

#7

"A WALL OF SILENCE"

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I'd like to provide a little background on myself for you. I began working in the Civil Rights movement over 30 years ago, For the last 18 years I have continued my work as a human rights activist in the prison movement, taking most of my direction from the prisoner activists themselves. I have seen enough pain and senseless cruelty to understand that it is an entire system which perpetuates crime. Poor folks aren't the cause of unemployment, poor educations, criminal living conditions, and so on. While my specific topic has more to do with political prisoners and control units in our prisons, I will be happy to respond to questions about wider prison and societal issues later, if anyone has them

In 1978, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Andrew Young, stated that US prisons held "hundreds, maybe thousands of people I would categorize as political prisoners". The outcry was deafening and Mr. Young was forced to retract his statement. Mr. Young was right. There was then, and there are now, political prisoners held in US prisons.

I'd like to offer a little background on prisons in general. The US imprisons over one and a half million people. That is a larger percentage than any other country in the world. Depending on geographic location, between 65 and 85% of those the US imprisons are people of color. On any given day, one out of four black males is under some form of social control which is a higher rate than happens in the formerly white supremacist country of South Africa. In other words, there is an apartheid in America that is worse than it ever was in South Africa. There are a lot of people making a lot of money off primarily black and Latino male bodies we cage.

If you are a young, male of African decent in this country, if you are poor, should you get arrested your bail will be set so high you become an economic hostage. For you, the phrase, "innocent until proven guilty" has little meaning. You may sit in a cage for up to two years with without having been found guilty of anything. You will certainly not get a trial by a jury of your peers. You will be defended by a Public Defender who has a caseload so vast that you cannot possibly be treated as a priority, and finally you will serve a sentence which is 30% longer than a white would serve for the same crime. If you have seen this same thing happen to your father, your uncles, your cousins....if you look around at the broader picture of what is happening to men, women youth and children of your nationality, it is not hard to conclude that there is genocide being committed.

been a steady increase in the number of people being imprisoned because of their political views and actions.

While the US continues to deny to the world that there are political prisoners within its borders, there is no way to work with prisoners for any length of time without hearing repeatedly of the existence of such people - and the treatment they are singled out for once in prison. Across the nation, we have seen the growing use of sensory deprivation/isolation units for such people and it is this "special" treatment which human rights advocates feel a growing concern about. These units are an outgrowth of behavior modification theory and are part of a systematic effort to destroy any visible signs of political resistance. The units, called Control Units, are designed to break the minds of the men and women caged there. If any of you have seen the PBS special called "Through The Wire", you will be familiar with the torture of Susan Rosenberg, Alejandrina Torres and Silvia Baraldini....and we have hundreds of other documented cases.

You can see the banner which has pictures of some of the men kept in New Jersey's Management Control Unit. In New Jersey, consistent with prisons in Ohio and across the country, if you Afrikanize your name, if you were involved in any progressive political or militarily defensive groups or actions, if you are a Muslim, a Black Panther, a member of the Black Liberation Army, or believe in independence for Puerto Rico or autonomy for the First Nations - in other words, if you exhibit ANY consciousness of genocide or oppression of people - you may be singled out for solitary confinement. You don't have to commit any institutional infraction at all. This is not a punishment. You are placed there simply for who you are and for what you believe. The Warden of Marion Penitentiary (which was the first control unit prison) has been openly quoted as saying that the purpose of the control unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in society at large.

Picture the method this country uses to accomplish this. You are placed in a cage in a human warehouse where you will eat, sleep, exercise, wash, read, think and take care of bodily functions. You are there 24 hours a day, day in and day out, year in and year out with no end. The prisoners say that the silence is eerie. There is a steel door between you and the rest of the world. You may be allowed out once every 46 hours for an hour and a half in a concrete yard. You may be allowed a 15 minute telephone call a day (in some cases one 15 minute call a month) and the call is monitored. Your mail is censored. If, for some reason, you have to leave your cell, you are strip searched,

don't know who George and Jonathan Jackson are, who Geronimo Pratt or Mumia Abu Jamal is, then you should find out. They are as much a part of American history as anyone else you've read about in your books.

Prisons reflect both the structure of society and the nature of the struggle against that structure. Many of the men and women that I've had the privilege to meet that constitute political prisoners in the US - are visionaries for a more just, humane and non-racist society. The government has attempted to build a wall of silence around them and those of us who speak out on their behalf also come under government surveillance....Rafael Cancel Miranda, who was a Puerto Rican political prisoner for 25 years tells us that it's not enough to just feel bad or sad. We must DO something. Which is one of the reasons I am here today. I can no more stifle my awareness than any of the men pictured on the banner can stifle their beliefs.

The overall situation in the country in terms of the growth of control units, the conditions in them and the number of people being caged in isolation is worsening. This is happening at the same time that I am observing rumblings of a new level of activism - and I think that the organizers of the recent events here on campus are a visible part of this activism. There was a man in Nazi Germany named Pastor Martin Niemoller, who wrote the following:

"In Germany, they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came and got the Jews and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up." Unfortunately this act of speaking out has caused me to be placed under the surveillance by the government. My best consolation is that I am keeping company with people of principles whom I deeply respect. Those of you who choose this arena for their activism may confront the same experience.

Right now there are a number of things going on around the country which are related to the issues I've been talking about. There is a new control unit prison opening in Florence, Colorado this month which will house 400 people in complete sensory deprivation. The government is telling folks that it is for 400 of the most "predatory" people in the federal prison system, which isn't true. A good portion of that massive concrete prison will be used to try to build that wall of silence around