"The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons."

Fyodor Dostoyevsky
(1821-1881)
Russian novelist
LETTERS

NATIVE LANGUAGE USED TO VALIDATE

Dear Prison Focus:

Allow me to take this time to write about a situation going on in CDCR for years. It’s pertaining to the Native American Language “Nahuatl,” that IGI/ISU seems to be classifying as gang-related/activity. As you may or may not know, CDCR officials use this Native American language to validate prisoners, specifically those of us who are Mexican, or descendants of the Aztecs.

This sort of action is not only wrong, it is prejudicial and a discrimination towards us people of brown skin. Moreover, this sort of action is in violation of the Native American Languages Act of the United States. Still, officials continue to label this Native American language (Nahuatl) as criminal misconduct.

At any time, officers search cells and are instructed to confiscate our art, Nahuatl studies, and any Nahuatl literature. The reason, we’re told: “gang-related.” This is nothing but culture deprivation, as well as racial discrimination.

I’ve submitted this matter to numerous organizations and government offices, including Native American Affairs in the attorney general’s office, and the International Indian Treaty Council United Nations Liaison, as well as the appeal process within CDCR.

Now, I’ve been verbally informed by CDCR’s officers, a sergeant, and a lieutenant that all Nahuatl materials will no longer be taken or confiscated. However, they have refused to put this so-called new policy in writing, and IGI still refuses to return all the literature they confiscated.

Victor C. Rodriguez

FOOD SERVICE AT PBSP

Dear Prison Focus:

I just finished reading the summer 2007 issue and want to comment on the article about food service at Pelican Bay.

I’ve been in prison since 1990 (moved to SHU in 1999) and can say the quantity and quality of the food is the worst it’s ever been. Here is a rundown of how our food is delivered and what our meals look like:

Guards do not wear hair nets and some sweat when serving the trays. The food trays are usually messy; more often than not the food slots are mixed.

For breakfast, the oatmeal is always served watered down. (On the mainline, I’d volunteered for kitchen work and the standard practice was always to add buckets of water to stretch it out.) If one gets more than three teaspoonsfuls of beans you are very fortunate. On many occasions I have counted my serving to total 13 beans. The eggs (powdered) are runny and amount to a few teaspoons.

For dinner I have many complaints. The vegetables are overcooked and soggy. When broccoli is served I rarely receive any of the tops (flowers), usually only the chopped up stems. The lettuce is always soggy. The days we are served “chicken stew” – or whatever fancy name they give it – it’s all gravy or some jelly-like substance with no vegetables or chicken. “Beef stew” is the same. Breaded fish is undercooked and mushy. All of the meals with ground beef are thick with grease and have a foul smell. Is it the manner in which it is cooked or is it old?

I think I’ve given you a general idea of our meals. While on occasion the quality is not bad, the quantity is always small. As far as special diets go, I don’t know other than it is extremely hard to get placed on the list, at least in my case (Religious Veggie) and the chaplain has not responded to my request.

Hector Garcia, Pelican Bay

VOLUNTEERS, WE NEED YOU!

Dear Prison Focus:

I received a postcard from Sally Bystroff today which deeply saddened me for two reasons. First, she informed me that she had been in a serious accident, for which reasons. First, she informed me that she had been in a serious accident, for which she is in my daily prayers for a full and swift recovery, and second, for what she had to say about CPF itself and stated, “Our whole group has dwindled, I have no idea of when the next issue will be out.” Does this mean that volunteers are losing interest in prisoner rights?

I have heart disease and Leukemia, so there’s not a lot I worry about these days, but one thing I always have on my mind is the way society as a whole seems to be turning a blind eye to the physical and mental torture occurring daily in jails and prisons throughout the United States.

Stop and take an accounting of what’s happening in today’s “modern” prisons. I think you’ll be surprised to learn the isolation trend, or about suicide rates among those imprisoned. But you know what’s really crazy is the fact that a large number of prisoners who have been subject to isolation will soon be released right back into your neighborhood.

Volunteers, we need you! I know that we often forget to let you know just how much you are appreciated, but you are greatly appreciated. Please, those of you that are still in the fight for human decency, use both hands to grab a hold of two other hands that will join in our cause. Lord knows we need and appreciate each and every one of you.

A. Wells, CMC-East

AMERICA HAS MORE PEOPLE IN PRISON THAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY

By Kaleem Omar, November 25, 2007

The United States, which never tires of billing itself as “the land of the free,” has more people in prison than any other country in the world. According to figures compiled by the US Bureau of Justice Statistics and published annually in the form of a report, America’s prison population, which has been growing inexorably for years, exceeded well over 2.3 million people at the end of December, 2006, representing a 2.5 percent increase over 2005.

Prison-related expenditure now costs the US federal government and states an estimated $ 45 billion a year at a time of rampant budget deficits and a national debt that has now ballooned to a staggering $ 9 trillion - fueled by rampant conspicuous consumption, on the one hand, and the US’s obsessive addiction to growth on the other. The problem of the rising national debt is further compounded by a failure to accept growth limits.

By contrast, China, with a population approaching 1.3 billion people, or 4.3 times more than the US’s 300 million, has slightly more than 1.4 million inmates. Russia, with a current estimated population of 150 million, has about 920,000 inmates. The US incarcerates people at a rate more than 15 times that of Japan, and its prison population is more than eight times that of Italy, France, the UK, Spain and Australia combined.

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THANKS TO ALL OF OUR PRISONER CONTRIBUTORS, AND TO OUR VOLUNTEERS WHO DO THE THANKLESS TASKS OF KEYBOARDING HAND WRITTEN ARTICLES AND LETTERS, TO THOSE WHO DO THE DIFFICULT JOB OF MAILING OUT EACH ISSUE, AND TO THE FOLKS WHO DONATE THE FUNDS THAT MAKE THIS PROCESS HAPPEN. A SPECIAL THANKS TO KEVIN “RASHID” JOHNSON, AT RED ONION STATE PRISON IN VIRGINIA, WHO PROVIDED ALL OF THE ART FOR THIS ISSUE.
ESSAYS ON SOCIETY AND PRISONS

Greetings from our new office in Oakland! We continue to hang in there and now are on the road to revival. Our new space is cozy and bright, and located in a building that houses other like-minded organizations. Though we miss our cohabitants in SF’s Redstone building, we are happy to find a better space and continue the work. In 2008 we are focusing on providing a great space for our work, outreach and volunteering, increasing financial support, maintaining our visits and improving the newsletter. We cannot do this without your help. Please contact us at our new home via mail, email or come by soon.

This issue of Prison Focus highlights the departure of long-time volunteer Mary Rubach, important news from around the world, an inspiring demonstration in Chowchilla, these essays and more. Here you will find a variety of writing and themes from the lack of compassion and care in prison, to the ongoing concern of additional punishment in prison by placing people in administrative segregation (in this case, the A/C at San Quentin), as well as the eloquent waxing of LeNard A. Scoven, however controversial. Finally, Ed responds to Scoven’s piece, taking seriously his smashing of dialectical materialism. My resonance with the essay was more about our greed and its destructive ways, as well as the need for all of us to take responsibility for our lives, however possible. The original author, C. Landrum also weighs in. You decide. Enjoy.

Leslie DiBenedetto, Co-editor

THE CONTINUING SAGA

IN THE WAKE OF TOOKIE WILLIAMS’S EXECUTION

By Tom Kerr

When death row prisoners are subjected to degrading and grossly unjust treatment, the rest of us ought to pay close attention, whether we subscribe to Mathew:40 or not: “In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” Prison officials are public officials, acting on our behalf, presumably for our benefit. If through our inattention or neglect we license prison officials to mistreat prisoners—some of the most helpless, abject souls among us—we license public officials to treat the public at large with contempt.

In its broad outline, Steve Champion and Anthony Ross’s story, which I first began to tell in January 2006 (see “Why are They Rounding Up Tookie Williams’ Friends?”), is straightforward. A few days prior to Williams’s execution on December 13, 2005, they along with several other inmates were rounded up and detained in the Adjustment Center, San Quentin death row’s “hole,” on charges they had conspired to retaliate against prison officials for their friend’s execution. For the past twenty months, they have been held there in stark cells on property control and with no phone privileges. From day one, both men have vehemently denied involvement in any kind of conspiracy. Indeed, judging by their many and varied writings, both have long-since transcended their violent gang pasts, explicitly repudiating, as did their friend Tookie Williams, the sorts of values, beliefs, and behaviors that fuel gangs and destroy communities. Both men, however, are award-winning prison writers and outspoken critics of San Quentin and the prison industrial complex in general. And therein lies the rub.

As I reprise their never-ending story, over a year and a half in now, the question of credibility looms large. Why should I, much less anyone else, believe two condemned men, two people who have nothing to lose by lying, and, perhaps, something to gain in the form of winning the sympathies of supporters and drawing the attention of prison critics?

But the same kind of logic can be used to establish the credibility of our informants. Unlike many of us living “free,” they have nothing to lose-jobs or social standing-by telling the bald truth. In a recent letter to me, Anthony Ross notes: “We have nothing to hide, which is more than I can say about them.”

As with any institution, the more corrupt a prison, the greater its stake in polishing its image, preserving it legitimacy, and squelching stories that subvert the official one it tells the public about itself. And near-absolute power, of the kind prison officials hold over death row inmates, can too easily, through all manner of manipulation, cripple the people who would tell subversive stories. If you think corporate whistle blowers take risks, imagine blowing the whistle from inside a death row prison cell.

In becoming well-read, self-reflective thinkers and accomplished writers while in the hell of death row, these two men, like Tookie Williams himself, have symbolically defeated the system designed to dehumanize and, ultimately, to destroy them. Through their essays, stories, and poems they have vehemently insisted on their humanity and steadfastly maintained their dignity. Such self-redemptive effort undermines the familiar and necessary assumption that men sentenced to death have, by their own conduct, forfeited their humanity—have become, as is often suggested, “animals.” And we can kill animals, so the magical thinking goes, without becoming animals ourselves. If we can kill them with impunity, all the more reason we can mis-treat them in the meantime. Who will care? Who will defend them? People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals?

The human voices of Ross and Champion put the whole inhumane, barbaric American killing apparatus on trial, and such a reversal cannot stand.

The darkly ironic truth revealed by Steve and Anthony’s interminable ordeal is that San Quentin officials themselves are the ones conspiring to retaliate against the late Tookie Williams and his friends! For what? For liberating themselves and for expressing their humanity in writing—while still in confinement on America’s morally bankrupt death row.

Of course, the ins and outs of the tale are complicated, involving false charges, time-devouring grievance procedures, published articles, various letters and documents, and lots of bone crushing time in the hole for Anthony and Steve. The opaque complexity of disciplinary procedures and appeals in prison is itself very often strategic, yet another way to punish inmates and confound transparency and accountability. Who on the outside can possibly stay abreast of internal prison proceedings? Who can possibly bear witness?

On occasion, however, moments of clarity present themselves, and Anthony Ross
The notion of a priori culpability, whereby one’s very philosophy, ideas, or character renders them criminal, suggests an insidious and racist mindset within the CDCR. Yet such flights of myopic thinking are common features of a system wherein humanity and justice have been supplanted by degrading abuse and repressive prison policies [see the Bay View article mentioned above].

