

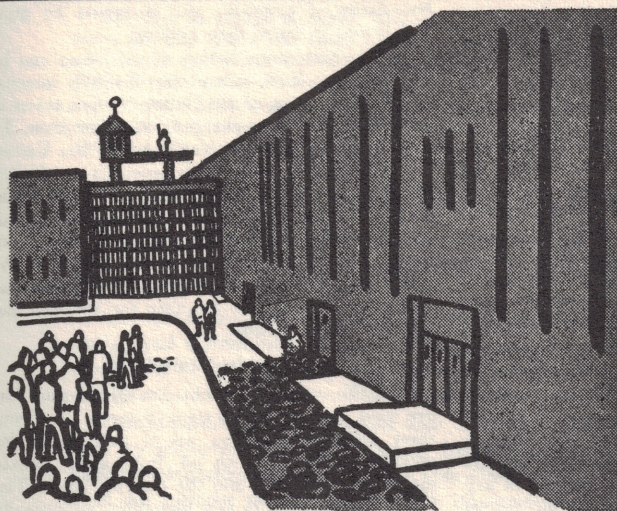
Alternative

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U. S. PRISONS --- A DISGRACE



Inmates at Danbury (Conn.) Federal Prison throw rotten liver on prison walk in protest against mass poisonings. Illustration by Lowell Naeve for **A FIELD OF BROKEN STONES**, to be published in September.

RECENTLY, a number of articles condemning the shameful conditions existing in our county prisons have appeared in national magazines (*Collier's*, *Woman's Home Companion*, etc.). Source material for these articles are statements issued by James V. Bennett, director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and reports made by Federal Inspectors, among them Edgar M. Gerlach, a former warden in the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Mr. Gerlach visited a number of county jails in West Virginia, and found alarming conditions, outstanding among them the fact that prisoners are wretchedly fed. Mr. Bennett is appalled that out of 3000 of them he has approved

only 500 for the detention of federal prisoners. There is no doubt that our county prisons are a disgrace to the nation.

The fact that our federal prisons are also a disgrace to the nation has, thus far, been overlooked.

During the war, I was a conscientious objector imprisoned in two of Mr. Bennett's prisons. One was the Federal House of Detention in New York City, the other the Federal Correctional Institute at Danbury, Conn., considered one of the better prisons in the federal system. Mr. Edgar M. Gerlach, mentioned above, was warden of the latter prison at that time.

Let me describe conditions in Mr. Bennett's House of Detention in New York City for you:

Prisoners are kept in steel cages. Built upward from the floor, each cage holds between ten and twenty human beings; sometimes more. In the corners in full view are open toilets without seats, shared equally by the diseased and undiseased, and the flies.

Windows are opaque, fresh air at a minimum. Direct sunlight rarely, if ever, reaches the unfortunate within.

Routine is rigid, unrelenting, solitary confinement imposed on the flimsiest pretexts. One man was confined for expressing a political opinion not to a guard's liking.

Guards are everywhere, watching, reporting.

Men "blow their tops" regularly. First to go while we were there was a boy not yet twenty. His sobs and screams as he broke down under the routine were heart-rending.

Stool pigeons, too, are everywhere, inventing and collecting false information. Those whose lives

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Letters and articles are welcome. They should be kept brief, if for publication.

Letters

To the Editors—

The article in the May 1948 issue of *ALTERNATIVE* about the Civil Disobedience campaign against Jimcrow fails in my opinion to grasp the real significance of this movement and points up on the other hand a real weakness in pacifist thinking.

The real significance of the Randolph-Reynolds proposal is that people, regardless of color, are called upon to resist by non-violent means two major conditions of oppression in our society, namely racial prejudice and statism. A primary difficulty of all anti-war movements has been to get people over the obstacle of blind obedience to the state, the "my country right or wrong" philosophy. The inculcation of obedience, respect for all things legal in our American culture, has meant that any type of brutality, oppression or injustice could be put over on the American people so long as it was dressed up in a high sounding law. The proposal of civil disobedience against a jimcrow army breaks with this concept in its attack upon racial prejudice and not in any chauvinistic manner, but in a call for all men to attack any injustice not simply because they are directly affected by it but because the "soul" of America is at stake.

