

Interview with Kunstler

An observer inside Attica

(LNS) What follows is a short interview with William Kunstler which ranges over a wide variety of topics relating to the Attica Rebellion and Massacre.

Kunstler, the movement lawyer for the Chicago 8, Rap Brown and others, was part of about two dozen people who were either requested by the prisoners at Attica or who went by themselves to act as a negotiating committee between Corrections Commissioner Russell G. Oswald and the prisoners.

The two dozen narrowed themselves down to a more workable 10, including Kunstler, Black Muslim Minister Jabarr Kenyatta (who was once an inmate at Attica), Young Lords Jose Pariss (who had also spent time at Attica) and Juan "Fi" Ortiz, Congressman Herman Badillo, Buffalo Assemblyman Arthur Eve and others.

The straight press, as well as a number of officials (including Governor Nelson Rockefeller) have suggested and in some cases have said quite specifically that Kunstler acted as an "outside agitator" and had incited the prisoners to be more unyielding during the negotiations.

Later in the week after the rebellion, however, 18 members of the negotiating committee and the other observers issued a statement saying that it was the intransigence of Oswald and Rockefeller which stalled negotiations (which was used as an excuse for the invasion) and that all the members of the committee had worked hard for a negotiated settlement.

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What sort of political activity was there before the rebellion?

The prisoners created a manifesto as early as June or July of this year. They had copied a lot of it, I believe, from the manifesto issued some time ago at Folsom Penitentiary in California as well as from a petition a large number of Puerto Rican inmates drew up in April.

In June they named five people to negotiate the manifesto with prison officials. Frank Lott, a black, was named the chairman. Of those five prisoners I know at least one was white — Peter Butler. The others were black. One of them was Herbert X. Blyden, who emerged as one of the leaders during the rebellion. Blyden was indicted for 72 counts after the Tombs (Manhattan Men's House of Detention) rebellion last fall. Very conveniently, the trials for those charges are coming up in two weeks.

This early manifesto, which had 27 demands, was sent to Commissioner Oswald on July 20. I have a letter Frank Lott sent to Oswald on July 20 in which he enclosed the manifesto. The Commissioner did not respond to that letter until a month later — August 16.

Oswald's response was something

like: "I received your demands and in general you know it takes time and we will read and study them and report back to you." The rebellion began on Sept. 8 — about two weeks after the prisoners got Oswald's response.

Apparently there was a "leadership" among the prisoners long before the rebellion because they appointed the five man committee.

I know the men were very conscious about what happened to the prisoners at New York's Auburn State Prison. (There was a prison revolt there last winter. Following it, most of the rioters were put into special segregation and six were ultimately picked out as leaders and prosecuted. None of their demands were met.) A number of prisoners who had been at Auburn are now in Attica — they move prisoners around quite a bit. So there was a distinct tie between the experience at Auburn and the prisoner population at Attica.

What was it like inside of Attica after the liberation?

I did not arrive at the prison until the night of the 9th, Friday. I spent a total of 20 hours inside the prison during the three times I was allowed in. I was conscious of an enormously well-organized prison situation. For example, a man freaked out during one of the negotiating sessions. He started to fight with another inmate. They were immediately separated and taken away by other prisoners. Another man had a nervous spell — he was freaking and yelling and he also was immediately taken away.

The security lines were everywhere and extremely well organized — people arm in arm — one facing back, one facing front, alternatively. Sam Melville (a white man convicted of bombing conspiracy in N.Y.C.) was in the security line.

There was a scare the first night I was there, on Friday. All the lights sent out. Non-prisoners like us were put up against the wall behind the negotiating table so we would be out of harm. The prisoners kept telling us in the dark, "You'll be alright. We've got it under control."

Our relationships in there were good. We (the negotiators) were never harmed. We were treated kindly, courteously, and considerately. There was great respect for us and people were delighted to have us take the mike and rap with them. Lots of people came up and asked us to call their relatives, which we did.

