

Tough Testimony On Prison Reform

By Tim Findley

A Congressional subcommittee looking into prison reform and the rights of inmates was told by California's prison chief here yesterday that "extremists on both sides of the question ought to just shut up."

Department of Corrections head Raymond Procnier insisted that the state is making progress in prison reform

faster than other jurisdictions.

But attorney Faye Stender, who has represented many radical inmates, replied: "I'm always interested in hearing Mr. Procnier — he sounds so good, and yet it just isn't like that in prison, it just isn't true."

The subcommittee of the House Committee on the Judiciary was taking testimony at the Federal Building here on prison reform after visiting San Quentin, Soledad and Santa Rita prisons on Sunday. The members return to Washington today.

Predictably, they heard the whole spectrum of opinion on prison reform from the dozen witnesses who testified during the day-long session. But there were two main points.

- Officials of the Department of Corrections recognized the need for reform but alluded to outside pressure from such groups as lawyers and political organizations.

- Reform-minded attorneys and others charged that the department was hiding

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evils in the California penal system.

Mrs. Stender, who submitted letters from inmates as part of her presentation, said the prison system is operating "under a system of terror . . . terror as the result of total powerlessness."

She urged the committee to draft legislation giving inmates "full rights under the Constitution" — particularly in prison disciplinary cases and parole hearings. At present, inmates have no right to legal counsel, nor may they call witnesses in such hearings.

Mrs. Stender denied fre-

quent implications over the past months by prison officials that lawyers have instigated or directed prison incidents. And she likened California inmates who are in maximum security sections to "Jews in the Warsaw ghetto."

HOPE

She was asked by Congressman John Conyers (Dem-Mich.) if that meant "the inmates feel that since they have no hope, they might as well assert their full rights as best they can?"

"Yes," she replied. "Many of them feel that way."

In a terse statement, acting San Quentin warden James Park criticized radical "agitators" and said most prison problems are a result of immaturity.

"I would hope the committee can come up with some solution for immaturity," he said.

QUESTION

And in response to a question about whether inmates should be allowed to form prisoners' unions, he replied:

"I think that's mischievous nonsense. If they had functioned successfully in such things as PTA's, unions or so forth they would not be in prison in the first place."

Mrs. Stender told the committee that California prison officials "like to have you call them on the phone, and it's true that when you phone the director about one guy the next day he may be out of the hole and in a better place — but that doesn't say anything for the rest of the 24,000 inmates."

She received applause from almost all the 50 persons attending the meeting inside the otherwise closed Federal Building.

Procnier said the main problem with the California prison system is lack of money for such proposed reforms as building smaller prisons throughout the state, so that inmates could retain contact with their families and communities.

COST

"The problem in doing that alone," he said, "is that it would cost ten times more

each year for a smaller prison system."

He accused some lawyers of being "very destructive . . . of communicating some sort of hope to inmates they have no right to communicate . . ."

And, he said, "unless we get some balanced concern, I'm afraid the system is going to get more and more repressive."

Perhaps the most emotional statement was delivered by Moe Comancho, president of the California Correctional Officers Association.

CONSPIRACY

He said prison violence will continue "until we accept the cold, hard fact that a con-

spiracy exists to destroy our penal system and deal accordingly with those who are responsible."

Those responsible, he said, include "not only a small portion of our inmate population but a segment of our free society that encompasses professional people and lay citizens, as well apparently as a few members of our legislature."

He suggested the "revolutionary, violent inmate" be separated from the "conforming population" and put in separate maximum security prisons.

And he said that his association wants an investigation of various groups—he mentioned the National Lawyers Guild, the California Prisoners Union and California Rural Legal Assistance—"and individuals such as Faye and (her attorney husband) Marvin Stender."

ANSWER

Specifically, he said that if "they (the Stenders) were found subversive and revolutionary oriented, as we suspect they will," they be held to answer for any connection "with prison murders which may have resulted from their influence on revolutionary inmates."

Subcommittee chairman Robert Kastenmeier (Dem-Wis.) broke in at that point.

"This is not the House Un-American Activities Committee, Mr. Comacho," he said.



RAYMOND PROCUNIER
'Extremists ought to just shut up'