

## Conference Calls: what's cooking at Marion prison?

There will be no cake and no happy birthday greetings this Saturday afternoon at the Peoples Church on West Lawrence. True, the occasion is a kind of birthday, but not the sort to celebrate with balloons and presents. It is the second anniversary of the lock down at the Marion federal prison in downstate Illinois, some 280 miles south of Chicago. And the participants in this Conference for Education and Action, including peace activist Daniel Berrigan and civil-rights attorney William Kunstler, will discuss a situation that has degenerated in its two-year life from bad to worse to incredible.

Since October 1983, most of the 350 prisoners have been held in small, one-man cells 23 hours a day, with their meals shoved in through the door. They are allowed out of the cell for one hour to "recreate" - but only one at a time and inside a special cage built for the purpose. They get outdoors just one hour a week, under extremely secure restrictions, wearing leg shackles and handcuffs. Three showers a week is maximum. No personal property and no tobacco are permitted. But three books at one time are allowed, as is one ten-minute phone call - every three months.

Such is the life of the **average** inmate. More troublesome types (about 70 currently) are put in the Control Unit, a supersegregated section where privileges are even more limited and strip searches and rectal probes more common. On the other hand, some cooperative people (about 60 men at present) are sent to the Honor Unit, where conditions more nearly parallel those of a normal prison.

No one in the federal government is apologizing for Marion or suggesting that the lock down will ever be lifted. Quite the contrary. Earlier this year at a United Nations conference in Italy, Norman Carlson, director of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, lauded Marion's effectiveness. By clustering the most incorrigible and crafty criminals at this new Alcatraz, he explained, more humane conditions can be permitted at other federal prisons. Marion warden Jerry Williford has also repeatedly told inquirers that the permanent lock down is necessary because "we get the worst there are at this place." Fully concurring with their judgment was a federal magistrate who heard testimony last June at Marion (which has its own courtroom inside the walls) in a lawsuit filed

by a human-rights group. The prison, he concluded, has "the most vicious, unmanageable and manipulative people in our penal system and perhaps in the penal system of the United States."

Participants in the conference Saturday will vigorously dispute all this. "What federal officials are saying about Marion is simply untrue," says Jan Susler, an attorney with the Peoples Law Office in Chicago and one of the conference organizers. Since 1982 Susler has visited Marion frequently as part of her work with the Marion Prisoners' Rights Project (MPRP), and each time she returns to Chicago more convinced that "what's going on there is totally unjustified."

Marion is not reserved for the most vicious and unmanageable of the penal system's inmates, Susler says. In fact, two private consultants hired by the Bureau of Prisons (on orders from a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee) determined last year that 80 percent of the people at Marion were neither incorrigible nor especially prone to violence. Some had been sent there after participating in work stoppages at other prisons or after being nabbed with narcotics or other contraband. Some had been aggressively involved in lawsuits against the prison system. And others had obviously been assigned to Marion for the convenience of prison administrators - just because there was an empty cell available. The ultimate reason convicts wind up at Marion is not divulged to the public. Assignment there, says the Bureau of Prisons, is based on confidential information.

Further, Susler argues, Marion is not helping the other federal prisons or the other 30,000 federal inmates: just the opposite. Because transfers to Marion are handled so arbitrarily, she says, morale at many prisons is worse than ever; people know they can be sent to that awful place for petty reasons or no reasons. Furthermore, the existence of Marion seems to be **increasing** the level of repression elsewhere. Speaking at a hearing on Marion, one penologist said the prison is "like an anchor on the whole prison system" - pulling everything toward it and its approach to incarceration, rather than easing tension and lessening punitive practices. For example, he noted, the Marion practice of handcuffing and shackling prisoners whenever they

are outside their cells is rapidly spreading through the whole system.

Finally, Susler points to the result of the Marion lock down on both inmates and staff. "It's barbaric, disgusting," she says. "It can't go indefinitely without something terrible happening."

That was also the conclusion of I. Frank Rundle, a New York psychiatrist who studied Marion in connection with an MPRP suit. "In my opinion," wrote Rundle, "the psychological effect (of the lock down) is to generate a sustained state of smoldering rage, resentment and bitterness, and a preoccupation with thoughts of violent revenge. . . . If more humane conditions are not restored, there will be a catastrophe, as some inmates reach the point of nihilist despair and care not whether they die." The institution, he said, is "an enormous pressure cooker" in which a simmering "poisonous stew" is nearing the point of explosion.

However, the federal magistrate who heard the evidence last June was more impressed with the arguments of Carlson and Williford than with those of Susler, the psychiatrists, and Marion inmates. He submitted his recommendations to a federal judge, who has not ruled on the matter. "We have yet to be heard before an impartial tribunal," says Susler.

The few concessions that have been achieved in the lock down's two-year existence - such as the creation of the Honor Unit - are due in large part to pressure put on Congress by the MPRP and other prisoners' rights groups alarmed about Marion and its effect on the prison system.

That gives Susler hope that greater awareness and a louder clamor will make a more substantial difference in the long run. And that is why the organizers are inviting the concerned public to the conference. Besides Kunstler and Berrigan, the speakers will include Imari Obadele of the Black Liberation Movement; Raul Salinas, a former Marion inmate and a leader of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee; and Jose Lopez of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement.

The conference will take place from noon to 10 PM Saturday, October 26, at the Peoples Church, 941 W. Lawrence. A \$5 contribution is requested. For information, call the Peoples Law Office, 663-5046.

- Robert McClory