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If These Walls Could Talk

Organizing on the Inside

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many groups of people previously thought incapable of sophisticated organization began to make serious demands on a system that kept them imprisoned in one way or another. Welfare recipients, Mexican American farm laborers and Black sanitation workers in the South all began to organize to improve their conditions.

One group of people, those literally imprisoned, also began to see the possibilities of making change in their lives. The prisoners movement of that radical era is a case study of organizing for change under the harshest of conditions.

Prisons emerged in the United States during the colonial era as an attempt to provide an alternative to corporal punishment. Prisoners were isolated in order to save their souls and make them repentant. But isolation only led to insanity and so, by the 19th century, the model was changed to one based on hard labor and other severe punishments. Prisoners essentially became slaves of the state, and were in fact declared to be "civilly dead," or without rights that the state was bound to respect.

Rebellions were common. In places like San Quentin and Alcatraz in California and Clinton in New York, prison riots began to draw outside attention to the conditions inside. In the early years of the 1950s, there were over 50 major riots in maximum-security prisons across the country. But the rebellions were seldom, if ever, organized; they were usually uprisings provoked by a final draconian measure or act of brutality that pushed prisoners beyond the brink of human tolerance.

Reform and Rebellion

Rebellions led to attempts at reform. But these efforts, often conducted by social workers and psychologists, usually resulted in temporary and insignificant changes. In addition, in an era devoid of large-scale criticism of society, few prisoners questioned the moral authority of the prison or criminal justice system. Things began to change inside, however, as events began to unfold on the outside.

As part of the radical upheavals that accompanied the birth of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a perspective emerged that saw prisons and police as part of a social system designed to deny people of color (and poor people) their rights. The Black movement for civil rights included the Nation of Islam, a group that built much of its membership from within prisons across the country and began to radicalize and unify Black inmates. In San Quentin, for example, prisoners who called themselves Muslims built a popular convicts union.

The emergence of the Nation, along with the increasingly widespread and radical movements for social change erupting across America encouraged inmates to see the possibilities of organizing a movement. "There was a considerable amount of impetus from what was happening in society," recalls John Irwin, an early organizer of the prisoners union movement. "There was a mood for change and a growing sentiment that the prison system, like other systems, was out of kilter."

By 1968 the beginnings of unified resistance could be seen in California's San Quentin. Inmate Darryl Graham started to produce an underground prisoner newspaper, *The Outlaw,* that called for racial unity (there had been a set of violent racial clashes between prisoners in the previous months). The newspaper also began to articulate a set of universal demands: the rights of due process for parole violators; reduction of prison terms for narcotics offenders (many were being sentenced to 10 years to life) and more favorable consideration for first-time offenders. In February 1968 inmates began to press for an increase in wages for prison industry jobs (prisoners were only earning 2 to 16 cents per day). Later that month, a quarter of the inmate population, calling for a Convict Unity Day, went on strike, shutting down a sizable portion of the prison's functions, including the manufacturing of clothing, furniture, canned goods and printed materials.

Setting the Stage

The strike was not all that successful and only lasted a week, but it set the stage for more to come. The next Unity Day Strike came in August. This time more prisoners struck, adding a demand calling for an end to the indeterminate sentence law, a 1917 measure still on the books that left the fate of inmate parole to the discretionary powers of the Adult Authority. The law allowed prison authorities to keep prisoners behind bars for an indefinite period of time. It was under this rule that someone like George Jackson could serve one year to life for a $70 robbery conviction.

As the civil rights movement shifted in tone from nonviolent integrationism to more militant critiques of American society, the view of prisoners also changed. Radical nationalists like the Black Panthers saw all convicts as political prisoners, supposedly imprisoned because of ordinary crimes but in fact victims of a racist, capitalist order. Prison organizers mobilized their cellmates around issues of basic rights, and motivated them with an analysis that pointed toward prisoner solidarity and unified rebellion as the only viable strategy.

The actions taken at San Quentin began to reverberate throughout other prisons. In late 1970 operations at Folsom Prison in California came to a halt. In an amazing show of solidarity, most prison workers inside the walls went on strike, paralyzing the everyday functions of the prison. The inmates showed they could act in unison and, more importantly, set the stage for the most ambitious organizing effort ever seen inside a prison — the movement to establish a prisoners union. The strike was the culmination of clandestine efforts by inmates, led by Martin Sousa, Larry West and Willie Holder, to collect grievances and find a way to dramatize them in the form of demands.

The strike articulated over 30 grievances, including demanding an end to solitary confinement for "political beliefs," halts on attempts to confiscate and censor reading materials, the eradication of the Adult Authority and an end to the indeterminate sentence. The striking prisoners also insisted that inmate workers be allowed to unionize and demanded compliance with minimum wage laws, workers' compensation and other labor-related standards.

Free Huey and Angela

Prisoners also demanded better treatment for the "celebrated political prisoners," among them Huey Newton, the Soledad Brothers and, later, Angela Davis. These dramatic efforts heralded the formation of the United Prisoners Union (UPU). Although two groups eventually emerged (after arguments over strategy), the prisoners movement at Folsom became a powerful force for change, winning many of its demands.

The force of the movement at Folsom and San Quentin and the charisma of its leaders — both behind-the-scenes organizers like Harlan Washington and celebrated figures like George Jackson — inspired struggles in other parts of the country. For example, Rahway Prison in New Jersey and state prisons in New Mexico, Illinois and Massachusetts all were rocked by prisoner resistance. Attica State Prison in New York was another. Inside Attica, prisoner demands for changes in the institution were met with military force, bringing the reform movement there to a bloody conclusion.

The radical prison movement eventually faltered, done in both at the hands of the powerful state and by internal dissension, but its accomplishments cannot be ignored. Through the efforts of inmates and their allies, California abolished the indeterminate sentence law and established Penal Codes 2600 and 2601, thereby overturning the inmate's legal status of "civil death" and guaranteeing some basic rights for prisoners. By attempting to do the near-impossible, prison inmates won the right to be seen as human beings and forged powerful, unified social change organizations. As the United States returns to the dark ages of highly punitive conditions of incarceration for crimes both large and small, prisoners can look back on a time when they found ways to organize in their own interests. TF

Suggested readings include:

Berkman, Ronald.
Opening the Gates: The Rise of the Prisoners' Movement.
Cummins, Eric.
The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement.
Glick, Henry R. and Atkins, Burton M.
Prisons, Protest and Politics.