Pacifists in their fight against military and war have never adequately recognized (1) that the difference between the psychological (and sometimes physical) violence of social conflict, economic conflict and the psychological-physical violence of war and statism is one of degree and that all the complicating interrelationship must be recognized and dealt with. (2) You must reach people where they are. The slow death of a laboring man who goes through the same interminable boring routine day after day; the slow death of a member of a minority group who is injured and discouraged to the point of despair by our vicious social mores; these conditions make the call to resist war and militarism sound far-distant and indistinct, particularly when militarism is able to disguise itself in the garb of excitement, glory, and escape from dull, degrading every day life.

—BILL SUTHERLAND

PATRIOTISM OR PEACE?

"I AM AN AMERICAN DAY" was rained out in New York this year. A few bedraggled politicians and singers tried to carry on, but without much success, and even the flags were wet and drooping. Mr. Hearst, who has shouted long and loud to promote the occasion, did not of course stand in the rain. He long ago discovered that patriotism is primarily a business affair.

For a great many people, however, patriotism is the cheapest and frequently only answer to the terrible feeling of loneliness and bewilderment which dogs our age. It is the devil's substitute for a genuine sense of meaning in our lives, which we have been denied. To be able to feel a common bond with others is a human craving but that this bond should be built on the artificial and idiotic boundaries of countries and sustained by guns and bombs is worse than nothing.

The deepest contradiction of patriotism can be seen in New York where the allegedly international organization of the United Nations exists in an atmosphere super-charged with Hearstism. To hold a meeting on the streets where the United Nations delegates walk it is necessary to display the American flag. Not to display it is to invite arrest. Radio stations start and finish their broadcasting days with the ritual of the national anthem. One of the largest aircraft carriers in the world floats in the harbor and units of the regular Army are on hand all the time for frequent parades on Fifth Avenue.

Self-evident Falsehood

It is the emotions which go with all this that are most dangerous and most diseased. The constant artificial whipping up of enthusiasm for everything that sets us off from other people makes for arrogance and the bullying spirit. The belief that there is in fact something intrinsically superior about being an American, a belief carefully nurtured in the schools, becomes so deeply ingrained that it is accepted as a truth as self-evident as the multiplication table.

No patriotism, however, can any longer stand the light of reason. Every country in the world is stained red with blood and the citizens of all nations have ample cause for shame and disgust. There are no superior people anywhere. What we do have of civilization and sanity in the world is the joint product and belonging of all peoples and there are none who have not contributed to it.

The noblest tradition of mankind is cosmopolitan and internationalist. Loyalty to humanity is the only kind of patriotism which has ever made sense.

—ROY FINCH

CORRECTION

The price of *Retort*, Box 7, Bearsville, N. Y., is \$1.50 for 4 quarterly issues.

Refuse To Be Drafted!

The draft law has been passed and the world is one step further on the road to atomic annihilation. When a conscription bill was passed in 1939, most people laid aside their anti-war convictions and registered under the law. They felt that they must accept the "democratic" decision of a "democratic" country.

There is no longer any excuse for such reasoning. Passage of the draft was not a democratic decision. It was dictated by a small group of oil merchants, militarists, Wall Street financiers, and their "public relations experts." The "decisions" of politicians who follow such interests are not deserving of our loyalty or respect.

No country has a right to our loyalty when it conscripts people for atomic and bacteriological murder. Few men would kill their mothers because Congress and the President ordered them to do so. If we submit to the draft law, we will be ordered to take actions equally brutal and equally unjustified.

The following statement has attracted more than four hundred signers in a few weeks. The original signers include Bernard C. Clausen, Henry Hitt Crane, David Dellinger, Henry Dyer, Julius Eichel, Richard B. Gregg, Cecil Hinshaw, George M. Houser, Dwight Macdonald, Milton Mayer, A. J. Muste, Kenneth Patchen, Ralph Templin and Denny Wilcher.

The time to refuse is NOW. The way to refuse is to join with others who have already taken the lead, and who are organizing an American civil disobedience movement similar to the campaigns by which Gandhi helped the Indians to win their independence.

The editors of *Alternative* urge you to join in this positive action against war and totalitarianism. Send this statement, with as many signatures on the back as you can obtain, to the Resist Conscription Committee, 2929 Broadway, New York 25, N. Y.

STATEMENT OF "RESIST CONSCRIPTION COMMITTEE"

We are unconditionally opposed to the drive toward conscription, under a Selective Service system (draft) or Universal Military Training (UMT).

