

# Prison Reform, Congress and

## James Riddle Hoffa

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After 57 months as Prisoner No. 33298, James Riddle Hoffa has not lost his interest in influencing events.

This week, with a substantial boost from Rep. John Conyers Jr., the black Democrat from Detroit, Hoffa engineered a confrontation between a grievance group of inmates and a congressional subcommittee in the federal penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pa.

The subcommittee's day started innocently enough. Conyers, subcommittee chairman Rep. Robert W. Kastenmeier (D-Wis.), and three other subcommittee members—Abner Mikva (D-

Ill.), William F. Ryan (D-N.Y.) and Hamilton Fisher Jr. (R-N.Y.) arrived to tour the main prison, a farm camp and a minimum security facility at nearby Allenwood.

But Conyers did not want the guided tour. He said he wanted to interview Hoffa, 58, the former Teamster Union president serving 13 years for jury tampering and mail fraud, and some of the leaders among the black inmates. Hoffa, he said, is one of his constituents.

"Obviously you'll explain to us the good features," Conyers told Warden Noah L. Alldredge. "But this is not a fun trip."

Alldredge said he had no

good food that was poorly prepared, the lack of hot water for making coffee in cells, overcrowding, and poor medical and dental care.

Even so, Hoffa said, Lewisburg "probably is the best of the lot" among federal prisons. He also had praise for Alldredge, who has been warden at Lewisburg for only 14 months.

Another prisoner, Leroy Mobley, 34, serving a 100-year term for bank robbery, kidnaping and assault, said that Lewisburg was considered the "country club" of the federal prison system. Part of the reason, he said, is because it has famous prisoners.

objection. He provided a meeting room and privacy for Conyers to talk with Hoffa and five other inmates, four of them black. The rest of the subcommittee toured the other facilities.

"They're gonna give you the same trip they give everybody else—the No. 3 tour," Hoffa told Conyers. "Anybody can tell you what's wrong and what's good about this joint in 15 minutes. If he talks longer, then he don't know what he's talking about."

Hoffa then took 45 minutes to run down his handwritten list of "indisputable grievances." Many of them were admittedly minor. But

they are the sort of things, he said, that grated on prisoners and led to trouble. There were allusions to Attica.

"If you raise an issue they can dispute," he said, "you've lost the argument. I learned that a long time ago. These are things they can't dispute. While they're trivial, they help a man keep his mind intact. When he loses his mind, there's a riot."

Hoffa listed several dozen items, ranging from homosexuality and drug abuse to ill-fitting clothing, poor recreation facilities and the lack of food for diabetics.

He complained of a commissary that was too small,

Among the famous locked up at Lewisburg, besides Hoffa, are Bobby Baker, Martin Sweig, the former aide to retired House Speaker John W. McCormack and Carmine De Sapio.

The obvious implication was that if the "country club" had problems that could lead to trouble, the other prisons had to be worse.

The black prisoners were impatient.

"Everything you say is cool, and I agree with it," Clarence Jones told Hoffa. "But black people go

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through another kind of hell."

Jones, 24, serving 20 years for bank robbery, charged black prisoners were victims of overt racism and oppression in Lewisburg.

Mobley said that the penitentiary had Jaycees, Toastmasters International and Holy Name Society programs for white inmates, but no black culture programs. And he complained that Black Muslims were not allowed to practice their religion.

"People are tired of being oppressed," said James Lake, 38, serving three years for forgery. "It's a brain-washing thing here."

"If something erupts tomorrow, I'm gonna be in it," said Lucky Johnson, 24, of Philadelphia, who is serving six years for bank robbery. "I want to be a man and not have those racist pigs put me down."

The blacks said they were

prepared to die because of the oppression they suffered. But Conyers plainly was not willing to have them do so. He made the point, over and over, that rebelling would be playing into the hands of those who wanted to kill black prisoners.

But Conyers was not optimistic about getting anything done. "Everything is stacked politically against anything happening even though we're here," he said. "I'm dealing with a bunch of dumb people in Congress. . . . Some of them think things are too soft now."

Hoffa got into a dispute with the blacks over whether a sensitivity training program for the guards would help. Hoffa said there was no way to change a man, that you simply had to select people with the right type of outlook.

Several of the black prisoners said Hoffa did not understand black people. Hoffa retorted he had been

working with "you colored people" most of his life and understood their problems.

Conyers broke in to say that black and white views were supposed to be different, and that to get hung up on the differences limited one's effectiveness.

The rap session continued for nearly three hours. The other subcommittee members returned, and Hoffa asked Conyers to bring them in, along with the warden, to hear the grievances.

Hoffa predicted that Alldredge would correct 85 percent of the problems once he knew that the subcommittee members knew something about them. "This guys gonna retire soon, and he's scared to death," he said.

With Alldredge and the other subcommittee members present, Hoffa and the other inmates repeated their complaints. Alldredge plainly was displeased with the procedure. He sat silently, fuming. The only exchange came when Hoffa blustered that he was not afraid to make complaints.

"Nobody frightens Hoffa," he said.

"Nobody frightens me, either," retorted Alldredge.

Conyers asked Alldredge to answer the complaints, but Kastenmeier intervened. He said he did not want the subcommittee used to coerce the prison administration. "We're not here to try to reform Lewisburg administratively," Kastenmeier said.

"We're a legislative over-

sight committee," Mikva said. "I don't want to be a party to a confrontation situation. I don't want to superimpose this rump procedure on the prison's grievance procedure."

"I'm not a rump investigator," Hoffa said indignantly.

Alldredge later told the congressmen that some of the grievances were valid—that there were some he could do nothing about because they were out of his jurisdiction, and others were in the process of being

corrected. On the Black Muslims, he said he would permit services as soon as an outside minister could be found.

The subcommittee left the prison with a promise from Hoffa that he would use the Teamsters Union to fight for prison reform.

"I'm gonna use the most powerful organization in this country as a sounding board for what I think is wrong with the prison system in this country," he said.