

Assaults Continue on Prisoners

Fifth Estate Collective

1978

1. Emily Harris

The following is a statement sent to us by Emily Harris, who, along with Bill Harris, Joe Remiro and Russ Little, is one of the surviving members of the SLA. The four are currently prisoners of the State of California; six others were murdered by police in Los Angeles in 1975.

I was one of the prisoners in the women's section of Santa Rita Jail near Oakland on the night of May 14 when it was destroyed by fire. Many women could have lost their lives in that fire because they came within a hair's breath of being left locked in their cells with no way to get out. It was an outrageous and frightening experience and I want to share it so at least people will know what happened and will understand better how prisoners' lives are threatened everyday in a million different ways by the very fact that one class of people—the police—has been granted the power of a key that locks the door.

It all started about 4:30 in the afternoon when one of the police laid her hands on a prisoner. When other women jumped in to defend their sister, they got maced, clubbed and sprayed with hoses. So the women started tearing the place up in protest—breaking windows, furniture and setting small fires.

Santa Rita police are known for their sadistic practices—treating prisoners like dogs—and Santa Rita is equally well known for its sub-human living conditions. Santa Rita prisoners—both men and women—have broken out in riots and organized strikes on several occasions.

Santa Rita has been the subject of civil suits that have resulted in court orders for improvements in prisoner living conditions. News media have been denied access to the jail and have filed suit to gain entry in order to investigate allegations and inform the public of conditions there. So the events on May 14 were part of an on-going process—when prisoners are brutalized day after day with physical assault and dehumanizing conditions they are bound to respond and keep responding in one way or another just to maintain their humanity.

On May 14, women in the jail protested continuously, for over four hours. Then about 9:34 p.m., a fire was started in one of the large dormitories and got out of control quickly when the wooden walls and roof caught fire. In other parts of the jail, heavy black smoke was making it impossible to see or breathe. The lights all went out and the ceiling sprinklers came on. I was in one of the locked security cells.

There were four other women near by in other cells and quite a few other women down another hallway in locked security dormitories. I could hear women in the yard outside where they had escaped the fire, but the hallway outside our cells was deserted. We were yelling and screaming for someone to let us out, pounding on the doors and walls. I had this amazed, outraged feeling that the police weren't going to let us out—amazed that our lives were so insignificant to them; outraged because I'd known all along that this was true.

There was a window in my cell, but it was completely covered inside and out with heavy iron grills secured by pad locks. I heard people at my window trying to get the grills free, but police were yelling that they couldn't find

the keys to the padlocks. I screamed at them to get inside to unlock all the doors, but they kept trying to pull the grills off my window even though they had no keys and no tools.

We were all choking from the smoke, we were angry and we were scared. We felt so helpless. The police with the keys had left us trapped. There could be a lot of reasons why—complete lack of preparation and coordination in the event of an emergency situation, panic, waiting too long until the risk of going back in the building was too great, complete disregard for lives when those lives are prisoners', sadistic pleasure in leaving us to go down with the building.

It was one and all of these and it doesn't really even matter what the reasons were because the results are all the same—women's lives were endangered in a very serious way that could have easily ended in death or injury.

The police never did unlock any of us, but we did get out because a courageous, beautiful sister—a prisoner—managed to get ahold of a set of keys in all the confusion and she wasn't going to leave her sisters locked in. She came back into the burning building and unlocked all the doors. I'll never forget her—never!

I grabbed my legal papers and ran out of my cell, felt my way along a wall to an outside door about 25 yards away, and ran out into the yard. Outside there were no police to be found. I mean they were so unconcerned about getting us out, they were nowhere in the vicinity! But within 10 minutes the police discovered I was out and removed me and several other women to the men's jail where they put us in day-rooms to sleep on the tables. They took my legal papers from me and then claimed they'd been lost in the confusion.

The day after the fire the sheriff's department launched an intensive cover-up.

That morning I was in court for a scheduled appearance with my husband, Bill. I told about the fire, about being trapped in my cell like the other prisoners, about being rescued by a prisoner not the police and about having my legal papers seized and conveniently lost.

When reporters tried to check out my experience in the fire, the police denied it and responded with nonsense like, "She wasn't treated any differently than any other prisoner" and "Emily Harris's life isn't any more important than that of any other prisoner." They claimed that police, not another prisoner, had rescued me. The sheriff praised police heroism and claimed the evacuation of the jail was handled in an orderly fashion. It all made me sick!

To facilitate their cover-up and attempt to shut me up, the police told my lawyers in court that they couldn't meet with me afterwards because I was being immediately transported back to the state women's penitentiary in Southern California. Then they proceeded to take me back to Santa Rita and held me in total isolation in a strip cell while they completed spinning out their cover-up to the public.

