

Long Fast Stirs Fears For Black Front Head

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ST. LOUIS, Mo., Sept. 1— Charles Koen, 26, lies chained to a hospital bed here, a gaunt black figure against the white bedsheets.

His weight is down to 115 pounds and officials at Homer G. Phillips Hospital fear that the head of the Black United Front of Cairo, Ill., is near death.

Koen has refused to eat for 45 days, a water fast protest against what he calls oppression of blacks.

He was jailed July 19 when he turned himself over to authorities to begin a six-month sentence for assaulting

a police officer in 1968. He had been free pending appeals, but the Missouri Supreme Court upheld his sentence.

Koen has led a black boycott of white-owned stores in nearby Cairo for the past two years.

He has maintained his innocence in the assault case and when his appeal was turned aside he said he would not eat until he was freed.

In a slow, dream-like voice, he told me: "Oppressed people around the nation must hear the vibes from the new method and the true method of fighting the evil system."

In his weakened condition, his conversation is often vague and spiritual. He frequently talks about his spirit leaving his body.

"I feel I'm in two places," he said, raising his arms slowly.

Hospital officials have tried to force-feed Koen but have been unsuccessful. They have managed to feed him some glucose through his veins.

Tuesday night, William Kunstler, defense attorney at the Chicago Seven conspiracy trial, led a group of about 300 demonstrators from St. Louis University to the hospital, where they chanted "Power to the People" and called for Koen's release. Police kept them from hospital entrances.

Kunstler, who had spoken earlier at the university, told the audience: "It's my feeling Charles Koen will die."