Just as Americans detested conscription in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Communist Russia, we are opposed to the adoption of the same evil in the United States. No matter what the nation in question, conscription is a basic evil with which there must be no compromise.

Conscription fails to prevent war, foments further warlike preparation by other nations, and denies fundamental freedoms of the individual, necessary to democracy. This violates our deepest convictions, that no person should be forcibly coerced into adopting a military way of life.

We believe human beings are fit for something better, something nobler, than slavery and training in the mass extermination of their fellows. Now is the time to proclaim our convictions and to assume our responsibilities in the light of them.

We will refuse to register under any conscription law which may be enacted and will counsel others of draft age, who are inwardly prepared, to refuse to register or to comply with any provisions of a draft law.

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are in danger are kept in separate cells for their own protection.

Of the hundreds of human beings in this one Federal House of Detention, a large portion *have not been convicted* of a crime, never were, and some never will be. They are merely being held day in and day out, week in and week out, month after month, in violation of their constitutional right to a speedy trial. Once tried, some will be found not guilty. Others will never be brought to trial. Those found guilty are not allowed to count the time already served as part of their terms. The innocent, released, leave behind their fingerprints, photographs, a record of unsubstantiated suspicions which may be used against them later, receive nothing for the time spent behind bars in a steel cage, and nothing for the labor squeezed out of them by the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Deadly Routine

Harassed, spied on by stool pigeon and guard, the inmate, *though he may not be guilty of a crime*, arises at the sound of a bell, is counted, fed, counted, worked, counted, fed, counted, worked, and so on, day in and day out. His mail, intercepted coming in and going out, is read and censored, his correspondents limited to close relatives, the number of letters he may write fixed at two a week, the number he may receive, seven. During visiting periods, his and his relative's conversation is listened to by a guard. He is not allowed to receive the gifts sent him by his loved ones. In the eyes of the prison authorities he is a fingerprinted, photographed, caged number, guilty before trial.

No authority in the United States can state accurately how many innocent men and women are being held under similar, or worse, conditions in other prisons: federal, state, county, and city. The number is huge unquestionably; the lack of regard for their rights, and of the law on the part of authorities sworn to uphold the law, interesting to say the least.

At Danbury prison where Mr. Gerlach was warden under Mr. Bennett, I saw a sane man locked in the lunacy ward and almost driven insane, a sick man punished for being sick, unpaid prison labor exploited under a merciless speed up

We are making up our permanent mailing list. If you want to keep receiving *Alternative*, let us know. Subscriptions are free on request. We will need contributions of approximately \$75 an issue to cover the costs of mailing and printing. Total printing this issue 3,000, including copies for street distribution.

Please make money orders payable to John Mack, Treasurer; checks payable to *Alternative*, Box 827, Church Street Station, New York 8, New York.

"The American federal prison system is an ominous expression of official and organized sadism," it is charged by Walter Rae, who cites many instances of brutality inflicted upon prisoners.

He asserts that the Bureau of Prisons "shrouds its irresponsible practices—precisely to protect itself against the pressures of an informed public opinion." Information gets out, he says, through prisoners who smuggle it out. Louis Taylor, a conscientious objector in Springfield Prison, Missouri, Rae writes, sent out reports disclosing that prisoners were savagely beaten for minor offenses, tortured with lighted cigarets, confined naked for weeks in bare cells on bread and sauerkraut.

The author recalls that when these facts were made public, an investigating board headed by James V. Bennett, director of the Bureau of Prisons, whitewashed the charges. Prisoners are still being beaten at Springfield, Rae has learned.

—N. Y. Post, September 9, 1947

system, Negroes segregated as a matter of prison policy, an inmate thrown into the "black hole" and driven to a suicide attempt, a meal of rotten food served that sent over two hundred inmates to bed sick and retching, and, of course, the usual coddling and encouragement of stool pigeons.

But of all the barbarous acts perpetrated at Danbury I think the continual serving of scum-laden and infested food was the one most resented by the inmates.

Infected Food

Prison law requires the inmate to eat everything placed on his plate. If he fails to do so he is restricted or thrown into solitary confinement. There is no way of knowing until the food is on your plate whether or not it is infected. If you do not take it and dispose of it somehow, it will be served in another form at the next meal, and so on till it is used. Inmates at Danbury could be seen leaving the mess hall after almost any meal with their pockets full of rotten food which they dumped into the prison yard.