The Santa Rita fire occurred just two days before the anniversary of the fire in Los Angeles that cost the lives of six women and men at the hands of police. For me the memory of those six beautiful people has made all the more real how close women prisoners at Santa Rita had come to losing their lives too. I remember the fire last year at a men's jail in Tennessee where prisoners and visitors were trapped and died of smoke inhalation because police didn't unlock the doors. It could happen anywhere.

It could be deliberate or an accident. Police are plenty quick to turn the key that locks someone up, but forget how to turn the key the other way in an emergency. And this constant threat to people's lives won't change as long as there are people who consider others as less than human and thus consider their lives as insignificant.

—Emily Harris

Santa Rita Prison

2. Behavior Mod

Increasingly the use of behavior modification is becoming a major form of torture in prisons from Moscow to Berlin and from the U.S. to Canada.

Although we are most aware of its use by various governments in their attempts to silence political prisoners such as Lorenzo Komboa Ervin in the U.S., RAF members in W. Germany, Angry Brigade members in the United Kingdom and intellectual dissidents in the USSR, to name but a few, the use of mind altering drugs in prison units is also being employed in a most hideous manner on non-political prisoners.

Liberation News Service (LNS) reported last month that Virginia State Penitentiary inmate Henry Tucker, who is serving a life sentence reduced to 40 years, was left permanently damaged by behavior modification drugs. While confined in two prison hospitals, Tucker was given excessive, unprescribed amounts of the behavior-modifying drug Prolixin by nonmedical personnel, including prisoners.

The side effects of the Prolixin and other drugs caused Tucker to become catatonic and suffer virtually total paralysis of his legs and arms. His legs frozen in a “froglike” position, he lay in bed without being turned or moved or otherwise treated for a considerable amount of time. Bedsores, which developed all over his body were not cleaned or frequently bandaged. They became deep, massive, and severely infected with maggots.

Tucker was close to death when he was transferred to the Medical College of Virginia, where he is recovering, although he still remains paralyzed and probably has suffered brain damage. Although Tucker’s case is extreme, it is consistent with the generalized abuse of prisoners subjected to behavior modification.

Last year, the inmates at Walla Walla State Prison in Washington rioted because of the “treatment” they were receiving. Their actions forced the closing of the behavior modification unit, where prisoners were forced to crawl around like babies and in some cases, chained to a bed in such a manner that they had to defecate on themselves. In W. Germany, imprisoned 2nd of June and RAF members have been held in behavior units (cells painted in glossy white and illuminated with a bright light 24 hours-a-day) for so long, that they have suffered nervous breakdowns and many have lost the ability to carry on the most simple conversations.

3. Komboa Ervin

Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, the black anarchist and prison organizer, has been placed into the notorious Control Unit Behavior Modification Program at Marion, Illinois Federal Penitentiary, after a protest by prisoners in the isolation Unit and an earlier food boycott in mid-March.

The Control Unit at Marion is infamous for having caused the deaths of ten men in the last five years that it has been open (three alleged suicides in 1977 alone!), and the self-mutilation and mental imbalance of hundreds of others. The Control Unit is a behavior modification (brainwash) program used to punish prison organizers, jailhouse lawyers, political prisoners, Muslims, and other “troublemakers.”

It is apparent that Komboa is being punished for his anarchist beliefs and his prison activism. He is an anarcho-syndicalist organizer for the Prisoners’ Union, and has been constantly persecuted by prison officials.

Komboa and three other black prisoners were placed into the Control Unit at Marion on April 3 after a protest in the Isolation Unit where several prisoners were brutally beaten by prison guards. On his second day in the Control Unit, prison officials tried to set him up by letting two white prisoners out of their cells while he was taking his recreation period, in apparent hopes that they would attack him, and either kill or seriously injure him.

Although they were armed with homemade knives, the two white prisoners refused to swallow the racist bait and do the prison officials’ bidding. As a result they were called “nigger-lovers” and threatened with beatings if they “kept running their mouths.” In the Control Unit the prison officials constantly try to set black and white prisoners against each other.

Komboa says the Control Unit is a torture chamber and that from the foregoing incident it is apparent that prison officials are trying to kill him or drive him to suicide. He is asking for his friends, supporters, and comrades in the anarchist, libertarian, and prison support movements to write to the Marion Warden to protest this conspiracy against his life and demand that he be removed from the Control Unit immediately.

George C. Wilkerson, Warden

United States Penitentiary

Post Office Box 1000

Marion, Illinois 62959

If you want to write to Komboa to express your solidarity:

Lorenzo Komboa Ervin
No. 18759-175
P.O. Box 1000
U.S. Penitentiary
Marion, Illinois 62959

For information on how to help Komboa, write to:

Audrey A. Myers, Director
Nat'l Committee to Support the Marion Brothers
4556A Oakland
St. Louis, Mo. 63110

and

Albert Meltzer
Anarchist Black Cross
c/o 43 Egremont House
Lewisham Road
London S.E. 13, England



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