

Mockery of Prison Reform

The agreement reached between Governor Rockefeller's office and the union of state prison guards makes a mockery of prison reform. The union won a promise from the state to establish a "maximum-maximum" security prison for "incurable" criminals. The guards prevailed in this key demand by threatening to stage a "lock-in" of all the state's prisoners—keeping them locked up around the clock, except for meals. Any institution, born in this spirit, is bound to incorporate the animal-cage concept of "correctional facility."

A case can be made for separating chronic trouble-makers from other prisoners, many of them basically decent and certainly salvagable, as scrutiny of individual records in the aftermath of the Attica tragedy underscored. But the destructive consequences of equating maximum security with humiliation and repression makes entirely predictable the futility—to say nothing of the inhumanity—of "maximum-maximum" security. Apparently, no lesson has been learned from the tragic results of answering the Attica inmates' violent response to repression with still more official violence.

It is easy to sympathize with prison guards, daily exposed to the anger and irrationality of those who resent them as visible symbols of the society that keeps them behind bars. Unquestionably, the guards' union has a right to demand every reasonable precaution to diminish its members' personal danger. There is a need for working conditions and procedures which reduce the risk that inmates will consider the taking of hostages as the only desperate means open to them of attaining prison reforms.

But this is precisely why it was both tactically and morally indefensible for the guards to threaten to hold all the state's 18,000 prisoners hostage, as they did by planning a "lock-in" to force the state to accept their misinterpretation of reform.

All this was particularly discouraging since the guards' agreement with the state did have some constructive features, notably the promise of state funds for better clothing, food and sanitary facilities for prisoners as well as for increased training facilities for correctional personnel.

Even before Attica, the New York State Senate Committee on Crime and Correction said that "any penal system which falls short of affording to its prison inmates the fundamental dignities to which all human beings are entitled demeans our society and threatens its future safety." The message to those inmates branded "incurable" in the new maximum-maximum security institutions will be that despair or violence are their only remaining alternatives. And for desperate men, violence becomes a course of no risk at all.