

Prisoners Union Fears 'Path of Retaliation'

By Tim Findley

Spokesmen for the United Prisoners Union, a recently formed organization of convicts and ex-convicts, expressed deep concern yesterday for what they said is a "path or retaliation" among prison officials.

John Irwin, a former convict and member of the board of directors of UPU, said at a news conference here that prison conditions have "backed convicts into a corner to the point where they don't care whether they live or die."

But prison administrators' announcements that they will "get tough" with the entire population "amounts to retaliation and will not solve the problem," Irwin said.

AIM

The UPU was organized last year with the principal aim of representing inmates on economic matters — particularly their pay in prison industries and compensation for work-related injuries.

Inmates in California prisons receive an average pay of 12 cents an hour for working in prison industries that supply furniture for virtually all state offices and schools, as well as producing clothing and shoes for the inmate population and, at Folsom, license plates for the state.

Prison officials have said inmate pay cannot be raised because of lack of funds and state rules that prohibit competition with private industry, which officials said would be necessary to raise salaries.

INJUSTICE

Irwin said inmates in California and across the nation share a "realization that they are the few selected out of a large class of law violators, largely because they are poor and powerless. They



POPEYE JACKSON
'We want to negotiate'

have a deep sense of injustice."

Despite administrators' claims that prisons have eased up in treatment of the inmates in recent years, Irwin said penal institutions "have never been less humane and more punitive than they are today."

He cited the fact that California inmates spend more time on the average behind bars than ever before. The median time served for Cali-

fornia inmates is 36 months — among the highest figures in the nation for median lengths of incarceration.

LOCKUPS

After violent incidents, Irwin said, state prison administrators immediately lock up all inmates in an institution, despite the fact that only a few may have been involved.

"Instead of seeking the roots of the problem, they retaliate," Irwin said. "We frankly are frightened to death about what's going to happen next if this keeps up."

Popeye Jackson another, member of UPU's board of directors, said the group does not support violent acts on the part of any inmates.

CONDITIONS

"We want to negotiate," he said, "but you must understand that the conditions as they are today force a man to be violent — you must be violent if you want to survive in prison today."

Both men cited distortions in the way prison officials view their prisons and report what is going on — particularly taking note of contra-



JOHN IRWIN
Convicts in a corner

dictory findings on how hostages in the Attica prison incident died.

"What is necessary," Irwin said, "is a basic change in prisons. We feel that administrators have backed themselves into a corner. If possible, we'd like to lead them out."