

## PROTESTORS CONFRONT HEAD OF BUREAU OF PRISONS

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When prison activists confronted the head of the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), Michael Quinlan, he and his BOP colleagues made a mad dash for the door and the airport. The American Society of Criminology held its 40th Annual Meeting in downtown Chicago November 9th through 12th, and Michael Quinlan was scheduled to participate in a workshop entitled "Auditing, Evaluating and Planning in the Bureau of Prisons". This offered a rare opportunity to those of us who have been working to end the 5-year long lockdown at Marion Federal Penitentiary in downstate Illinois. We could confront, face to face, the chief of the Bureau of Prisons and hold him responsible for the brutal and racist reality that is Marion.

Our plan was simple. One of the members of the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown would stand up towards the beginning of the workshop and explain that Marion Prison is a matter of life and death and had to take precedence over the planned topic. Several of us would then express our concerns with the situation at Marion and the proliferation of Control Units in general. We would display our banner and hand out our leaflet of explanation. Finally, we would present Quinlan with the over one thousand signatures that we have obtained on petitions. We would then be on our way, leaving the workshop to pass out leaflets and talk with as many participants in the conference as possible. The best laid plans . . .

What actually happened was somewhat different. The BOP panelists, all white men and one woman, were introduced by the moderator of the workshop. Then Bernard Headley, on behalf of the progressive caucus of the American Society of Criminology, most politely and with great dignity, gained recognition from the moderator. He then presented a petition to Quinlan from members of the Society calling for an end to the lockdown at Marion. Following Prof. Headley's presentation, a member of the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown stood up and began to speak. She was able to complete about half a sentence, at which point pandemonium broke lose. BOP personnel began shouting and screaming. One woman from the BOP rudely shoved a woman photographer in an attempt to stop her from recording the developments. Above the din could be heard the cry of "Quinlan, you're the real criminal". In the midst of all this, Quinlan and his colleagues slunk out the door, and the workshop was canceled.

It was apparent to most of us present that the response of the BOP was characteristic of that institution and the people who run it. In the face of the mildest opposition, they responded immediately, with no entertainment of dissent, no pretense of dialogue. To them, we were the enemy, the terrorists. It took some of us by surprise. We had listened to Quinlan's speech on National Public Radio the day before. We understand that he considers himself a liberal. He wrote recently to the Nation magazine in defense of the situation at Lexington Prison. We were fortunate to be in the midst of an academic conference, and not in the belly of one of their institutions. You can imagine what kind of "liberal" control they exert there!

What we would have said to him and his audience had we had the opportunity, is that Amnesty

International has concluded that Marion's policies violate the "United Nation's Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners", rules that were established for countries such as Chile, South Africa and El Salvador. Amnesty International found that conditions at Marion amount to "cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment." All of Marion is a control unit. For five years most of the men have been locked in their cells for 22 to 23 hours a day. They have had to endure sensory deprivation, beatings, finger probes of the rectum and chaining to their beds spread-eagle. They have no jobs and no contact visits. The prisoners are being poisoned slowly but surely by the water supply which is drawn from a toxic waste dump. PCB contamination, in particular, has been documented by the Environmental Protection Agency. Yet the prisoners have no other source of water and must drink and shower in this contamination. They suffer from dizziness, nausea and skin rashes as a result of this continual exposure.

We would have said, had we been allowed to speak, that 60% of the prisoners at Marion are Black or Latin and that this proportion has been increasing since Quinlan became director. Marion is the culmination of a racist society and a racist prison system. A Black person is six times more likely to go to prison than a white person, and the Black imprisonment rate in the United States is the highest in the world, higher even than the rate for Black people in South Africa. In fact, we believe the purpose of Marion is the warehousing and control of people of color.

We furthermore would have listed for him the 13 political prisoners now housed at or designated for Marion. This is the largest concentration of political prisoners in the country. This becomes even more remarkable when one considers the fact that Marion is one of the smallest prisons in the United States.

In addition to the satisfaction of confronting Quinlan, who is generally protected by his barbed wire tower, there were further positive reverberations. The Chicago Tribune reported on the incident in an article entitled "Protestors confront federal prison chief". And perhaps most heartening was the response to the workshop about Marion the following day. The room was jammed with people, over 50 attendees. This stood in sharp contrast to the ten to fifteen non-protesting people who had attended the Quinlan workshop. Perhaps we are beginning to break through the veil of secrecy that shrouds that dungeon.

(Further information about Marion Prison and the efforts to end the lockdown may be obtained from CEML at the address above.)