I am reminded of the weeks and days leading up to the execution of our brother Stanley Tookie Williams. San Quentin Spokesman Vernell Crittenden went on a virulent smear campaign to paint Tookie as an active gang member, offering no proof and despite the fact that Tookie had been cleared of any gang association by the former warden, Jennie S. Woodford. Then, of course, in his statement justifying the use of lethal injection as an alternative to a life sentence, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger argued that since Tookie had mentioned Malcolm X, Assata Shakur, George Jackson, and Geronimo Pratt in his book on prison life, Life in Prison, he could not have redeemed himself.

This pattern of criminalizing and vilifying black leaders and personalites is an old one. And some San Quentin officials are taking this practice a step farther by making the mere mention of a name a gang offense. This bizarre leap of flawed logic provides them with an erroneous catalyst for action against us. It sets in motion a malicious process that can disrupt our mail, personal property, visits, and trust account indefinitely!

There is a real and present danger here. This intentional misreading of language makes it possible to write up any prisoner who elects to use certain appellations in his writings, such as comrade, chairman, minister, brother, homeboy, etc.

The retaliatory targeting of prison writers has a clear objective: to intimidate and disgrace those voices willing to expose violations of basic human rights and degrading conditions in prison. If successful, this strategy becomes an unwritten policy for censorship and will eventually leave only one version, one interpretation, of life in the CDCR—that of the CDCR!

It is worth noting that our Bay View article consisted of over 1,300 words, yet only three “comrade George Jackson” were plucked from their context and reinterpreted as something criminal or, worse, seditious. Agent T. De La Rosa’s semantic alchemy defies the criteria for gang activity as defined in the CDCR rules and regulations, as well as the standard set forth in the 1994 case Castillo v. Alameida, Jr. [No. 94-2974], which establish specific guidelines for gang identification. The use of the word “comrade” is not included in either of these sources.

It is a relatively easy matter to persecute us. There is no real redress here. The inmate appeal process is controlled by the very people who violate policy and abuse prisoners. Now, the intent is to silence truth.

P.S. During a unit search on July 11 all of my writing paper was confiscated and all of Steve Champion’s reference books were taken. We were never given a reason for this. We believe it was a blatant attempt to disrupt the writing projects we are currently working on. Since December 2005, we have been isolated in the Adjustment Center on the bogus allegation of conspiracy to assault staff in the wake of Stanley Tookie Williams’ execution. We are in an ongoing legal battle to fight this false charge and regain our dignity and the very modest “privileges” afforded to death row prisoners.

When we consider how hard it is to confront the deceptions and lies of this country’s leaders, including Bush, Cheney, Libby, Gonzales and others, we can only imagine the daunting challenge faced by death row prisoners confronting deceptions and lies perpetrated by their keepers. There are no meaningful checks and balances. And with the exception of some mainstream, highly sensationalized and largely pro-prison, media depictions of life inside our prison industrial complex, the system, as a whole and in its parts, remains a closed book—a black hole in a putatively open society.

Tom Kerr is Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric and Ithaca College. You can email him at tkerr@ithaca.edu. Anthony Ross is a death row prisoner residing in the Adjustment Center at San Quentin.
FAMINE OF COMPASSION
By Keith Reese
Night, in the heart of a person in prison is eternal. Though the celestial sun arises in each circadian cycle, darkness ever expands its black veil over the hopes of society’s exiles. The zeitgeist of evil, corruption, inhumanity and anarchy goes on. Compassion is a fiction heard of in fairy tales. It belongs to heaven, and certainly cannot permeate the thick granite and steel walls that encircle the anguished lives within it. The evil within this dank and forlorn milieu gnaws exponentially with the moments. Compassion is an invisible, immaterial entity. Yet, it is a quintessential factor to human existence. Without it, even the evil man wanes and fades away.

Pandora has been here, in the cold halls of prison. She has delivered the quizzical box of tribulation, and released its woeful contents upon us. Pandora has heard, “There is no rest for the wicked” and she has escorted compassion away, leaving cries of agony, embattled souls and the vain strife of racism. Men’s minds have devolved to primitive beasts, leaving out predatory roles in a labyrinth-like arena. A heavy, dark nebula of hatred and contention hovers over this Cimmerian subculture, visiting its restless denizens for all time.

A quasi-compassion exists, usually as a pretext to invasion and conquest of a hapless individual. I close the door to my heart and my life, for concern that a predator will enter. To determine who is good and who is bad, thinking like a psychologist on philosophy is imperative. Psychological thinking aids one to see into minds. Philosophical thinking aids one in thinking.

The famine of compassion is not entirely ubiquitous herein, a quiet genre of people to exist in reclusy, away from the hell hounds. In the company of a self-styled rehabilitationist, one can nest, intellectually grow and attend the soul. During a peaceful hiatus, when trouble-mongers are not amok, I stop to see that the sky is not a myth, and the sun has been shining all along.

EQUAL JUSTICE FOR ALL?
By Joseph Gerber
Equality. Do we really know what it means? We think we do. We claim equal justice and justice for all. However, what we really mean is equality and justice for all except….
We want to give the impression of across-the-board love and respect in society. Save those lies. Gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgender people are looked down upon. We do not have equality. Heterosexuals can marry, for example.
It’s not a crime to love someone of the same sex. According to the bible it’s not a crime but a sin. This is where forcing your beliefs on someone comes in.
This is not the land of the free and home of the brave. I love this country but it is hypocritical. I was brainwashed into thinking homosexuality was wrong. Now I believe otherwise.

NEW AGE SLAVES
By Henry Hill
Labor on these plantations is truly a mental and physical endeavor. It is not normal or even ethical for a grown man or woman to slave for the insult they call a pay number. For a few cents an hour or a bit of reprieve from these concrete and steel dungeons, we participate.
Many of us have burnt bridges on the streets, lack reliable resources or may not have loved ones with the financial ability to supply us with the basics, so we’re forced to degrade ourselves.
If you owe restitution, you don’t reap the full harvest or even the lion’s share of the money you earn. We all know that saying, “There’s nothing new under the sun;” well this modern day slavery on these new plantations, prove it true. If you know the history of the Afrikan’s plight with chattel slavery in America, the Willie Lynch law, you know I speak the truth. If you don’t know the facts, I urge you to research it; you will understand your current situation that much more.
The jobs we’re assigned are designed to keep the plantations running, not for gaining job skills for employment on the streets; look in Title 15 at §3040 (c) (2) and §3040 (d) if you need more proof. Every job in here benefits the prison institution, but not all these jobs help people find employment once released.
We go by many names but let’s keep it real, we’re still slaves: house and field, laboring on “Massa’s” plantation, dreaming of, fighting for or completely rejecting the prospect of freedom. This country was built on the blood, sweat and tears of oppressed people, especially the Afrikan. Until we come together, both incarcerated and free, these plantations will continue to thrive due to the ignorance, fear and dissensions among us all.

DENTAL CARE
By Jason Joseph Artiglio
I want to share some information with you concerning the change of regulations occurring in §3350.1, §3352.1, §3352.2, §3354 and §3358 of the (CCR), Title 15 regarding dental services. The provisions implemented are effective state wide. The notice was issued to the public on Oct. 13, 2006. Similarly, as in the case of PLATA, which affected thousands of prisoners in the mental health arena, a complimentary case (on dental care) was on the rise in Perez v. Tilton, et al., Case No. C05-5241 JSW, U.S.D.C.

This settlement agreement was a result of Perez’s legal challenge that the department was not providing constitutionally adequate dental care to prisoners. These regulations pursuant to the settlement agreement are to provide a level of dental care required under the 8th Amendment. The adjusted regulations implement a new Dental Priority System and address the needs of patients in a timely manner, ensuring appropriate dental care and establishing a Dental Authorization Review (DAR) Committee as a subcommittee which works in conjunction with the Medical Authorization Review (MAR) Committee at each institution. The Health Care Review Committee reviews cases approved by the MAR and DAR Committees.

So, when do I get treatment?
I had been put on a waiting list for a medical necessity involving my teeth and gums, and received a medical ducat by the dental office 150 days later. The following morning I arrived to see the dentist; the office was empty and unoccupied. Minutes later I was approached by the dentist and basically told that until more staff was hired and there was an increase in wages, I would have to continue waiting for dental care. I confirmed this through an official who had prior insight and informed me that...
ON CONSCIOUSNESS, RESISTANCE, AND THE RISE OF MATERIALISM

By L.A. Scovens

FROM JESSE’S DAISHIKI TO P. DIDDY’S PLATINUM JESUS PIECES

We should’ve known resistance was on a slippery slope when Jesse traded in his daishiki for a tailored suit. Shaka kicked Rufus to the curb, Sammy the Bull turned state, Malcolm became a face silk-screened on a five dollar t-shirt and our rebels smoked base in crack houses, the cause dissipating within the pale fumes.

When the liberation theories that fueled black consciousness, the movement for civil rights and feminism were co-opted by unrepentant materialists, the poor were cast out into a long, rough winter. We chased cash through the indifferent streets that led us directly to these hovels we rot in.

Materialism got us here. Our frenetic scramble for cash has stuffed America’s prisons with addicts, con artists, pushers and thieves. We’ve worshipped at the altar of Mammon – because if all that matters is matter, then cash is the only god worth kneeling to – the only divine power.

Let’s take the analogy a step further.

The prison industrial complex is a boil on the back of the state which is the high priest of Mammon. The bodies that swell the boil like pus are sacrifice to the one god. The political machine is the disciple to Mammon, the glamour of capital is the narcotic that dazes us into insensibility while we’re picked off one by one like virgins at Aztec fertility rites for sacrifice to the beast. And as we await to be thrown into the chasm – dreaming our dreams all the while – we struggle through the gutter oblivious to the drooling slack jawed beast eyeing us down: Mammon.

We can’t resist its hunger by worshiping at its altar. And its altar is materialism – the fallacy that all that exists is bone, vein, and sinew: Matter.

The rise of the prison industrials coincided with the dramatic increase in the importation of cocaine that occurred in the early 1980s. The debauchery that ensued inspired the War on Drugs and was justification for the massive prison building campaign that employed the rural poor while incarcerating the urban poor.

It has been alleged that certain elements within the Reagan/Bush administration were complicit in the explosion of cocaine importation into the U.S. Once considered an urban myth, these allegations were substantiated by evidence uncovered by journalist Gary Webb which established links between the CIA and Ricky Ross – a young entrepreneur recruited to push South American cocaine in L.A. to illegally fund the contra insurgency in Nicaragua. In effect, elements within our government were pivotal partners in sparking the crack epidemic that dismantled America’s urban centers, turning them into North American Beirut’s.

The War on Drugs, birthed during the Reagan administration, was in full bloom by Bush I’s reign. When his administration increased funding for massive prison building campaigns, he was cleaning up the detritus from his fiasco with the Contras. He increased the wealth of many of his strongest supporters with the economic boom the prison and criminal justice system created. By the time the role played by a small privileged minority to fund their illegal war with cash was exposed by Gary Webb, any organizations or movements which could have demanded swift action against those responsible for starting the crack epidemic had already been undermined or irrevocably destroyed by the very same epidemic. Which was centered in what, by the way?

In Materialism and its fat cousin Greed, of course.

The Bloods and Crips, whose modern incarnations are the progeny of archaic Black movement organizations, were the vanguard of the new drug dealing elite in the 1980s. Their rise precipitated the crash, burn and approaching irrelevance of the Panthers, BLA, BGF and other consciousness-raising organizations.

