

Racial Awareness

The Attica-Quentin Link

By John Linstead
 and Diane Monk

ATTICA (N.Y.) — (CDN) — Several prison authorities, among them Winston Moore, director of the Cook County (Chicago) Department of Corrections, today cited racial unrest as a major probable cause of the violence at Attica.

They also linked it to the recent San Quentin outbreak and the revolutionary politics of slain San Quentin prisoner George Jackson.

More than 85 percent of Attica's inmates are members of minority groups. The majority are blacks and Puerto Ricans, many of them from New York City's teeming slums.

Largest Employed

The town of Attica — outside the prison's 30-foot tall, 6-foot thick walls — is small, with a population slightly under 2900. Attica is in upper New York's dairy farming country, about 35 miles east of Buffalo, but the prison is the town's largest employer now.



GEORGE JACKSON
 His death the spark?

Virtually all of Attica's residents are white and all of the prison's correctional officers are white. Most of the guards live in Attica or in other nearby towns like Batavia.

It is "hard to justify" an all white prison staff when 85 percent of the inmates are nonwhites, said Cook County's Moore.

Two prominent New York City criminologists described the rebellion at Attica as part of a "contagion" that began Aug. 21 with Jackson's abortive escape attempt at San Quentin and warned that the epidemic could spread to other prisons.

Found Everywhere

The two experts also blamed the inmates' uprising on prison conditions, violence in American society and the growing militance of blacks and Puerto Ricans. They noted that all three of these elements are found everywhere in the nation.

"Apparently these people (at Attica) may have caught the contagion of what took place at San Quentin," said

Dr. David Abrahamson, a psychologist who has taught psychiatric criminology at Columbia University.

Donal MacNamara, director of the corrections program at John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York, said he was "sure" the Attica riot was linked to the deaths of Jackson, two other inmates and three guards during the escape attempt last month at San Quentin.

Racial Unrest

William Vanden Heuvel, chairman of the New York City Board of Correction, said racial unrest was a major problem in all of his state's prisons, where more than 80 percent of all prisoners are either black or Puerto Rican.

The men in charge at the prisons, Vanden Heuvel said, are "basically and racially hostile" to inmates.

And while the prison employs, particularly guards, cling to old racial prejudices, black, Puerto Rican and other minority group inmates grow in racial pride and political sophistication. Many inmates, at Attica

and elsewhere, pledge allegiance to the Black Panther Party or convert to the Black Muslim faith while they are in prison.

New Element

The racial pride and the increased politicalization of inmates are relatively new elements in the volatile prison mix — but the older causes of prison discontent are still there, too.

The mother of one prisoner who was inside the violence-wrecked courtyard of Cellblock D at Attica talked outside about the "small things, things that nobody seems to worry about, that bother inmates and increase the tensions."

She said her son complained about being allowed only one roll of toilet paper ever five weeks, about visitors being limited to immediate family members only, about the high cost of cigarettes (10 to 15 cents more a pack) in the prison commissary as compared to outside.

The mother also said her son told her it was "cheaper and easier to get dope from the guards inside Attica than it is outside on the street."

Auburn 6

Prisoners also are inflamed by reports of what happened to prisoners who rebelled at other institutions, contended Lewis Steel, a New York attorney who represented the so-called "Auburn 6," the six inmates who were most heavily charged with criminal activity last November at Auburn.

Steel, vice president of the New York City chapter of the left-wing National Lawyers' Guild, said all ringleaders of

the Auburn rebellion were placed in solitary confinement afterward — without bedding or sanitary facilities.

The lawyer told a story of one Auburn rioter whom he said was tear-gassed through the vents of his solitary cell and then left there for 24 hours until he developed pneumonia.

Such incidents, Steel said, were the reason why the Attica rebels demanded "administrative amnesty." State officials were willing to accept that demand, thus promising that the rebels would not be punished further within the prison system for their actions.

Radical Attitudes

Other demands made by the Attica prisoners showed the inmates' growing awareness of radical politics.

Most of the Attica rebels were black, but there were significant numbers of both Puerto Ricans and whites among the 1280 inmates who actively participated in the uprising.

Two things were apparent from the composition of the outside negotiating committee requested by the rebels: A definite leaning toward leftist politics and a recognition and appreciation of persons active in prison reform efforts.

Among those the prisoners wanted as negotiators were State Assemblyman Arthur Eve and State Sen. John Dunne, two legislators known for their efforts in support of prison reform; William Kunstler, the attorney who defended the Conspiracy 7 in Chicago; Bobby Seale, chairman of the Black Panther Party or Huey Newton, the party's defense minister; Minister Jaybar Kenyatta of the Los Angeles Black Muslim Mosque and members of the Young Lords organization of New York City, a radical Puerto Rican group.

Journalists

Also on the prisoners' request list were Tom Wicker, associate editor of the New York Times, who recently wrote a column favorable to George Jackson and a Buffalo reporter who had written a series on conditions at Attica.

Observers at the negotiating sessions reported that the rhetoric of Seale and Kenyatta received a particularly en-

thusiastic response from the prisoners.

Another indication of the strength of a highly politicized faction among the rebels was the fact that the demand that any prisoners wishing to seek asylum in a "non-imperialistic country" be given transportation there.

This demand apparently was taken seriously by a large number of inmates, because it was introduced and discussed repeatedly during the negotiating sessions on Thursday and Friday.

Demands Lost

Lost along with many lives in yesterday's blood bath were the 27 demands submitted by the Attica rebels and accepted by Russell Oswald, New York State's corrections commissioner.

Among the concessions the inmates could have won if the violence had not occurred were administrative amnesty, "true" religious freedom, an end to almost all censorship of publications brought into the prison, freedom to be politically active "without intimidation or fear of reprisal," and creation of a permanent independent service to handle prisoners' complaints.

Observers at Attica and authorities on prison riots predicted that many of these demands will be heard again from inmates in prisons across the country.