

A JAIL IS A JAIL

In June, 1971 New York City's infamous Women's House of Detention shipped out its inmates to the newly constructed New York City Correctional Facility for Women. The sisters were moved very early in the morning with no advance notice. The City Department of Corrections was afraid to face the demonstrators outside who were angry that the sisters were being sent to the isolated penal colony.

The Department of Corrections, in an effort to blunt increasing agitation from the outside community, outdid its usually tepid news releases in praising the new facility at Rikers Island. Mayor Lindsay gushed that the new prison would be a "home to help" and declared "there is no price we shouldn't pay to rebuild lives in our city." Corrections Commissioner McGrath called the new facility "the city's most unique hotel."

The City spent \$16. - \$24. million on its new showplace penal colony. Corrections authorities praised Rikers for its "college campus design." The women at Rikers know that no amount of "good press" can justify the construction of yet another inadequate, inhuman, and unnecessary prison. Inside their "model prison" they struggle under the same brutal and inhuman conditions as their sisters and brothers in jails all over the United States. A jail is a jail -- and bail is still a way of keeping poor sisters and brothers in jail.

The women at Rikers Penal Colony are, in fact, worse off than when they were incarcerated in the old House of Detention. Rikers was deliberately designed to isolate the sisters from each other and from their families, lawyers, communities, and from their active supporters on the outside. Situated in the middle of Queens and adjacent to the constant noise of LaGuardia jet traffic, Rikers is accessible from Manhattan only by a special bus trip taking at least one hour.

Inside the prison the authorities have brought to bear their most sterile, brutal technology to keep the sisters apart. The solid steel doors of their tiny cells open and close only by a central electronic switchboard. The women are often locked into their cells for 15-16 hours per day. They see each other only as they are being marched about the building and their communication is greatly hindered by the physical set-up of the prison. Lights are kept on in the cells 24 hours a day; many sisters must sleep under their beds if they are to sleep at all. The prison's public address system penetrates every cell and cannot be switched off. Recently authorities used this system to broadcast, at 11 p.m., a recording of hysterical laughter.

Like their sisters and brothers in prisons elsewhere, the sentenced women at Rikers are conscripts for forced labor. Women work for up to 10¢ an hour. Most women do not make enough money to buy bare necessities like toiletries and cigarettes from the rip-off commissary.

Most sisters at Rikers have never seen the much-publicized educational and recreational facilities. On the excuse of lack of guards for escort, the women cannot get outdoor exercise or the use of any of the facilities. Medical care at Rikers is totally inadequate and the food is mostly starch.

There are, in effect, two Rikers prisons. One is the image of the "model prison" presented by the authorities and most of the press. The other is the Rikers that the women prisoners must endure every day. Increasing numbers of people on the outside are becoming aware of the real Rikers and are uniting to support the struggle of their sisters and brothers in prisons everywhere.

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