Shortly after getting out of prison, Huey Newton took the reins of the Panthers away from Elaine Brown and turned the party into a protection crew for pushers and gangsters. He promptly became one of their best customers and his addiction ran our hope into the ground. The youth stopped looking at the brothers’ nation building in the trenches and chanting “Power to the People” as role models. They began looking to the gangsters and their addiction run our hope into the ground.

Scovens ............ Continued on page 18
In accordance with Title XV, Article 11, “the facility administrator shall have the responsibility to ensure provision of emergency and basic health care services to all inmates.” Our visits over the last several months have led us to question the effectiveness of the state’s healthcare receivership to bring prisoner medical care up to constitutional standards. It is our opinion that not all inmates are receiving adequate access and/or proper treatment to remedy their health dysfunctions. It has been reported that some prisoners have not seen a “real” doctor in months, but rather general health care providers who often err in diagnosing them and/or prescribing medications, leaving them with further and sometimes irreversible complications as a result. Meanwhile, others claimed they have changed prescriptions and/or have been released from their meds for reasons unbeknownst to them.

“The incarcerated population is the only population in this country that has a constitutional right to health care,” said Barry Zack of Centerforce Inc, a non-profit organization that offers HIV and hepatitis education to prisoners at San Quentin. According to some prisoners, the attitude of some doctors and staff is often deplorable and condescending. One gentleman told us that while visiting medical he was told if he wanted another opinion, he should “go and visit an outside doctor,” as if he had a choice in the matter. In prisons around the U.S. and true at PBSP as well, Hep-C patients are bringing to light the lack of treatment they feel they are receiving. At least a few at PBSP have been told that treatment cannot take place until Stage Three, when liver damage has developed. Unfortunately for many prisoners, they must suffer the frustrating and painful consequences associated with this virus while awaiting appropriate care.

As is true for us all, maintaining meaningful relationships with others is key to a sense of fulfillment in our lives. For prisoners, the ability to remain in communication with people on the outside is of utmost importance, particularly for many of our brothers at PBSP who have been shipped hundreds upon hundreds of miles from their family, friends and community and do not receive visits on a regular basis. A consistent criticism we are told by prisoners is the inefficiencies associated with the handling and delivery of mail. Prisoners become embittered when their mail is not sent or received in a timely manner—in some cases up to 30 days or more. Others have informed us that their legal mail has been opened and/or tampered with. Yet another common upset in recent months has been the large red stamp which now appears on all outgoing mail. CPF and their allies have received numerous letters and artwork where it is obvious that little attention was paid to the integrity of the piece when applying the stamp.

There are dozens of prisoners who have contacted us to learn more about how they can challenge their gang validation and indeterminate SHU status. It appears that many of them are still unclear as to what exactly constitutes “gang activity.” CPF has compiled numerous reports by those who claim they are wrongly validated and have no affiliation with gangs whatsoever,
either on the inside or outside of prison. A prisoner’s name and CDCR number found in another’s cell, for example, could be considered evidence of gang affiliation. Perhaps even more disturbing is when possession of cultural products and/or tattoos is seen as loyalty to a gang—a form of evidence and possible reason for receiving an indeterminate SHU sentence. Many prisoners find themselves sentenced to SHU terms without any understanding of why they are there. They want to be sure that provisions for validation set forth from the Castillo case are being implemented and enforced appropriately.

Food quality and quantity is also a steady grievance reported, particularly in the SHU. Men have expressed their concern regarding the insufficient quantity of the food which leaves them “always hungry.” Many have said that supplemental food from the commissary is necessary in order to maintain a somewhat healthy diet.

Perhaps it is easier to grasp the vast complexity of the natural landscape on the Redwood Coast than it is to fathom the mechanics which produce the machine named the prison-industrial complex. We realize our reports constitute only a portion of the everyday realities prisoners must endure, and so as family members, friends and concerned citizens who stand in solidarity with people incarcerated, we must continue to support each other in our efforts. I have been personally moved, and many have agreed, by the level of resilience and consciousness displayed by so many individuals at PBSP.

I would like to express my deepest respect and gratitude for Mary Rubach who has, through her compassion, wisdom and dedication, touched so many lives both on the inside and outside of prison. Mary, you are a true inspiration for us all, and you will be missed dearly.

**DEMO ROCKS CHOWCHILLA PRISONS**

*By Corey Weinstein*

I’ve been attending demonstrations at the two Chowchilla prisons for women for many years. But Saturday October 20 was a new experience for me. Let me just say this: it was nothing like any of the more recent demonstrations with the same 42 people in attendance. That evening, I cried tears of joy and appreciation for all the organizing that went into such a successful event, and for the young people who showed up strong.

There were 200 people assembled at CCWF for a spirited march to VSPW led by a drum corps. Twice on the march the throng stopped at places where we could see CCWF prisoners on the yard. We made lots of noise and got lots of waves from the women in return. Chanting, yelling and screaming kept the noise level very high during the 30 minute march. There were lots of great signs demanding decent health care, parole for lifers, an end to physical abuse of women, especially the new pepper spray called Orange Crush, and Dignity for Women Prisoners campaign. The mood was joyous and raucous and I was carried along on the high energy of the youthful demonstrators. There was a busload from the Bay Area and one from Los Angeles, and many cars full of folks from north, south and the Valley.

The rally formed up at one of the huge concrete signs in front of VSPW. The speakers stood on a little boulder in the flower garden. Tongue in cheek awards were given to corrections officials for jobs we wish they had done well. X-cons and young organizers spoke out about their experiences and goals. I spoke briefly during open mic to describe the Dignity for Women Prisoners Campaign demand of removing male staff from the housing units and S and E posts, and introduce our campaign manager, Pat Parker. The attendees understood immediately what I had said and contacted Pat to help the Campaign in LA.

The rally could be heard from VSPW all the way back to CCWF. That flat Central Valley sure carries sound well. So the women at CCWF could hear the rally and see us marching. CPF was well represented by Georgia and I from the Bay Area and Pat, Roger and Bill Tate from L.A. I met old friends and made new ones, all while being well cared for by the organizers of the event.

It was a great day for our movement for decency and human rights in our prisons, and an end to mass incarceration.
COURT UPHOLDS WALLACE CONVICTION
A Baton Rouge judge has ruled against Angola prisoner Herman Wallace’s appeal that his conviction be overturned because of prosecutorial misconduct. Wallace, convicted or murdering a prison guard, showed that prosecution witnesses were promised favors by the former Angola warden Murray Henderson.
A key prosecution witness, Hezekiah Brown, had his sentence commuted in 1986 after Henderson wrote letters on his behalf.
The Advocate, Oct. 10, 2007

MELEE AT HIGH DESERT
At least four prisoners were hospitalized after 75 prisoners clashed at High Desert State Prison. Two were treated at local hospitals and two were sent to Reno.
RGI, July 29, 2007

JUDGES CONSIDER CAPPPING PRISON POPULATION
A three judge panel of federal judges will consider whether to cap the size of California’s prison population as a means of assuring prisoners constitutionally mandated levels of health care.
“They can’t treat them all in a timely manner. So as a result, they can die, get injured, suffer serious permanent injury, become psychotic for long periods of time without getting treatment ... all because of overcrowding,” says Don Specter, Prison Law Office.
“I don’t blame the courts for stepping in. We tried to solve the healthcare crisis that we have ... the overcrowding crisis that we have. The fact of the matter is for decades, the state of California hasn’t taken it seriously, haven’t really done something about it,” said Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.
KFSN, Sept. 24, 2007

FARMERS USE PRISONER LABOR
As crackdowns on undocumented workers intensify, farmers are facing a labor shortage. The solution in some states appears to be to put prisoners to work on farms and in other related industries.
“We are contacted almost daily by different companies needing labor,” says Bruce Farely, of Arizona Correctional Industries, a state labor program. “Maybe it was labor that was undocumented before, and they don’t want to take the risk anymore because of possible consequences, so they are looking to inmate labor as a possible alternative.”
In Arizona farmers pay a minimum of $2 per hour, of which 30 percent goes to the prison to cover the prisoners’ room and board. Farmers must also pay transportation costs and for correctional officers to guard prisoners in the fields.
The CS Monitor, Aug. 22, 2007

PRISONERS SLEEPING ON FLOORS UNCONSTITUTIONAL
The federal courts ruled that Los Angeles County has violated the rights of prisoners by having them sleep on the floor. That “deliberate indifference” constitutes cruel and unusual punishment according to judge Dean Pregerson.
Court documents showed that during a four month period in 2005 more than 24,000 prisoners in L.A. County were forced to sleep on the floor. Stephen Yagman who represented the prisoners claims that there might be as many as 500,000 prisoners and former prisoners who can claim damages against the county.
Los Angeles Times, Sept. 24, 2007

THREE CHINO COS GUILTY
Three former guards at Chino State Prison were convicted of federal civil rights and conspiracy charges stemming from an incident in which prisoners in shackles were thrown down. Robert McGowan was convicted of assault and Thomas Ramos and Hector Flores with conspiracy to cover up the incident.
McGowan pulled two shackled prisoners from a van and bounced them on their heads, according to trial testimony.
Los Angeles Times, Oct. 16, 2007

$146 MILLION FOR S.Q. HEALTH CLINIC
Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has signed legislation authorizing the state to borrow $146 million to build new health facilities at San Quentin, the site of the court receiver’s pilot program to bring CDCR health services up to constitutional minimums.
Reuters, Sept. 26, 2007

FIRST MINI-PRISON TO OPEN IN STOCKTON
The first of the state’s planned 32 mini-prisons authorized last spring in AB900 will open in Stockton. The state will use the facility of the former Northern California Women’s Facility to open the Secure Community Reentry Facility (SCRF) that will hold up to 500 prisoners.
AB900 authorizes the state to borrow $7.8 billion to build 53,000 new prison and jail beds, of which 16,000 are planned to be SCRF beds.
The legislation authorizing the reopen-
there are no clinical or business systems in place that support good care. That’s why it was taken over from the state.”

Sillen reports that he has hired more doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other staff, reducing vacancies in the health care system from 31 percent to 21 percent.

Priorities for the coming three years include:

- Building 5,000 more medical beds and 5,000 more mental health beds
- Building clinical and support space in existing prisons. The first to get more medical space will be Avenal.
- A new orientation program for newly hired nurses.
- A revised asthma prevention program. (Asthma was the leading cause of preventable death in California prisons last year.)
- An information technology project that will give California prisons wireless access to each other.
- Continuing the San Quentin Project, the pharmacy takeover by Maxor National Pharmacy Services and other remedial activities.

There are new projects initiated by the receiver at 20 of the state’s prisons.

The entire report can be found online at: http://www.cprinc.org in the Court Materials section.

Medical News Today, Sept. 28, 2007

DEUEL BEGINS DESEGREGATION

In response to a Supreme Court decision resulting from a lawsuit brought by prisoner Garrison S. Johnson, the CDCR has begun the process of desegregating the prison system. At Deuel, prisoners are being polled on their attitudes towards people of different races and ethnicities as CDCR struggles to desegregate their men’s prisons by July 2008. California’s women’s prisons are not segregated.

Prisoners who refuse to share a cell with someone of another race will lose privileges, lose credits or be assigned a higher security classification.

Employees from Deuel visited the Texas prison system this year to learn from a system that took sixteen years to desegregate.

