep men and women chained to a meaningless life in an inequitable social system. The most basic question in the long run isn't how good or bad the prisons are, but the social and economic factors which force thousands of people into those prisons every month. Prisons will be abolished only when we have collectively built a new society and can collectively maintain a culture which places human needs over property rights.

ISSUES IN THE STRUGGLE

The struggle outside and its relationship to the struggle inside present several problems and issues. The following list is by no means complete or exclusive. Rather it represents some of the issues which we have tried to confront in our own collective discussions while preparing for the conference.

(1.) Political Analysis and Education

We find ourselves with poor information and a limited understanding of the prison system and the struggle inside. Our understanding is limited by our own lack of consciousness and distorted by information received through the conventional media. What is the history and function of the prison system? How is the modern system different from earlier forms of control? What demands are prisoners making and what is the history of experience from which these demands arise? These questions and others require us to read, research, and understand in order to formulate a coherent political analysis.

(2) Fundamental Goals of the Prison Movement

While the movement outside prisons is still struggling to define its goals and priorities, the struggle inside has been developing a high level of solidarity and unity. As Tom Wicker observed at Attica, "The racial harmony that prevailed among the prisoners - it was absolutely astonishing, that prison yard was the first place I have ever seen where there was no racism." This solidarity exemplifies the development of a long range goal of the prison movement - to develop inside a revolutionary society where the administrators can't suppress and divide prisoners through class, racial and sexual exploitation. The short range goals and strategies are more complex and less apparent. We need to develop programs of support for prisoners trying to survive under desperate conditions while at the same time being careful not to co-opt the revolutionary potential and spirit of the prison movement.

3. Leadership

There is a dangerous tendency among some groups outside to define the prison movement only in terms of well-known political prisoners. Courageous leaders like George Jackson, Angela Davis, Huey Newton and others have stressed the need to go far beyond special considerations for individual prisoners and bring attention to the systematic oppression of the convict class. We have a great deal to learn from the struggle inside which emphasizes collective action and solidarity in addition to strong leadership. As George Jackson said, "The prison movement is aimed at the protection and liberation of political prisoners and the convict class in general."

(4.) Support for the Struggle Inside

Organizers inside prisons are constantly subjected to personal dangers and harrassment. Many risk not only their freedom but also their lives. Prison authorities have launched a counter-offensive which includes everything from parole denial, solitary confinement, beatings and murder to more sophisticated strategies such as "behavior modification" and the development of special "adjustment centers" and "isolation wings" for "aggressive" prisoners. We need to develop methods for protecting prisoners from official retaliation during their struggle for justice and freedom.

(5.) Strategies from Outside

The movement for prison reform is historically the work of middle-class professionals and philanthropists, who, due either to bourgeois sense of morality or economic self-interest, have helped to create new forms of repression disguised by liberal rhetoric. "Humanitarianism" has been used to justify houses of correction, solitary confinement, indeterminate sentencing, parole, and drug therapy. We must guard against the danger of lending ourselves to the development of new forms of control under the guise of reforms which make the prison a more effective tool of pacification. "The legacy of a century of reform effort," observes the American Friends Service Committee, "is an increasingly repressive penal system."