

Behavior Mod—Walla Walla

anon.

1977

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The Walla Walla Brothers had figured they'd seen just about everything in anti-human treatment during their years of resistance at the Walla Walla State Prison in eastern Washington. But that was before the establishment of the "mental health unit" (MHU) there two years ago to make Walla Walla a laboratory for behavior modification experiments.

Examples: Prisoners in MHU are forced to wear baby diapers, crawl on the floor and drink liquids from a baby bottle for weeks on end. They are handcuffed and chained to their beds for long periods of time and must defecate and urinate on themselves. "Cooperative" prisoners are bribed and threatened into forming goon squads to terrorize and beat their fellow prisoners.

The idea of MHU is to destroy any speck of human dignity in the prisoners, so they will be susceptible to the carrot-and-stick techniques aimed at remaking their personalities according to official specifications. MHU works on the principle that all problems, including inability to adapt to prison life, are the result of personal choices, and that these problems are more faked than real. Social realities such as poverty, unemployment, and racism are ignored.

The stakes in MHU are very high. The large number of suicides there, many of them under very suspicious circumstances, show the authorities mean business in their determination to put the lid on the Walla Walla Brothers—the organized prisoners' movement within the walls—and to terrorize the general prison population.

The MHU is designed for prisoners who are considered adjustment problems, and this includes those who are politically active. The first stage is confinement in the hole for up to 23 hours a day, with no recreational or educational opportunities. Release from the hole depends on the prisoner signing a contract which signifies complete submission to the authorities; the prisoner "voluntarily" agrees to cut his hair, change his thoughts, restrict his associations. Contract violation, defined arbitrarily by the authorities, is punishable by indefinite confinement in the hole.

It's a truly Orwellian world in which the prisoner is never sure of the bounds of correct behavior or what will land him in the MHU. Affection between prisoners is suspect, as is ordering and receiving the "wrong" kind of literature and writing to newspapers or legislators about prison conditions. One man was punished because of his association with a radical in the county jail.

A class system is created in MHU in which those prisoners who cooperate are rewarded by being placed on committees that decide on work assignments, and make progress reports on and mete out punishment to their fellow prisoners.

The case of Donald Snook illustrates how this operates: on his second day in prison, Snook was assigned to MHU for observation. As soon as he got there, he was assaulted by the resident attendants (the "good" prisoners) while the guards watched. He was handcuffed to a radiator during group sessions at which he was ridiculed by other prisoners; he was hosed with cold water, tied between two mattresses with rope, chained to a bed for 16

days, isolated in a strip cell, injected with massive doses of tranquilizer and Mace. Legal calls were denied and his-outgoing mail never left the unit.

The angel of the MHU is William Hunter. He was fired last June after public outrage over his brutality, but taken on later as a "consultant." He says, "the administration should call all the convicts out into the big yard and all the toughs should be executed, one a week, until nobody wants to be tough."

The MHU was established as a desperate attempt by the authorities to put the lid on the Walla Walla Brothers. In 1971 after a long and bitterly-fought work strike, the Brothers won the right to de facto self-government and other demands.

The struggle intensified after the authorities reneged on the agreement. Two years ago, the prisoners seized the hospital and other facilities and took hostages, but the insurrection was crushed by force, the prisoners' governing committee liquidated and most of the militants placed in isolation or transferred. Since then, the Walla Walla Brothers have petitioned, filed suit, gone on hunger strikes and appealed to the public to keep the pressure on.

Their immediate demand at present is that the authorities be made to conform to judicial and legislative rulings on prison routines. An outside support network, building a letter-writing and petition campaign to state legislators and planning a demonstration in the state capital of Olympia, is being coordinated through Billy Bourgeois, c/o Morning Due, Box 22228, Seattle, Washington 98122.

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