Frankfurters with an eighth of an inch of green mold on them were frequently served. Salads containing spoiled onions and mottled cabbage were commonplace. Liver and pork could be counted on to be pestilential. I have seen inmates retch at the sight of the food placed on their plates. Some of the men lived entirely on bread rather than risk solitary confinement for refusing to eat prison fare.

During my stay at Danbury, Mr. Bennett paid one of his routine inspection calls on the prison. A few days before his arrival I had been forced to work in the prison flower garden during a rainstorm and after an attack of arthritis, had collapsed. I was thereupon thrown into solitary confinement for "refusing to work". Mr. Bennett had me brought to the front office for an inter-

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YOU CAN'T 'REFORM' A JAIL

The article by Howard Schoenfeld in this issue of *Alternative* throws a glaring spotlight on the physical brutality and actual terrorism which exist in our so-called "model" Federal Prisons.

Many prison reformers hoped that the Federal prison system would serve as a laboratory where experiments based on better treatment of prisoners would yield good results. These reformers didn't realize that prison officials, with tongue in cheek, would warp and pervert their ideas of rehabilitation into psychological punishments, and carry on the old methods of actual physical brutality behind a phoney front of nice looking buildings and spotless kitchens.

Even when penologists, churchmen and other do-gooders discovered what was actually happening in the prisons, officials have always been able to say, "Look—we tried your ideas but you just can't be soft with these men. They are bad actors. The more you do for them, the more they act up. Our job is to keep these guys in jail with a minimum of disturbance. With all of your rehabilitation ideas they keep coming back convicted of worse crimes."

To all of this the penologists have no answer. They will never have an answer until they open their eyes wide and discover these facts:

America Is a Prison

(1) Our American society is one where men feel very much alone. All the bigness, the mad pace, the scramble for position, stepping on one another, creates such turmoil inside people that they "blow their tops" and commit acts which injure their fellows.

(2) Our American society is one where men feel like part of a machine—regimentation, we call it in other countries: Screwing on bolt number 16 in a Ford factory, being drafted into the army, the "impersonal" finance companies, all tend to destroy a man's sense of manhood and his respect for others—result: crime.

(3) Our American society is one where a man is frustrated in his desire to create something worthwhile. A set of phoney sex customs, class and race prejudice all play a part in the frustrations which also result in: crime.

How in the name of history and all of man's experiences can a man suffering from loneliness, regimentation, frustration be helped by the further loneliness, regimentation and frustration which is prison? It makes no difference how many dishes of ice-cream, how many movies, how many baseball games he gets, a man who is caged and ordered around like an animal is going to fight back. If he fights back, prison officials are going to say that decency doesn't work. In the end there is the same physical brutality which we think of as existing in Germany, Russia—anywhere but here, America.

Where does this lead us? How can we break the vicious circle described above? For one thing we have discovered that whether the sugar coating consists of automobiles and refrigerators on

the outside or ice-cream and movies in prison, men cannot take a system which denies them the opportunity to create and to love. Every person is therefore individually responsible for standing up like a man and saying *no!* to a draft, to race or class prejudice, to the control of his economic welfare by others. The men who are now in prison as a result of injuring or killing their fellow men can be treated without the present punishment system of police, courts, and prisons.

—BILL SUTHERLAND

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view, the purpose of which was to find out why I couldn't stay out of trouble in the prison.

I took advantage of the opportunity to tell Mr. Bennett of the foul food we were being fed, thinking naively that he might not know. I had noticed we were given good food on the days the food inspectors arrived, and it seemed possible there was skulduggery afoot without his knowledge. Mr. Bennett grinned when I told him a mass poisoning of the inmates was sure to occur if things went on as they were.

The Hypocritic Oath

Several weeks later the inevitable mass poisoning occurred. Hundreds of inmates became acutely ill after eating a meal of infected pork. While they lay in agony on their cots, nauseated and vomiting, or suffering acute attacks of diarrhea, the rest of us were assembled in the mess hall and addressed by the prison doctor who informed us he had examined the pork and found it in perfect condition. The sick men, he said, were faking!

Afterwards, the food continued as foul as before.

The beating and torturing of inmates, and the use of "strip cells" in the Federal Bureau of Prisons is a fairly common practice. Many such instances have occurred during Mr. Bennett's reign. The truth is that atrocities occur in our prisons regularly, and that disgraceful conditions are the rule rather than the exception.

Certainly, it is time to look into our prisons. All of them.

—HOWARD SCHOENFELD

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