

A PERSPECTIVE FOR THE WORK TO ABOLISH CONTROL UNIT PRISONS by the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown

More than 1,000,000 people are incarcerated by the United States, over 3,000,000 are under the control of the "Criminal" "Justice" "System," and about 10,000,000 are arrested yearly. Black people in the U.S. are imprisoned at a rate of about 900 per 100,000, which is about 7.5 times as often as white people in the U.S. and almost twice as often as Black people in South Africa. About one out of every four Black men will go to prison in his lifetime (this does not include jail, parole, probation, or arrest), about one out of every two Black men will be arrested, and there are more Black men aged 20-29 under control of the criminal justice system than there are Black men *of all ages* in college. Although there are many fewer women in prison, the imprisonment racial differential between Black and white women is even greater than between Black and white men.

While huge numbers of people are going to prison, the crime rate is not decreasing, society is not becoming a "kinder and gentler" place, no one is being rehabilitated, and an entire nation of Black people is being criminalized. The "war on crime" of Lyndon Johnson has become the "war on drugs" of George Bush, but even the *Los Angeles Times* states that they are both quite simply a war on Black people. For example, a front-page article in this paper noted that while 80% of all drug users are white, 80% of all people who go to prison for using drugs are Black.

The desperate conditions of life for Black people are widely understood by now by people likely to be reading this statement and thus need not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that many of these conditions are similar to those in the Third World.

This nature of imprisonment along with these conditions of life can be seen as comprising genocide, as defined by the United Nations General Assembly, being imposed upon Black people by the United States.

Prisons do not deter crime. Prisons do not rehabilitate people. And it costs far more to send a person to prison than to Harvard. The only function that an institution that fits this description can serve is as some kind of containment mechanism for people of color.

It is important for us to note that prisons should not be seen as an accident or as a "failure." Prisons only fail if their purpose is to prevent crime or to rehabilitate. If, on the other hand, the purpose of prisons is to contain people of color, they are succeeding—at least temporarily.

We believe that people of color will be the leading force for progressive change in the United States, and the world. They have historically always demonstrated the greatest tendency to pursue the creation of a just society within the borders of the United States and we see nothing that has changed this situation. Thus we oppose the use of prisons to blunt and destroy the potential insurgency of people of color.

(more, over)

It is in this context that control unit prisons can best be understood. Rebellion in society cannot be contained except by imprisonment. Rebellion within prisons cannot be contained except by control units. They are the prisons within the prison system. Although we were told that the United States Penitentiary at Marion would put all the violent prisoners in one prison and allow the rest of the system to loosen up, this has been a big lie. First, it is not the most violent prisoners who get sent to Marion; it is the most rebellious, the dissidents. Second, Marion has not loosened up the prison system. Rather, it has worked as an anchor to pull the rest of the prison system towards it in more and more restrictive prisons.

When Marion was opened, no one could have known what it would become. It evolved gradually to become the most destructive prison in this history of the United States. Now they are planning a "new and improved" Marion in Florence. None of us now can say that we do not know what they are constructing there in the empty lands of Colorado. They are building what will become the most intensive life extinguishing prison that western "civilization" has ever produced.

We are at an essential juncture. Although prisons in the United States have existed for 200 years, now the government is making a conscious, systematic and deliberate attempt to qualitatively shift the *meaning and nature* of imprisonment by generating more and more of these control unit prisons. They are attempting to create a new order, a new order with an iron fist. It is their experiment and thus our battle. Both the buildings and the associated ideology must be combatted.

We oppose control unit prisons for three main reasons. First, they are brutal and no human being should be forced to live under such brutal conditions, conditions that kill the body and deaden the soul; conditions so horrendous that to experience them minimizes the chances that one will ever emerge human again. These conditions degrade and brutalize not only those they incarcerate but those in whose name they are built. And we in CEML say no control units may be built in our name! Second, these prisons are generating a new model and ideology that will proliferate unless we stop them and stop them fast. Finally, as the capstone of the prison system, these control unit prisons are one of the ultimate attempts of the system of white supremacy to sustain itself. For these three reasons, and many others, we oppose control unit prisons.

The question is, will North Americans ever say enough is enough? Now we are fighting level 6 prisons. Perhaps our grandchildren will be fighting level 9 prisons. And to what effect? Will crime be deterred? Will inequality be minimized? Will enfranchisement increase as these monster prisons come to dominate our lives?

Those of us who are progressive cannot hope to be building a new society, a society based on human values rather than greed and exploitation, unless we face squarely this new level of terror being constructed by the government to operate in our name. To fight against control unit prisons is not a negative act. It is a life-affirming act, an act that can facilitate the pursuit of a new society. All of us must, in one way or another, be involved in such a pursuit.