I had a sense of real organization. There was always someone typing in the stenographic section. The loud-speaker, unlike ones in the outside world, always worked — they didn't have any problems with that. The inmates at the negotiating table were articulate, well-informed, and pressing with their demands. As some straight reporter said, there was even a lack of what the outside world would call profanity. There was also an absence of heavy rhetoric.

The People's Central Committee seemed to oversee the various activities and functions. Can you tell us something about it?

There were 30 prisoners on the Central Committee, which was dominated by blacks. There were some whites — two or three. One was Jerry Rosenberg from Brooklyn, a jailhouse lawyer for all the prisoners. He was a vital, vibrant small man. There were several other whites, one a tall lifer. There was also a handful of Puerto Ricans. They rotated the chairman every night.

Can you tell us more about the white prisoners? There was a rumor that Sam Melville rigged up an electrical communications network.

I never heard of Sam doing anything like that. Sam did not approach the negotiators at all. He stayed aloof, primarily because he had a security job. Robin Palmer (another white activist jailed on a bombing conspiracy conviction) was always up near the table. Robin gave me a lot of letters to get out to people.

What did Cellblock D look like?

The field looked like a sloppy boy scout camp. There were so many things around, so many men living together. There was no running water (the prison officials turned it off) and they had to dig trenches to go to the

bathroom. But there was no odor. I really expected it to smell like a real shit house but it didn't. We could see where the hostages were. There were sheets on the ground, blankets made into tents, paper scattered all over. I didn't see any rocket launchers.

Did Oswald make the negotiating committee sign something before you went in for the last time, saying that if anything happened to you, the state was not responsible?

That was just before the last time we went in. A few minutes after we went in he tried to completely undermine us with the prisoners by sending in the letter demanding the immediate release of hostages and negotiations on "neutral territory."

The timing was beautiful. The prisoners were understandably angry at us because they thought we knew about the letter and we were being used as a front for Oswald. The letter was either to get us killed so there would have been an incident (something very favorable to the state — the prisoners killing their own negotiators) or to undermine our credibility so that we couldn't really work with them anymore or to undermine them psychologically. Which ever the reason, each one is equally indecent.

We heard something about the legislators on the negotiating team being shown the bodies of the people whom prison officials described as "throat cutter murderers."

This was right after the invasion — about two or three in the afternoon. This got almost no publicity. Bobby Garcia (State Senator from the Bronx), Arthur Eve, Herman Badillo were taken through by Assistant Director of Corrections Walter Dunbar and were shown four men — one white and three black, lying on their stomachs, fully clothed. Those were the ones pointed out as seen cutting throats. And then there was a big black guy — Frank Lott — who was lying with a football under him to prop his head up. He was pointed out as the one who had emasculated one of the hostages — Michael Smith. He was naked and lying face up. (Lott was one of the five people who had signed the manifesto which was sent to Oswald in July).

Dunbar said that he had been told this by Commissioner Oswald — an official report and that there were films of all this. Then Dunbar told them that two of the guards were killed before the assault which of course was untrue.

The things they said were major untruths — the slit throats, the emasculation — which would have been terrible because they would have undermined the credibility of the prisoners. But we knew that wasn't true because we counted the hostages as late as 7:00 on Sunday night and there were 38. That was exactly right — there had been 39, one, one had gone out with a heart attack.

The straight press picked on an "extremist demand" about prisoners wanting to be transported to a non-imperialist country. They also seemed to think you egged the prisoners along on that demand.

There were a couple hundred who kept stressing that they wanted transportation to a non-imperialist country, but that was voted down by the rest. It wasn't presented as a collective demand. Some people would take the mike and say they looked at themselves as political prisoners and they wanted to get out to a non-imperialist country. That was sympathized with and discussed for a time, but it was never advanced to the authorities.

Before I went into the prison I met with a number of New York Panthers. They indicated that they had been in contact with four countries through Panther headquarters in Algeria who said the Attica prisoners could start a new life there. These countries were Algeria, North Vietnam, North Korea, and the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville). I told them that only because a member of the Central Committee had brought it up and gave me a specific request to find out about it. I told the prisoners that if they ever got out of prison they could go to these countries.