Tracy Press, Sept. 27, 2007

CDCR FINED IN INFECTION COVERUP

The California Division of Occupational Safety and Health fined CDCR $21,000 for their failure to investigate eight staph infections between June 2006 and May 2007 and for not reporting the infections to OSHA. Two Folsom staffers were hospitalized as a result of the infection.

CDCR announced the formation of a working group to establish procedures to prevent staph infections in their prisons.

Sacramento Bee, Nov. 1, 2007

NEW PAROLE MODEL IN ORANGE COUNTY

The CDCR is testing a new parole policy in Orange County. Parolees who are considered at low risk to commit crimes will be released from parole after six months rather than the three years standard in the rest of the state.

By releasing some parolees earlier, the CDCR intends to put more resources into those most at risk and saving money in the process.

Fewer people on parole should also mean fewer parolees sent back to prison for minor violations of parole rules, reducing the prison population.

Reducing the time most parolees are on parole is a reform that has been pushed in California for years by activists and academics and most recently by former Gov. George Deukmejian’s Independent Review Panel.

Sacramento Bee, Oct. 4, 2007

MORE PRISONERS TO BE SHIPPED OUT OF STATE

The CDCR has contracted to send 3,060 prisoners to prisons run by Corrections Corporation of America outside California. The new contract brings the total number of beds contracted by CDCR to 7,772.

California prisoners are now locked up inCCA prisons in Tennessee, Mississippi and Arizona. With the new contract, prisoners will also be sent to Oklahoma. CCA is also scheduled to build a new 3,060 prison in Eloy, Arizona. This contract brings CDCR payments to CCA to over $100 million per year.

The CCA/CDCR contracts can be read at: www.cdcra.gov.


MADRID RECEIVERSHIP TO END?

Special master John Hagar who has been overseeing reforms resulting from the 1990 Madrid v. Gomez lawsuit has told the court that he may recommend in January that the case be terminated.

Hagar reports that internal reporting and officer discipline issues have largely been addressed. He wrote that CDCR has developed “an overall effective use of force/ code of silence related investigation and discipline program.”

Hagar’s investigation of how CDCR investigates use of force cases revealed a cover-up going all the way to the director’s office. His report forced the resignation of then CDC-director Ed Almeida.

Steve Fama of Prison Law Office, while acknowledging the progress that Hagar and CDCR have made, is concerned that CDCR “doesn’t yet have a statewide policy that sets ground rules” for use of force by staff.

“I appreciate the efforts that have been done,” Fama said. “However, the special master points out it could change in very short order.”

Sacramento Bee, Oct. 25, 2007

PRISONERS FIGHT FIRES

In response to the massive fires that swept through Southern California, the governor sent CDCR fire department emergency strike teams to fight the fires. More than 2,600 prisoners from 16 prisons risked their lives fighting fires this season.

Prisoners who participate in the program working side by side with free world firefighters are paid $24 per day. “They’re required to work hard, they’re expected to work hard, and they do,” said Captain Bryan Lee of Cal Fire.


Agence France-Presse Oct. 25, 2007

CHANGES TO PAROLE BOARD

Bilenda Harris-Ritter had been a member of California’s Parole Board for only a few months when she received a call from the governor’s office asking her to resign. When she asked for a reason, she was told by Alberto Roldan that the governor wanted to go “in a different direction” and that she was “forbidden to tell anyone about this phone call” and “forbidden to attend the board meeting next week.”

In her search for the reason, she discovered a website that criticized her for recommending parole to too many lifers – 12 of the 300 lifer cases she’d heard in her three months on the board.

Christina Ward of the Doris Tate Crime Victims Bureau says that 12 parolees are too many. “We were concerned about her performance on the board,” she said.

Tracey St. Julien was also forced off the parole board by the governor who appointed her.

Superior Court Judge Linda Condron

Continued on page 23
ED’S COMMENTS

By Ed Mead

I lost my job in San Francisco so I’ve moved back to Seattle where I originated. From here on out, for as long as there is money (and CPF permits me) to do so, I’ll be co-editing this newsletter from the Great Northwest. Accordingly, you will see a little more Washington State prisoner news in this publication. Someday I would like to see Prison Focus become a really national magazine for prisoners, with writers and news from all over the U.S., but for now we are straining for the money needed to print and mail the current newsletter.

Every issue we send out costs us about three thousand dollars. Neither I nor the folks who do the mailings are paid a dime. We could all be doing other things with our time. Yet we are here with you today because we believe in the mission of CPF, and we have hope that our prisoner-readers will be able to overcome their circumstances enough to develop rights and class conscious, and to take the steps that flow from these awarenesses. But it’s a two way street. We are out here for you; you be in there for us. We need your money and stamps to keep doing the work we do. If each prisoner sent us the five bucks we ask for a yearly subscription this publication could become a part of the national voice today’s convicts so badly need.

A STEP BACKWARDS

In the October 10 issue of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer the editorial staff threw its weight behind a constitutional amendment that would make it legal to rent prisoners out to private companies who will profit off their labor. The editorial said, “ Voters should enthusiastically say yes to Senate Joint Resolution 8212, an amendment that would allow inmate labor programs under state contract with private companies.” The reason for the Joint Resolution was that the Washington state constitution specifically banned private contracting of prisoners. The paper went on to say: “This measure has the support of those in both parties who have taken the strongest stances in the Legislature for public safety and victims’ compensation. Don Pierce, executive director of the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs, is one of the prominent supporters.” Who supported this measure is a clear sign of what it will bode for Washington’s prisoners. And the prisoners who supported it stood side by side with law enforcement. Rather than looking at their own self interest, they should have been looking at who they were in bed with. On November 6 the voters approved the constitutional amendment and now those prisoners are going to learn what slavery really is all about.

I correspond with Washington prisoners and, as indicated above, some of them seem gleeful at the prospect of being exploited in even more ways. One of them used to be against private firms profiting from prison labor, but now says he has since changed his mind because so many prisoners are broke and can’t buy the greeting cards he makes. This kind of narrow self interest will continue to be the downfall of prisoners. Think, when in the history of the human race has leasing out prisoners to private companies for their personal profit ever been successful? When has the practice ever failed to be terminated as a result of the serious abuse of prisoners? Oh, you say, now we are wiser and the government can do it right this time. Would this be the same government that has gutted habeas corpus, uses torture on prisoners, does secret renditions, etc.? Once again prisoners seem unable to see beyond their immediate self-interests. Long term goals and objectives appear to be beyond them.

Some years ago, when I was first publishing the Prison Legal News, the Washington state legislature proposed a bill that would take the good time from sex offenders in that state. Upon learning of this I immediately climbed up on my soap box and wrote articles saying that if prisoners allow this to happen to sex offenders, then the state will be doing it to violent offenders next. The guy doing the PLN printing on the outside would not print the issue because of that article, so we found someone else to print and mail it and subsequent issues. Then the prisoners whined about what kind of nut I was for defending rapos. Well the good time law passed and sex offenders were made to serve longer terms of imprisonment since they could not earn regular good time. Who cared? And low and behold, the following year (maybe it was two years later) the legislature turned around and did the same thing to violent offenders. Who could have guessed?

ON RACISM

I also correspond with some racists (oh, they don’t call themselves that, they say it is about racial pride). In my letters I try to say that the primary contradiction prisoners face is between them on the one hand and those who are holding them captive at gun point against their will on the other. These prisoners are literally slaves of the state, a status legitimized by the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution. They are completely disenfranchised from the political process, both locally and nationally, and held in a condition of dependency and irresponsibility. There’s more but you get the point. “No,” I am told by the white pride folks, “the primary contradiction is between us white prisoners and the ‘mud races.’” They say the white race must be defended from incursions by other races. If this isn’t done, they say, the white race will be assimilated by the darker races.

Gee, the white race? Who has killed more human beings in the history of the earth than white men? Think of World Wars I and II, and then they killed millions of North Koreans back in the 1950s. Former defense secretary Robert McNamara says the U.S. killed 3.2 million Vietnamese (the Vietnamese say the figure was much higher). The white folks in power have already murdered at least 1.5 million Iraqis in what amounts to an act of international armed robbery (to steal their oil). So would this be the superior white race we are talking about? The great model of which is the Nazi Germans, the ones who fed babies into the ovens? Still, I must admit the racists are right in one regard, in time the white race will be assimilated, there will only be one race—the human race. Fight that as you may, huddle up in your bunkers, but it will come to pass. And with it will come the end of the evil of racism.

ECONOMICS 101

The wealthiest 1 percent of Americans earned 21.2 percent of all income in 2005, according to new data from the Internal Revenue Service. That is up sharply from 19 percent in 2004, and surpasses the previous high of 20.8 percent set in 2000, at the peak of the previous bull market in stocks. The bottom 50 percent earned 12.8 percent of all income, down from 13.4 percent in 2004 and a bit less than their 13 percent share in 2000. Things couldn’t be better for the ruling class (despite their disrupted plans in Iraq and Afghanistan) with the top 2 percent of adults in the world owning half its wealth, the top 10 percent with 85 percent of it, and the bottom half...
with just 1 percent. In addition, corporate wealth is at a record 43 percent of 2005 national income accruing to profits, rents and other non-wage/salary sources compared to a declining percentage of it to individuals, except for those at the top gaining hugely. In short, the rich continue to get richer and the poor of course get poorer.

U.S. labor is in crisis with living standards declining as the result of reduced or eliminated business benefits, government services and stagnating wages. Add the growing budget and current account deficits; ballooning national debt; excess speculation; weakening dollar; high energy costs; outsourcing of jobs, and more. Labor’s history of overpaid, underperforming, corrupted leaders explains why only 7.4 percent of the private sector organized, compared to 34.7 percent in the 1950s.

The social and political movements are in similar disarray. Imperialist adventures in Korea, Vietnam and other wars hide the true cost in lives, devastation and human wreckage. The latest O.R.B. British polling data reporting 1.2 million Iraqi deaths since March, 2003 alone plus another 1.5 million up to that date. The true toll may be even higher with huge uncounted numbers of daily violent and non-violent deaths that one estimate by Gideon Polya places at 3.9 million from 1990 to the present. No one knows for sure, and his estimate may be as good as any other. Yet today’s anti-war demonstrations continue to attract fewer and fewer people, while at the same time the anti-war consciousness of the American people grows. Our tame activist leaders don’t seem to get the message.

**SPEAKING OF IRAQ**

There are many parallels between the national liberation struggle of the people of Iraq today and the struggle of the Vietnamese people to expel that same invader from their lands. And that the response to each should be the same—solidarity. (Although the Palestinian resistance says the time for mere solidarity has long since passed.) In any event, my point is that we as progressives must fight for the defeat of our own ruling class and for victory to those opposing the military occupation of their lands.

The struggle of the Iraqi people is an anti-imperialist struggle. It is the duty of anti-imperialists in the occupying nation to support this struggle, if only on a tactical level. The issue is not complicated. Ask yourself these two simple questions, is this an anti-imperialist struggle? Yes or no? Does international law support the right of the Iraqi people to take up arms against a foreign occupier? Yes or no? If your answer to either of these questions is yes, then the issue of who is right and who is wrong should be clear to you.

Notwithstanding this very straight forward question, there are those who objectively side with the occupation by proudly proclaiming, “I will not sell out Iraqi women, gays, and communists to a bunch of Islamic fascists.” In their zeal for political correctness they crawl into bed with their own ruling class. These “comrades” have not internalized the important lesson that class trumps all other forms of oppression. While this segment of the left prattles on and on about rights of women and the other crimes of the “Islamo Fascists,” they do not address the issue of oppressed and oppressor nation, or of occupied or occupier nation, or imperialist and anti-imperialist struggles.

