

DAIRY OF A BAIL-OUT, or, A JAIL IS A JAIL

by a member of the Womens Bail Fund

2:30 pm I get a bus up to 59th St. and 2nd Ave., where I meet Sue, also from the Bail Fund.

3:00 We wait in the rain for the Q 101 "Rikers Island Bus."

3:30 The bus crosses the bridge onto Rikers Island, after stopping at the check-point. We get out at the Rikers Island "Reception Center," which services all three jails on the penal colony. The Reception Center is hot and crowded - about 60 people. There are 4 windows with signs over them, but none says Womens Prison, and none says Bail-Outs. There are lines at each. We wait in the wrong line and are told to go to the adjacent line.

5:00 The official has us sign in the book; the name of the woman we are going to bail out, our name and address. We receive number-badges to clip on our clothes, and go through a turn-stile into a little waiting room from which we will be taken by bus to the women's prison, even though walking would be much faster than waiting for the bus.

For each person to be bailed out, only one person is allowed to go through the turn-stile, so some relatives stay back.

5:15 We rap with the relatives and wait for the bus.

5:30 The bus comes. One woman has been waiting about an hour already, but they never call her name. She tells the bus driver who ignores her. We say very loudly that she's been waiting a long time. He finally looks at her and says she can get on that bus. We ride to the "New York Correctional Institution for Women," which has a dedication plaque dated 1969. (The first inmates were not admitted until June, 1971, due to fires, a sinking foundation, etc.)

5:35 Inside the womens prison there are again no signs above the windows. We go to the only window occupied. We wait there until the officer finishes making a phone call. He finally finishes and informs us that we are at the wrong window. We go over to the other side. There is no man at the window, but we hear music over a loudspeaker. There are about 5 of us. We are getting uptight. It is stuffy. No air conditioning. We yell, "anybody there?" Finally he appears, takes one name, and leaves the window again for about 15 minutes. He reappears with bail receipts and other forms. The man pays the bail money.

- 6:00 We wait. The guard takes another man's name. More people arrive. We begin to rap with the people, all Black and Puerto Rican, about the Bail Fund and to hand out an information leaflet with our address on it. The people have never heard of us and think there must be a "catch" to what we do. When we talk about why we bail people out, that we think people are imprisoned for crimes of survival and that the real criminals are at large, they become interested. One woman says she wants to send us some money. Another says she'll spread the word uptown.
- 6:10 Still waiting. We are very thirsty. No vending machines. There is a drinking fountain, at least, thank God.
- 6:20 The official returns to tell one man that the woman he wants to bail out has another charge against her requiring \$500 more bail. The man recounts his money. Not enough. Officer tells him to go home and get it and come back. He leaves.
- 6:25 A young man's name is taken. He pays a \$1000 bail and includes some extra money for the guard, accompanied by winks, etc. We are all told to wait but not to walk around outside. When we protest at having to wait so long we are told that things are rough for the guards because the prison is new and they're short of help. We tell him that "things are rough" for the women waiting inside, too.
- 6:45 Still waiting. A bus takes the first relatives back to the reception center to wait some more.
- 7:00 Finally only Sue and I are left. We have 3 names but must give them one at a time and wait about 20 minutes for each to be processed.
- 7:20 Sue is told that the bail for one woman is \$1000, not \$250. We explain to guard that the woman's bail has been reduced to \$250 that afternoon in court. Guard says he has no records yet of this. The legal aid office is already closed for the evening so we can't call to confirm it. Guard refuses to call anyone to get updated records. We go to phone booth and call the legal committee of the Bail Fund for advice. They give us another name which they have just received.
- 7:30 We return to window. Guard is not there. We wait.
- 7:35 Guard returns. We give him new name. He tells us to wait but not to walk around outside. It is still stuffy and hot inside so we sit on a cement ledge outside. It is eerie there. No one is to be seen, inside or out. It's like all people have disappeared from the face of the earth. Three cats are frolicking. The piped-in music can be heard. It is hard to believe that hundreds of inmates are penned in on this island. From where we are allowed to wait we can see no windows so we cannot yell in to the prisoners. There is not a sound except the music and every few minutes the deafening roar of a jet from La Guardia Airport just across the river.

- 7:45 We walk back inside. A door suddenly noiselessly slides open by remote control and a woman appears. She is confused, doesn't know where she is supposed to go. There is no one there to ask. We ask her if she has just been bailed out. She says she is the sister of the man we had seen slip the guard some money. We figure out that he is probably waiting for her back at the reception center. We wait for the bus. She says that bails for prostitutes have become extremely high - \$25,000 on one woman. Also she tells of a woman who got \$1000 bail merely for fighting with another woman.
- 7:55 The bus comes. She leaves. We wait.
- 8:00 The bus lets off two more Black men. We rap with them about the Bail Fund. They are interested. One man tells us about the history of police harassment of himself and his son, now 17. They have both done short stretches in city jails - for "suspicious loitering" and "assault of an officer." He is here to bail out his 2 cousins. They got up the money from a collection of neighbors and relatives. \$500 each.
- 8:40 Guard finally processes all the papers and we pay him the bail money.
- 9:00 Bus comes and we arrive back at the reception center. The other people are all still there, much to our surprise. We return our numbered badges to the officers behind the windows. Unlike at the prison itself, here there are 5 officers, all apparently with nothing to do. At least the place doesn't look like a desert island anymore.
- 9:05 There are about 15 people waiting in the reception room now. Guards are going off duty at half-hour intervals. They come through the turnstiles laughing and talking. We sit down on one of the many hard wooden benches arranged like church pews, and wait. We rap with the other people there. There is no place to buy a sandwich or to get coffee or soda. Only a drinking fountain. Two phone booths that are out of order. We pass around cigarettes and wish we had some coffee and cookies.
- 10:00 Still waiting. People are pacing the floors, angry and fatigued. Some of them have to go to work tomorrow. Some have hungry kids at home.
- 11:00 At last! The inmates arrive by bus. We call out their names and the women come over to us. They are exuberant and talkative. We determine that one woman has still not arrived.
- 11:05 The third woman comes. Everyone is happy. They are extremely glad to be leaving. We are too. They talk about the new prison: "Man, that is a REAL jail" They march you everywhere by two's,

We walk back inside. A door suddenly noticeably slides open by
no lingering in the halls, three half-hour recreation periods a day,
isolated cells with doors, not bars, so you can't shout down the
hall, everything operated by remote control, cell-lights on 24 hours
a day. Breakfast at 5 am. Much less freedom of movement than in
the old House of Detention where the women could lounge in the
corridors and generally be together much more. Now there is not one
uncontrolled minute. Rigid supervision. Each cell is like solitary.

11:20

The Q 101 bus finally arrives. We get in and ride to subway, ex-
changing phone numbers and rapping about the Bail Fund, meetings,
etc. Each person has a place to stay for the night, so we say
goodbye. The entire procedure has taken us about 7 hours plus
transportation time.

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Bail Fund. They are interested. One man tells us about the history
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are doing off duty at half-hour intervals. They come through the
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Requests for information and literature, and contributions can be sent to:

Womens Bail Fund
P.O. Box 637
Cooper Station
New York
New York 10003

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