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SOME OF THE REBEL CONVICTS' LEADERS
A remarkable, if short-lived, society

The Convicts' Amazing Unity

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Late Sunday afternoon, at the last meeting between inmates in rebellion at Attica correctional facility and a special observers' committee, a nameless black prisoner seized the microphone.

"To oppressed people all over the world," he shouted. "We got the solution! The solution is unity!"

With 31 of the rebels dead in Monday's bloody recapture of the prison, that statement may seem bombastic or pathetic. But for those of the observers' committee who had a chance to see the unusual society of the Attica prison yard during its four brief days of existence, there is no doubt that the prisoners did achieve remarkable unity—even if it proved no solution to their problems.

The black inmate's impassioned cry also suggests several other aspects of that strange society — its strikingly effective organization, its fierce political radicalism, its submergence of racial animosity in class solidarity.

Not much was known to the observers of the

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leaders of the uprising. One clearly was Richard Clarke—"Brother Richard"—a Black Muslim with an impassive face and an air of command. Another was bull-shouldered Herbert Blyden, with a long scar on his face, who said he had "72 counts" against him as a result of his participation in an earlier uprising at the Tombs in New York City.

Still a third leader was a tall, lean man with a laconic voice who had the knack of making a crowd listen without haranguing it; he was known to the observers' group only as "Champ," and was reputed to be one of the prisoners' "jailhouse lawyers."

Time and again, one or another of these leaders evoked convincing evidence of the prisoners' unity. After telling

them of an offer by Corrections Commissioner Russell Oswald to negotiate a settlement on "neutral ground" if their hostages were released first, Richard Clarke demanded to know what he should reply.

"No!" the men shouted. "I can't hear you," Clarke said, cupping his hand around his ear.

"Hell, no!" the prisoners "It this from everybody?"

:::Yes!"

"Anybody disagree?"

"No!"

The last answer came in a shattering roar. It was only one of many times that the observers saw the rebels acting almost as if from mass instinct.

Their organization was most evident in excellent security arrangements. Although in a Friday morning negotiating session in the prisoner stronghold Oswald felt

himself threatened with seizure, the leaders prevented it and no serious threat to the observer group appeared in five subsequent trips into the stronghold.

Human chains of men with linked arms maintained effective crowd control. In one session, Blyden staged a mock alarm to show how quickly the prisoners' "first line of defense" could man their outpost on the surrounding walls.

Once, in an eerie night negotiating session, a prisoner apparently went out of his head and charged about challenging others to fight. Three or four security men moved in silently and efficiently dragged him off.

When the observers were in the prison compound, there was constant head-counting to make sure none was separated from the group. The only weapons in evidence were baseball bats, iron pipes and one tear gas launcher in the possession of a masked security man.

That kind of organization, not to mention the unity displayed by the prisoners, would have been impossible if there had been racial discord in Block D. None was apparent to observers. The human security chains were interracial; the leadership committee featured at least three white men, although the rebelling inmates must have been at least 85 per cent black and Puerto Rican.

Once, when a black prisoner was orating at a high pitch about the disadvantages suffered by blacks in America, an inmate shouted back at him in a heavy Puerto Rican accent: "Don't forget our white brothers! They're in this, too!"

SPEAKER

A short bespectacled white man with long hair, whose name was Jerry, was one of the prisoners' "jailhouse lawyers" and one of the most frenzied speakers on the question of race and class solidarity.

One prisoner, Blease Montgomery, was a sandy-haired white man from Conway, S.C., a small town well-known to this writer, a native of Hamlet, N.C.

"Man," Montgomery said, "there's people in here we treated like dogs down home ... but I want everyone to know we gon' stick together, we gon' get what we want, or we gon' die together."

And when I asked him what prison had taught him about race relations in America, he said in his South Carolina drawl: "I've learned so much that if I get out of this I want a plane ticket out of this country."

VIEWS

Racial harmony, evident as it was, was not so prominent in Block D as were radical class and political views. Every orator pictured the rebelling prisoners as political victims, men at the bottom of the heap for whom society cared nothing, to whom it gave the worst of treatment and offered no redress of grievance.

The prisoners referred to themselves constantly as "brothers" and stressed again and again their determination to stand together.

"When you don't give a damn, you don't have nothing to give up but your life!" one speaker shouted. And another reminded them that Malcolm X, the Black Muslim leader, had said that "if you gon' make a revolution, you got to believe."

The restrained Champ, in one of his few moments of passion, shouted that the hostages were being well cared for. "They're sleeping on mattresses, but I ain't sleeping on no mattress. They treat us like animals, we take care of them. Well, I ask you, does animals take care of people or does people take care of animals?"

Still another leader, "Flip" Crowley, told the observers, in one of the most dramatic speeches they heard: "We do not want to rule, we only want to live ... but if any of you gentlemen own dogs, you're treating them better than we're treated here."

The physical conditions in which the prison society existed were difficult and getting worse when the revolt was crushed. The prisoners were dependent on prison au-

thorities — fearful for the hostages — for food.

Most of the men seemed to live in the open, under makeshift huts and blanket shelters. Hundreds of prison blankets had a hole cut in the middle, so that inmates could wear them like Ponchos.

Other inmates wore football jerseys. Most had rigged towels or blankets or shirts into Turbans. Many security men wore football helmets, often with face masks. Some of those doing tasks that might have been criminal acts — guarding the hostages, for instance — were totally masked, wearing T-shirts over their heads with eye-holes and mouth-holes cut in them.

The hostages — of whom eight are reported to have been shot by police gunfire — were clad much like the prisoners, in gray prison wool or coveralls of about the same color. At a distance, it would have been difficult to distinguish them from inmates.

Before the police invasion, the hostages were guarded in a tight circle formed by wooden benches hauled into the prison yard near a handball backboard. Each had a mattress. One, Captain Frank Wald, said the hostages took their exercise, as well as ate and slept, within the circle.

On Friday, when the observers were allowed by the prisoners to go to the guarded circle to interview the hostages, a press photographer wanted to take their pictures. At first, the guards refused. The photographer persisted.

Finally, Champ put the matter to the crowd of prisoners in the yard. "All in favor of pictures say aye." The ayes had it, and the pictures were allowed.

"But if any of you hostages don't want your picture taken," Champ said, "you don't have to. You can just turn your backs."