Sure, it would be nice if the Iraqi and Afghan resistance movements were led by working class formations. But the sad fact of the matter is that our government, with the silent acquiescence of the American people, installed and/or supported reactionary dictators like the Shah (Muhammad Reza Pahlavi) of Iran and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. These two U.S. supported-thugs murdered many of the progressives, leaving the religious leaders as the primary force to oppose the current occupations. Are we to now wrench our bloody hands and say “we can’t help you because you are not progressives” or because “we disagree with you on the issue of women’s rights or gay equality”? To do so would be to elevate those issues above the right of a people to throw off the yoke of a foreign military occupation; it would be a slap in the face of the global struggle against U.S. imperialism. It’s not about fascists versus imperialists; it’s about a people’s inalienable right to choose their own fate and to control their own resources. It is, in short, about right and wrong.

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**JUSTICE DEPARTMENT LAMBASTES SEATTLE JAIL FOR ABUSES**

By Mike Carter, Seattle Times, Dec. 2

Inmates in the King County Jail in Seattle, suffer physical and sexual abuse at the hands of guards and are not receiving adequate medical care, according to a scathing report by the U.S. Department of Justice, which concludes inmates’ civil rights are routinely being violated.

The 27-page report contains a litany of instances of abuse and inadequate treatment so serious that earlier this year the Justice Department issued a letter alerting jail officials to “life-threatening” deficiencies in medical care for some inmates. At least two inmates have died from inadequate medical care and there have been three jail suicides in the past three years that were likely preventable, the report says.

The report concluded that inmates have been physically and sexually abused by guards and that those instances were often poorly investigated, if at all. Ailing inmates are denied medications, misdiagnosed and sometimes left to suffer untreated, the report says.

It also says inmates are routinely pepper-sprayed, even when they are restrained or not violent. And, the report says, jail corrections officers use a painful, “degrading” and dangerous hair-pulling technique to control inmates.

The Justice Department opened its investigation last spring, not long after the county ombudsman raised concerns about Jail Health Services. A Seattle Times investigation also revealed hundreds of medical errors, including the overdose death of one inmate and the death of another from an untreated infection by flesh-eating bacteria.

In one example, the report said, a desperately sick inmate died of a perforated ulcer after a series of jail health missteps that included his having to wait seven hours to see a doctor while in so much pain that he was “sweating and doubled-over.” The jail’s “inadequate diagnosis and inordinate delays” in treatment “likely contributed to the inmate’s death,” the report said.

The jail’s efforts to control communicable diseases—especially the highly contagious and dangerous methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA—were also questioned. Investigators pointed out that a key component to preventing the disease is good hygiene but said inmates are given a single pair of underwear during their entire jail stay, which they are responsible for washing themselves.

Another issue was inadequate internal investigations. The Justice Department points to an “abnormally high” number of internal investigations into sexual and physical abuse. The report states that the investigations are often either inadequate or, in some cases, complaints aren’t investigated at all. As of 2006, there were 25 sexual-abuse-related investigations involving jail staff.
**WHITE BUFFALO**

The clouds roll in as the old ways pass by,  
Revealing a new dawn with Red and White side by side.  
No writing we possessed so word passed from father to son,  
An event many moons away will remove the curse on everyone,  
That our skin makes us different, our fear makes us hate,  
After the battles we fought different lifestyles we create,  
To continue the fear our skin color brought on,  
In our minds we are “Right” – but the future said, “Wrong!”

Anasazi’s vision revealed that the day White Buffalo does rise,  
The wind howls, leaves dance and the people stand side by side.  
You come to us upon a traveling star’s tail,  
To free the people from a burden like Hell!  
What other curse could there be that demands humanity,  
Than our imagination skin color makes “Him” different than “Me!”

Let us dance many dawns until a vision reveals  
A new day in history when we forget how to kill,  
The one we now call brother – as it was meant to be,  
Let us dance, let us smoke, let us LIVE you and me.

White Buffalo, White Buffalo you dance with the moon,  
Anasazi your vision brought the day none too soon,  
When all men of color throughout history,  
Will all live in Peace – as the way it should be.  

*By Victor Lee Severance*

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**IN COWBOY LIMBO**

In Cowboy Limbo, woefully men ride,  
Chrome spoked ponies of cracked naugahyde.  
Old broken down wranglers, rustlers, and hands,  
Drink beer and pop wheelies, on moonlit desert sands.  
You used to see them in front of some store,  
On Route 66, or outside of the bar.  
Black, white, or injun, texicans, too;  
Weathered faces and duds, just part of the view.  
But I guess I was different; because I saw them.  
I looked past the waste, seeing no shame, or sin.  
No pity or handout did I have to give.  
Being needed and wanted, useful men wish to live.  
A broken skate, a hat band, or rusty ol’ knife,  
Or a frayed ol’ lariat, they’d give some new life  
Then a pat on the head, a wink and a smile,  
I’d take down the road, with me mile after mile.  
Riding along, their work was unwound,  
As I got it ready for the next town.  
Back in the ‘50s how else’d they survive,  
In cowboy limbo, just waitin’ to die?  
So next time you see ‘em don’t just pass ‘em by.  
You and they’ll be blessed if you stop and say hi.

*By Frank Johnson*

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**UNTIL I COME HOME**

Coming home to empty faces  
And uncomfortable embraces.  
Only smile I recognize  
Is my mama’s  
So I hug her the hardest  
‘Cause her love was shown  
Through prayers and correspondences.

Now I’m out the pen  
Questioning whether I fit in  
Now that my program no longer  
Consists of yard, chow, an packages.  
Job applications  
Become precious time wasted  
When I come to the part  
About my incarceration.  
No matter how free,  
Society finds a way  
To open up your wonderful wounds  
And build another prison.

Now I understand the empty face  
Held back from the celebration.  
The way the media portrays rehabilitation –  
No one expected a successful homecoming  
I’m coming home to mama  
Keep the faith for the better.  
And I’ll keep all my promises  
Concealed in thoughts and letters…  
Until I come home.  

*By Anthony Robinson*
INTERNATIONAL NEWS

This section touches on news outside the United States. It’s important to know what is happening around the world, so we like to pass this information onto you. In Iraq, since the invasion, under our watch, children are interrogated and allegations of abuse and torture have been made. Interesting words recently came from the Pope regarding the treatment of prisoners, and there is noew about political prisoners in the Middle East. We hope you find these pieces helpful.

IRAQI CHILD PRISONERS ABUSED AND TORTURED

Iraqi NGOs [Non Governmental Organizations] have raised concerns about the condition of children in local prisons, saying they are being abused and tortured during interrogation.

“Children are being treated as adults in Iraqi prisons and our investigations have shown that they are being abused and tortured,” said Khalid Rabia’a, a spokesman for the Prisoners’ Association for Justice.

“Our investigation started after families brought their five sons to our organisation looking for psychological help for their children who were recently released from prison, and what we found out was shocking,” Rabia’a added.

According to Rabia’a, child prisoners are being accused of supporting insurgents and militias. Most were detained during Iraqi army military operations in the Baghdad neighbourhoods of Adhamiya, Latifiya, Alawi, Doura and Hay al-Adel.

“The children showed signs of torture all over their bodies. Some had marks of cigarettes burns over their legs and one couldn’t speak as the shock sessions affected his conversation,” Rabia’a said. “It is against international law that protects children and we call for interventions in all Iraqi prisons to save the lives of these children.”

A senior official from the ministry, who requested anonymity and who has been supplying the NGO with daily updates, told IRIN that every Iraqi prison is holding at least 20 children and they are all suffering abuse.

Rabia’a said the NGO had informants in many Iraqi prisons but since they did not want to be named, they could not go to court and prove the abuses.

At least 220 children are believed to be held in Iraqi prisons. IRIN requested permission to visit the prisons said to be holding child prisoners but the request was denied.

Source: IRIN, Oct. 25, 2007

POPE SAYS NO PRISON TORTURE

Prisons must not be centers for torture and other degrading forms of punishment, but must help rehabilitate detainees so they can “conduct upright and honest lives within society,” said Pope Benedict XVI.

Jails and correctional facilities “must contribute to the rehabilitation of offenders, facilitating their transition from despair to hope and from unreliability to dependability,” the pope said in a September 6 audience with prison chaplains at his summer villa in Castel Gandolfo. The chaplains were participants in an international meeting on the pastoral care of prisoners.

“Public authorities must be ever vigilant” in creating conditions that help prisoners regain “a sense of worth” and in “eschewing any means of punishment or correction that either undermine or debase the human dignity of prisoners,” he said.

Citing the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, the pope reiterated church teaching prohibiting torture, saying it “cannot be contravened under any circumstances.”

More than 200 religious and laypeople participated in the 12th International Commission of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care. Its focus this year was “Discovering the Face of Christ in Every Prisoner.”

The commission’s president, Christian Kuhn, told the pope that prison chaplains often discover that people who find themselves in jail suffer from extreme poverty or mental disabilities.

The pope praised the work of prison chaplains and other pastoral workers for dedicating themselves to a ministry that “requires much patience and perseverance.”

He reminded them they “are called to be heralds of God’s infinite compassion and forgiveness” because prisoners “easily can be overwhelmed by feelings of isolation, shame and rejection.”

Together with civil authorities, pastoral workers need to help “the incarcerated rediscover a sense of purpose so that, with God’s grace, they can reform their lives, be reconciled with their families and friends, and, insofar as possible, assume the responsibilities and duties which will enable them” to become constructive members of society.


PALISTINIAN POLITICAL PRISONER ISOLATED

The secretary general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Ahmad Sa’adat, appeared in the military court in ‘Ofer, for another hearing in the case against him. It is the first time he was seen in public after his recent deportation to the Nafha Prison, and it was a chance for him to make it clear why he was deported.

The Israeli prison authorities sent him to the remote Nafha prison in the Naqab desert as part of an ongoing campaign to attempt to isolate the Palestinian resistance and to attack all those Palestinians who reject U.S./Israeli dictates. Physical conditions at Nafha are harsh and it will be very difficult for his family and his lawyers to meet with him.

In spite of this suffering, Ahmad Sa’adat didn’t hesitate to seize on the opportunity of his appearance at the court to state his firm position. As he was brought in, he immediately stated in a loud voice, calling on the Palestinian People not to give any faith to American/Israeli policy trying to force Palestinian divisions.

He continued to call on Abu Mazen (the Palestinian President) not to take a one-sided decision to participate in the conference, as any decision should be taken by the whole Palestinian people, and as national unity was the only way to defend the suffering Palestinian people.

Source: Solidarity Campaign with Saadat & his comrades, Nov. 18, 2007

Leslie DiBenedetto
CPF: LOOK BACK AND GO ON

By Donny Johnson

In the late 1980s a few human rights fighters sat around a table and said: “We have to do something about the torturing of human beings in the hell that is SHU.” Pelican Bay Information Project was born with the compassionate efforts of Corey Weinstein, Bato-Luis Talmanzeta and Catherine Campbell. Later to join was our dear Leslie who’s a proud mommy, Georgie Schreiber, and some friends we’ve lost along the way namely Holbrook Teter and Bob Whorton. The tireless legal efforts of Charles Carbone, Esquire put some teeth in what came to be California Prison Focus. Dear Mary Rubach has left to go back to England and she will be missed. There are far too many people to acknowledge who have volunteered at CPF in some capacity so please everyone accept a metaphoric collective pat upon the back for a job well done. CPF shone a light into the darkness of SHU and the California prison system and continues to do so. As a volunteer organization of unpaid members, CPF has released and revealed more information about what goes on in the belly of the beast than any other source in the state. This writer has languished in Pelican Bay’s SHU from its notorious and bloody beginnings, and I can honestly say that things would be worse if not for the focus that CPF put upon this place, and the rumors those groups of prisoners on the yard together for they were known enemies. The result was a video taped and fomented melee the protesting staffer warned of.

The Special Masters reports continually exposed the undue influence which thwarts rehabilitation by the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, and at one point a guard’s self-proclaimed gang called “The Green Wall” which dysfunctioned with a code of silence, was exposed. There was even an anthrax scare directed at Senator Gloria Romero as she investigated the troubled California prison machine. Those scandals have faded and the powers that be have regrouped again around six recently signed gang crime bills and the immigration hysteria of post 9/11 America.

The problems that remain are systemic and have a locus in the utilization of SHU indeterminately.

Some say that things have changed for the better with enhanced staff training in the CDCR. and I appreciate all professional staff that respectfully do a hard job and are trying to make ends meet. The professional’s are not the problem and I really am glad for those who treat me, and other human beings, like they are human beings. The problems that remain are systemic and have a locus in the utilization of SHU indeterminately with the aforementioned enhanced interrogation tactic of debriefing. In the Castillo regulations the outcome was that the CDCR had to base its confidential disclosures, three of which land a human being in the SHU, on contextual information. Many frivolous disclosure items were dropped from the allowable application for those disclosures such as talking in the law library innocuously or being in an innocent photograph. Those contextual requirements are ignored in large part and people are being swept up like said regulations were non-existent.

The SHU has been shifted in part by the moving of purported gang members one place, and the rumors floating around say that “validated associates” will soon be moved another part of the SHU. It looks to me like the only thing that has changed is the semantics defining the same thing.

The level IV prisons where the few people who leave the SHU are housed at are volatile places that explode regularly and remain on lockdown with fewer services than the SHU itself. In short it is a set up to place a SHU prisoner in such places as the outcome is as predictable as a fixed fight as known enemies are housed together. The more things change the more they stay the same.

With all that in mind, and the many things not mentioned as such, it is clear that the human rights work of CPF must go on. The inescapable reality of the frustration that California prisons are as SHU tortures people and sentences never end requires all of the rays of light as can possibly shine in this darkness. CPF has fought for California’s incarcerated men and women with the courage of a lion. At the same time the CCPOA chases the white whale of mass imprisonment and torture by the American Guantanamo Bay that Pelican Bay and SHU at large are. This is one of those things where it is not the destination—it is the never ending journey.

I say, afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted—and thank you to CPF for their years of human rights service.

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CPF ON KPOO RADIO

Listen Thursdays from 11 a.m. to 12 p.m. weekly! Tune in to 89.5 FM in San Francisco and the Bay Area, or stream online at www.kpoo.com
As many of you know, Mary slowly weaned herself from work at CPF and returned to her homeland this fall. Over many years, she tirelessly aided an uncountable number of individual prisoners’ in their plights to right their wrongs, thus, will be missed by many. Because she worked so hard – visiting prisoners at Pelican Bay, answering mail and requests for help across the country, keeping steady her presence at CPF – we’d like to spend some time in tribute. So, if you would like to say a few words or draw a picture of Mary, we’d love to have your contribution. Please send your material by March 15, 2008.

FOR MARY

Where to begin saying farewell to such a sweet, gentle, and loving humanitarian as Mary Rubach. A scribe said that love was kind, patient, longsuffering, and full of hope. Our dear Mary shared all of those qualities with CPF and all the prisoners behind bars that she reached out to and went the extra mile for.

I met Mary once a few years ago and her concern and empathy radiated through the plate glass of the SHU visiting booth like warm rays from the sun.

I lived down the tier from a man that Mary was helping to get his school books and he often praised her for her generosity and heart of gold.

We all hope that life treats you well across the pond Mary. Bon voyage and you remain in our fondest thoughts.

Take care, Mary. You will be missed by all of us. Love goes with you.

Donny Johnson

TO MARY FROM ANDREA

I want to thank Mary for inspiring me over the last couple of years. Working with her and watching her in action has taught me that when you see blatant injustice you can either complain about it or do something about it. Mary, in her 80s, would hop on BART with her excessively large backpack more than twice a week to get to the CPF office to make change happen. I hope that even from the other side of the world she knows we are thankful for her amazing work and contribution to California Prison Focus. Thank you Mary!

A FEW WORDS ABOUT MARY

While working in New York I had been part of a county citizen activist group valued by the county sheriff and local police department. The group was concerned that the men and women incarcerated were treated as people with a future. Now, as a retired pastor, I was looking for similar situation in the Bay Area. No such thing.

I went to my first CPF meeting for letter writing and met a group of people who at least cared and felt concern for this population. There was Mary handing out letters, directing traffic, helping the corresponders, talking about the importance of these letters and mentioning some of the work she did beyond just responding. She told us, she may ask for the name of the doctor, or the Chief Medical Officer the prisoner needed to contact, and would write a letter of advocacy on their behalf. Often times the letter helped the prisoner receive the attention he needed. Mary was doing a very worthwhile thing.

When Mary talked about the situations and the men with whom she was in contact it was always with concern and caring. She saw her role as showing the writers respect and doing what she could to encourage them. In the last few years as problems have mounted and CMO’s were even less responsive, her passion still was enkindled. Mary wrote and visited war-

dens to plea for more reasonable treatment for prisoners especially at Pelican Bay. She sent essays on health in the hopes that it helped men take better care. She appeared before the CDCR Sec.15 SHU group rewriting the regulations to plea for more fairness in the administration of rules. She attended forums to learn more and demand better treatment in the prisons especially the SHU.

She has inspired me to think about ways to do what we do better.

Mary looked forward to her visits to Pelican Bay. She sought answers to questions, and paid attention to what people felt and thought.

I miss her.

Sally Bystroff

TO ALL PRISONERS: A NOTE ON WRITING TO CPF

For ease and efficiency, please follow these guidelines when writing to CPF:

• Write your complete name, address, prison number and date on the letter
• Print legibly
• Be brief
• Indicate on the envelope who the letter is for (i.e., Newsletter, etc.)
• Write and underline if an action is requested (Although this does not guarantee a response, it will help us identify those that need specific help.)
• Do not send unsolicited legal or medical documents.
begun chasing the crack monster, pleading with the thugs for another hit.

The fall of consciousness cleared the way for the rise of degradation and materialism. Vanguard gangsters preying on the poor became the new liberators and rebels – the heroes and the sex symbols of the new generation. Spirit was siphoned out of the lives and consciousness of black youths, who were the primary targets for the War on Drugs and its prison industrial complex.

Consciousness gave a death rattle in the late 1980s when Public Enemy, X-Clan and the Native Tongues turned hip-hop into a vehicle for resistance; but the 1990s saw the murder of even that.

When P. Diddy turned hip-hop into a hedonistic materialist paradise, we saw the last of consciousness. In its place rose greed, apathy, reality TV and Flava Flav schtupping Bridget Nielsen on VH-1.

What in the hell has this world come to?
prison systems of the 1980s that affected the change; it was the benevolent spiritual and behavioral changes of prisoners that did it.

It isn’t politically correct among our peers for me to say that the latter is bullshit but I’m saying it. To qualify my position and in the spirit of full disclosure I should tell you that I’m housed on Florida’s equivalent of California’s SHUs for the murder of a prisoner.

I’ve been a party to the psychosis that has allowed the prisoner/crats to justify their security housing campaign. This gives me a unique perspective on our situation. In a very human and mystical sense, I am you. I can call the kettle black precisely because my pot is black as oil slate.

I’ve been a carrier of the disease of degeneration that has infected our culture. But I am healing. I am growing beyond my dysfunction. This gives me the insight needed to diagnose the still rampant disease in my folks and prescribe the balm that has sent my illness into remission. And that balm, friends and lovers, is called Truth. Pure, uncut as pinkish Peruvian straight off the brick, still stinking. It’ll make your eyes water.

The ultimate truth about liberation is that it begins in – you guessed it, baby – the mind. Free your mind and your ass will begin in – you guessed it, baby – the mind. Free your mind and your ass will follow, as the good Dr. Funkenstein once said.

Toussaint L’Overture was free long before he incited the uprising that defeated Napoleon’s power and freed Haiti from the Teflon yoke of colonialism. Frederick Douglass was free quite some time before he hopped that train from Baltimore, phony papers clutched in his sweaty palms. Their liberation was birthed in their minds before they manifested it as material reality.

Those of you who’ve studied your history will argue that Toussaint’s betrayal by the French and his consequential death in prison makes mud of my theory. But that argument can’t stand. Toussaint died as a free man despite his chains.

How? Because he embodied revolution. His name is synonymous with liberation. He died as a general whose brilliance freed a nation from tyranny. Napoleon’s prison couldn’t deny him that. Toussaint died knowing there were no slaves in Haiti. He died as he’d lived – free.

Don’t lament Toussaint’s fate. He accomplished his goal. He fought the Good Fight. Have we? Have we even embarked on the journey toward getting the mob done or are we too busy pulling lint out of our navels while crying about our misfortune? Are we slave content with our lot, waxing eloquent about the wicked hands we’ve been dealt? Or are we free men getting down to the business of liberating ourselves from our limitations?

It begins with the mind.

And we need a paradigm shift. A Whole New Attitude. Mind over matter, baby. Like Hendrix digging that R&B was the old wave then searching for something new. I know you’ll cry and scream your little world won’t let you go, he sang. But his world, his culture, did release him. Though black folks booed him and thought he’d lost his mind, he wore his freedom like a heart on his sleeve and redefined the blues. He surpassed limitations, exceeded expectations by holding on to a vision and manifesting it.

Jimi sang and played liberation. He embodied it as much as Toussaint did. And until we do the same, we’ll remain rats in a cage shanking each other over punks and crumbs.

FROM JACOB’S ANGEL AND MAO’S DESPOTISM TO A PARADIGM SHIFT TOWARD FREEDOM

Politics devoid of vision and spirit is a feast of jackals. In the absence of spirit, immorality, amorality and greed reign supreme. We saw this in the fall of consciousness, the rise of the gangsta ethos and the commodification of imprisoned bodies. Humanity, as restless a species as we are, will either ascend or descend with whatever we do. We’ll be ruled by either body, mind or matter.

The idea that we can achieve liberation without grappling with spirit-wrestling Jacob’s angel – rebuking Christ’s demons, is like saying we can snatch the sun out of our heavens and still have our blue sky. The relationship between spirit/mind and liberation is so intimate that to divorce them is to render one or the other obsolete.

The only way out of our hell, the only way to liberate ourselves is to do like Maya Angelou and rise. And we cannot do that without another dose of that uncut truth.

Prisons were justified because of the way we preyed upon one another. Crip against Blood. Black against white. Hispanic against black. SHU’s were justified because of the violence we’ve inflicted on one another. Don’t forget that. Don’t forget the shivs we’ve slammed into each other, the punks who’ve been raped, the colors we’ve waged war over, the dope we’ve smuggled inside, the OD’s – because these are the weapons we gave the politicos and prisoners to jam us up with.

If we demand treatment as human beings we must first behave and live like human beings. If we act like caged monkeys throwing handfuls of shit at each other, justifying our placement in cages will continue to be child’s play. If we don’t want the cops policing us we’ve got to discipline ourselves among ourselves. Our unwillingness to do so prevents us from attaining any modicum of respect outside of our circle of support.

We call them – these cops – traitors. But who have they betrayed? They’re just working stiffs earning their peanut butter and jelly by obeying the will of the people to keep us in cages. His or her ignorance and belligerence should be expected.

However, those who prey upon the weakest among us – especially those who are complicit with their silence, betray us and make our oppression seem a necessary evil to John Q. Public. Brothers speak of revolution but they’re spitting the rhetoric without full consciousness of what it is. A 360. Becoming something totally, qualitatively different than what existed before.

Mao, Kenyatta, Lenin and Castro’s uprisings were mere changing of the guards. The crown of the oppressor just changed hands. The people just got a new, more polished boot shoved up their asses.

We must achieve a revolution of consciousness if we are to create true, lasting, irreversible change. Materialism hijacked the Civil Rights movement when Jesse and his boys began to value the pimp game and extortion more than nation-building. When the visionaries were murdered – those who taught that change and revolution begin with the spirit – the materialists ran the movement into the ground. Materialism propped Farrakhan, Sharpton and a hundred black basketball-playing millionaires up while
prisons have swollen with the poor who’ve gotten poorer while civil rights have been attacked like a meaty bone savaged by the pit bull establishment.

The materialists have stood by pontificating, watching the beast pick the bone clean, while the good working folk fixate on the wealth and lifestyle they’ll never attain. They defend the tax bounty of the wealthy and economic rape of the impoverished.

The poor, the disenfranchised who’ve made prison a second home, see what little cash they have siphoned into the gaping maws of the materialists while marinating in cages, meditating, and giving praises to Mammon.

We need a paradigm shift. If we are to liberate ourselves we must embrace accountability. (Ouch! Did he say that? Yes he did.) Only by accepting the fact that we exercised power to create the conditions we live in, can we connect with and wield the resources we need to destroy our circumstances and rebuild.

But how do we destroy this hell we’re in? By tearing this mf down? Burn baby burn? Attica II? After all, there are more of us than them. Do we do it by waging a hunger strike? By taking hostages? By turning the heat up on here?

Nope. Those tactics would not earn us any sympathy. They would earn us new enemies, more public resentment and rage.

We need a paradigm shift away from anger and toward peace. We need to alter our consciousness and move away from the materialist ideals that have warped our culture. Journey closer to spirit. We need to hold ourselves accountable for the harm we’ve done—harm that created our circumstances. To hell with what has been done to us, for now. Before we can achieve any sort of liberation, we’ve got to free ourselves from our karmic chains by atoning for what we’ve done to bring pain into the world. Once we begin to do that, once we move on then we can start being about the business of restoring equilibrium to a planet we’ve worked to destroy.

As long as we refuse accountability it will continue to be child’s play for the politicos and prisoncrats to convince the public we deserve harsh treatment. Our cries will fall upon deaf ears.

Because remember — many of those folks out there going to the ballot booth are people we’ve victimized. Their anger is justified. However you cut it, we did them wrong. We proved ourselves no better than the hordes of greedy industrialists and war-mongers who’ve created the conditions of poverty for their own enrichment. Until we acknowledge that and more to rectify the harm we’ve caused, we will continue to be tied to the whipping post. We’ll continue to be Scooby Snacks for Mammon.

RESPONSE TO “ON CONSCIOUSNESS, RESISTANCE, AND THE RISE OF MATERIALISM” BY L.A. SCOVCENS

By Ed Mead

What a pleasure it was to read Mr. Scovens’ well written “On Consciousness, Resistance, And The Rise Of Materialism.” I am also pleased to see the Prison Focus magazine slowly develop into a vehicle that will help fuel the theoretical development for what could be a reinvigoration of the now moribund prisoners’ movement. Scovens’ criticism of the materialism of bourgeois culture and the impact it has on poor communities is certainly correct. But when he attacks the opposite of bourgeois materialism, dialectical and historical materialism, he departs from the path of forward progress. This stems from a lack of understanding of the subject he is criticizing.

Actually he goes further than criticism, he claims that dialectical and historical materialism helped “shove the nail into the coffin of the Civil Rights Movement.”

He says “history has shown that Marx and Engels’ theories were incomplete. They proposed, in part, that matter is the sole subject of change. They posited that, since nothing exists but matter, it should be the sole focus of any true liberation movement.” His answer is once again inject idealism (spirituality) into the dialectical equation. He says there is much we can’t see like gravity, which he says is immaterial. First of all, every successful socialist revolution has been guided by the principles of dialectical and historical materialism, and to the extent they have failed was a result of their departing from those elementary principles.

The ancient Greeks did not know the physics that caused thunder, but being the humans they were, they could not admit to their own ignorance; so they substituted that lack of knowledge with the god Thor, who caused thunder by throwing his magic hammer across the heavens. Poor. We had an answer to what caused thunder. This kind of idealist thinking has gone on down through the ages, the Catholic church torturing and murdering people because they said blasphemy like the earth is round or the that the earth revolves around the sun, or that there was no god. But even though you can’t see gravity, it is nonetheless a material force. Gravity can be measured and quantified and mathematical calculations can be done with it. Just because you can’t see it does not mean it lacks a material basis.

Similarly, he says “There isn’t a scientist alive … who can pinpoint the seat of the mind.” He goes on, “volition, an invisible force with definite and measurable effects on matter, cannot be traced to any pound of flesh.” Well, yes, and ancient Greeks could not pinpoint the cause of thunder either. But of this you can be sure, the human mind is made of matter, and what springs from it springs from matter.

Why I take this issue up is because the few of you who have followed my repeated encouragements to study dialectical and historical materialism will know that at every turn there will be those who want to sneak some form of idealism into the dialectical construct. This is one reason why successful revolutions have gone wrong and why progressive movements have been shunted to the sidelines of history. And we can see this happening as Scovens takes us into biblical analogies to make his point.

Where Scovens’ real lack of class consciousness comes through most clearly is when he says, “Mao, Kenyatta, Lenin and Castro’s uprisings were mere changing of the guards. The crown of the oppressor just changed hands. The people just got a new, more polished boot shoved up their asses.”

To the unconscious mind, that mind lacking class consciousness, this quote sound quite reasonable. Scovens’ critical error is to see only the political superstructure and to ignore the economic infrastructure of
these societies.

Visualize a large ocean liner with the superstructure housing things the wheelhouse, ballrooms, and the like. And beneath that is the infrastructure, which houses the fuel and engine that drive the ship forward. Now apply this analogy to a social order. The superstructure is the political form the society takes, it can be any number of variations—liberal democracy, military dictatorship, fascist, etc. So too can the infrastructure take a number of forms—slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, or communism. When looking at a country like Cuba, if lacking class consciousness, one sees only the superstructure and then parrots bourgeois propaganda on the evils of that political system—just another boot on your neck. But looking at the economic infrastructure one can see that it is socialist, in that the means of production (factories and so on) are in collective hands, not those of private capitalists. And as a result of this Cubans have better medical care than Americans. They may not have many chrome toasters, but what they do have they have together. So if you are an anti-communist in Cuba, yes there is repression. The reason for the existence of the state (the superstructure) is the forcible suppression of the interests of one class by another. This is true under socialism too. It will be true until we reach the stage communism, a classless society and hence a stateless society.

And remaining true to his dream of a revolution in our minds, progress without struggle, Scovens rejects direct political action by prisoners, saying instead that “we need to alter our consciousness and move away from the materialist ideals that have warped our culture. Journey closer to spirit.” He says doing otherwise would “earn us new enemies, more public resentment and rage.” But we will never change existing realities without struggle. No justice, no peace! Or as Fredrick Douglas said: “Power concedes nothing without demand. It never has and it never will.”

Those who are serious about revolutionary progress will not try to introduce idealism into the dialectics of change. Class considerations must always be primary. The failure to learn this lesson is to become a liberal or worse. There are those who believe that the central oppression is not one of class but is, rather, gender based, and if only women were in power it would all be so different. Well, yes, with a bunch of Margaret Thatcher types running the show it would be slightly different, but capitalism and imperialism would remain. The same is true if Blacks were calling the shots, or gays, etc. Yes, there would be important differences, such as progress in the areas of sexism, racism, and homophobia, but class would out in the end. Without a radical transformation of existing class relations it would be business as usual. Just look at today’s South Africa. Now they have a capitalist government with a Black face selling weapons materials to Israel.

One point Scovens is correct, “if we demand treatment as human beings we must first behave and live like human beings.” Which is another way of saying that in order to take responsibility over our lives, to have actual power, we must first learn how to exercise responsibility. Responsibility is something we take; it is not given to us. Yet it is wrong to blame the current situation on prisoners alone, who are also victims. They are victims of a social and economic order that breeds poverty, inequality, and injustice—a system that breeds crime. The problem of crime and punishment will never be solved within the context of the existing social order (capitalism), and those who think otherwise are foolish liberals.

RESPONSE BY C. LANDRUM

As we’re well aware of, there are two meanings (definitions) of materialism. On the one hand there is the superficial obsession one has with material possessions, on the other hand there’s the historical and dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels, i.e., the philosophic and scientific basis of Marxist ideology.

There are three possible conclusions we can deduce from L.A. Scovens’ piece. One, he either intentionally deceives the reader by using these two separate meanings of materialism interchangeably, as if they were both one and the same, when it conveniently supports his baseless argument. Or, two, he really doesn’t thoroughly understand the philosophic and scientific materialism of Marxist dialectics. And, three, it is a neither one or the other dichotomy, but both of the above which I believe is the case.

At one point, making an accusation, he says of me: “He [me] eliminates mind-pure consciousness from the strategy building and cripples the movement before it can gain momentum…. Yet a simple review of “The Road Ahead” will demonstrate that I spent some time addressing the very issue of the inseparability of the subjective consciousness and objective matter and our need to focus developing and raising the consciousness of the population. I would like to quote word for word verbatim to him straight out of “The Road Ahead,” as an example of his attempt to deceive the readers with his accusation, but space limitations prevent me from doing so. Readers should review that article in the applicable issue of Prison Focus.

AFSC STOPMAX CAMPAIGN

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FSC is (re)starting* a campaign they hope will promote and support a national movement to end the use of solitary confinement and related forms of torture in U.S. prisons. The work is realized through grassroots organizing, research, public education, resource sharing, human rights training and policy advocacy and is called Stopmax.

The American Friends Service Committee carries out service, development, social justice, and peace programs throughout the world. Founded by Quakers in 1917 to provide conscientious objectors with an opportunity to aid civilian war victims, AFSC’s work attracts the support and partnership of people of many races, religions, and cultures.

AFSC’s work is based on the Quaker belief in the worth of every person and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice. The organization’s mission and achievements won worldwide recognition in 1947 when it accepted the Nobel Peace Prize with the British Friends Service Council on behalf of all Quakers.

The AFSC is directed by a Quaker board and staffed by Quakers and other people of faith who share the Friends’ desire for peace and social justice.

They welcome hearing from you. Contact Stopmax:

National STOPMAX Campaign
AFSC
1501 Cherry Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102
Phone (215) 241-7137
Fax (215) 241-7119

If you would like to receive regular updates concerning developments or media coverage regarding prison isolation, please write to stopmax@afsc.org

*AFSC was a key member in the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prison of the 1990s.
right after 4:30 p.m. count on Halloween, there was the sound of a scuffle in D Hall. An alarm brought guards running from all parts of the yard. An ambulance pulled up to the back door of the hall in which we live. The attendant pulled open the back door, got back into the ambulance and backed the rear of the vehicle up to the door. Next thing we knew, a phalanx of guards came hot-footing down our hall toward the ambulance, three of them surrounding a tall, slim woman with her wrists cuffed behind her back, hair flying everywhere and a wild, terrified look in her eyes. She’d threatened to cut her wrists.

Later, we were locked down at 7:00 p.m. for the rest of the night. Even though several industrious prisoners had worked hard to put on a Halloween party for the housing unit, with homemade decorations and cleverly-designed games and snacks, the guards squelched the fun and locked us down. They had to do “paperwork” on the cutter. Both are becoming more and more common, lock-downs and suicides. If it’s the weekend—lock-down. If it’s a holiday—lock-down. People are locked down and they become even more depressed, over and above the general pall produced by simply doing prison time. Bam! Another suicide attempt . . . or worse, a success!

It’s suicide city at Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF). One prisoner said to me, “I’ve never seen so many people trying to kill themselves as I have in the last year. Sure, people die of natural causes . . . well, ‘natural’ prison causes like years of poor diet, no medical care, ever-present tension, but this suicide stuff!” As one of my roommates said, “It’s a madhouse.”

The warden was compelled by the rising rate of suicide attempts to issue a memorandum in August. In it, she assured the overcrowded, crammed-in-for-life masses that she is, “committed to insuring that you all have access to any level of mental health services you might need to address any mental health issues you may be experiencing.” Huh? More like, each attempt is a crazed reaction to emotional isolation in the midst of teeming predation. It is in prison that a human being comes to know that she really is, no matter what spiritual myths she may embrace to get her through each day, all alone in the universe.

Recently the CCCMS program was re-evaluated. There are increasing numbers of CCCMS women in prison or it sure seems that way. CCCMS is pronounced Triple C-M-S. It means Correctional Clinical Case Management System. It is a designation for prisoners who are prescribed psychotropic drugs for behavioral management. CCCMS is enshrined in Title XV, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) bible of rules and regulations, that spells out the direct supervision of California’s more than 173,000 prisoners in its prison industry. They may have been taking prescribed drugs on the street. Sometimes an prisoner is given a medication to lower the incidence of anger and violence stemming from previous life experiences of abuse, whether personal, systemic, or both. Sometimes a prisoner is medicated because of the way we are housed, woefully overcrowded, in dorm rooms, day rooms and the gym. Sacramento instructed mental health professionals to reduce the number of women prisoners at CCWF on behavior modification drugs because there are too many using them. “Get rid of the Topamax and Wellbutrin!” Often, pills are “cheeked” at the “hot med” window and sold . . . that is, bartered . . . for tobacco and food. Those pills were money in the bank—“were” because many women have already been precipitously de-scheduled from their meds.

Part of the reason to control the medication rolls was the plan to merge 600 women prisoners into the state’s three women’s prisons from California Rehabilitation Center (CRC) which, until spring of this year, had been a co-ed facility. A few went to Community Correctional Facilities but most were sent to “ugly beds” (halls, gym, floors) at California Institute for Women (CIW), Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW) and CCWF.

The CRC transfers had a dire impact on medical care. The prison industry’s health care is in federal receivership, no longer under supervision of CDCR. The receiver, Dr. Robert Sillen, got an email from a colleague, dated May 24:

“... I got a call form (sic) Dawn Martin at VSPW this a.m. and they are being overwhelmed with the influx of prisoners and custody has closed down some of the off site transportation which is now causing a delay in care. She stated that they were at 200 percent of capacity and that there were prisoners on the floors. She does not know how she is going to deliver care to these prisoners.”

This is the result of prison transport chaos on medical care. The mental health care that our warden assures us will be provided is similarly impacted. Sillen, in his supplemental Report Re: Overcrowding in Spring 2007 wrote that CRC had 299 CCCMS prisoners who would add to already-inflated CCCMS numbers at the other women’s prisons. He stated:

“Each of these receiving prisons is already overcrowded with CCCMS patients. As of May 25, for example, (i) CCWF was operating at 132percent of its CCCMS capacity, its Reception Center was operating at 145percent of its CCCMS capacity and its administrative Segregation Unit housed 24 CCCMS patients;(ii) CIW was operating at 101percent of its CCCMS capacity, its Reception Center was operating at 75percent capacity, its Administrative Segregation Unit housed 89 CCCMS; and, (iii) VSPW was operating at 154percent of its CCCMS capacity, its Reception Center was operating at 129percent of its CCCMS capacity, its Administrative Segregation Unit held 15 CCCMS prisoners and its Security Housing Unit housed another 32. In light of the existing overcrowding at these facilities, the influx of still more prisoners to these facilities may strain the system to the breaking point.”

The atmosphere of eternal conflict prevents all solidarity among prisoners and keeps everyone fearful of and fighting with one another.

The “hot med line,” which operates at breakfast and at the evening meal and where prisoners pick up their psychotropic drugs, grew to an insupportable number last summer. The line took two-and-a-half hours to process. Of course not all “hot med” prisoners were getting psychotics. Some get pain-killers and there is a large number of diabetics who get insulin that’s now being dispensed in their housing unit. But a large part of the “hot med line” did get them and something had to be done.

Prison psychologists have a huge caseload that they can’t handle with any efficiency. There isn’t time for proper evaluation on A yard, the receiving yard, of incoming prisoners mental health conditions. Some scam the system. “Oh yeah, I was on such and such on the street. Yup!” All this prescribing of head meds got out of hand, so Sacramento stepped in.
From now on, lifers will be a non-priority. They’re not going anywhere anyway. More and more women, no matter what their needs, will be pulled off meds and taken off CCCMS status. Many now get drugs such as lithium that they consider less effective and which can have undesirable side effects. One reason lifer and long-termer needs can be degraded is that these prisoners have acclimated and they don’t appear to cry out for help. However, taking people off CCCMS without a real diagnosis could lead to emotional explosions. One prisoner remarked, “I think they would want to cause explosions. I scares the outsiders. If a higher safety risk can be created in women’s prisons, Sacramento can show that women are as violent as men.”

CCWF and VSPW, our sister prison sited across the county road, together the largest mass of imprisoned women in one place in the world, were built per a dorm housing plan because women aren’t considered dangerous to staff and to each other. Originally the two prisons were designed for four women per room but that was in the last century. I was transported to CCWF for four women per room but that was in the last century. I was transported to CCWF in 2002. Since I’ve been here, there have always been eight women in every room. A couple of years ago, we wrote letters to legislators to beat back an attempt to cram another woman in for a total of nine per room.

CIW, built in the 1950’s with its two-person cells, is spoken of at CCWF in the hushed tones one uses to describe some kind of prison heaven. “Wow! Two! Only two people to a cell!” On the other hand, CIW’s dayrooms have been housing women in bunks since the 1980’s so, as common space, they’ve been off limits for a couple of decades.

With eight people in a room, women tend to achieve a natural ethnic balance. It makes it more difficult to cultivate the racially-based antagonisms that the “old CDC” (prior to the addition of Rehabilitation to the departments name and the U.S. Supreme Court ruling against racial separation in California’s prisons) has done so successfully among the state’s male prisoners.

However, as with the men, the ethos of violence, AKA “handling your business,” permeates women’s prisons. If a woman tries to kill herself, she’d better do a good job because, even if she has one, DNR’s are not routinely honored. Also, if a woman fails at her suicide attempt, she may get jumped for her ineptitude because she didn’t “handle her business” well.

There is no transfer from a room for a woman who feels or who is actually threatened until the prisoner has tried, at least once, to “handle her business.” It’s all a bizarre situation. In the end, a transfer to another room with seven different women is no guarantee of safety anyway. Eight women living over and under each other in a small room, many for life, leads to patterns of behavior that would challenge brain surgeons or rocket scientists or ordinary Americans who never give a thought to how they’d manage to survive such an environment. We’re all dumped together. There’s no regard for an individual’s social or cultural history. Background other than crime history, is wiped out. Previous medical or mental health history, all of it, counts for nothing. The most deranged person runs the room because she terrorizes the others. She may be genuinely crazy or a run-or-the-mill bully. Short-termers can be subject to the whims of people who don’t have release dates. Lifers, who must face a parole board that grants no release dates, must deal with a short-term nut who threatens to beat everyone up for a spoonful of Folger’s coffee.

Cruelly and disdain are the way, ladled out by staff and prisoners alike. Fights occur in broad daylight, resulting in fifteen guards descending on two women with cans of Orange Crush pepper spray drawn like six-guns. Perhaps a fight might be completely ignored if staff don’t feel like doing “paperwork.” Women walk around sporting black eyes like merit badges.

Write-ups abound, on the other hand, often for minor infractions. Short-termers get longer short terms and long-timers . . . oh, well . . . stay longer and longer, perhaps with a dollop of extra time in Ad Seg which can end up seeming like a vacation from the pandemonium of dorm housing. In Ad Seg, cells house only two people, a real plus. A prison thrives on chaos, moment-to-moment instability, and imminent threat. The rule is “never get comfortable.” The minute you do, everything changes. The atmosphere of eternal conflict prevents all solidarity among prisoners and keeps everyone fearful of and fighting with one another. It makes it easy for the staff to play people off against each other. Add mental illness to the list of ingredients and there’s a perfect combat stew bubbling away twenty-four/seven. ●

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found that “something is certainly wrong with the parole board.” Of the 3,000 cases reviewed by her court, the decisions that denied parole to murderers were all “vague and all inclusive and thus truly meaningless.”

Judge Condron found that the decisions to deny parole to murderers all cited the particularly “callous” nature of the crime. “The board has continued to deny countless paroles, labeling the crime ‘callous’ without ever suggesting what crime would not qualify as ‘callous’,” she wrote.

“The system is malfunctioning and must be repaired. The board must make efforts to comply with due process.” She has ordered the board to develop better definitions of its terms and trainings for board members. If her ruling is upheld by the appeals court, up to 3,000 lifers might get new hearings.

Monterey Herald, Oct. 9, 2007

“The civilized have created the wretched, quite coldly and deliberately, and do not intend to change the status quo; are responsible for their slaughter and enslavement; rain down bombs on defenseless children whenever and wherever they decide that their ‘vital interests’ are menaced, and think nothing of torturing a man to death: these people are not to be taken seriously when they speak of the ‘sanctity of human life, or the ‘conscience’ of the civilized world.”


●

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Prison Focus #30 will address High Desert State Prison. Send your articles and artwork please. Due date for submissions for the next issue is 2/28/08. If you have ideas for issue #31 send them in to us as well.

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Some Suggestions for Submissions:
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• Short Articles (250-500 words) The same identification guidelines apply. Topics can be issue specific, or current news or information.
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• Larger articles are accepted but be aware-our space is limited.

Topics: PF topic of issue; current news; recent or pending legislation or policy; news from your institution; organizing efforts; books-basically anything related to the prison industrial complex as you see it. Individual legal cases are not usually printed.

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