

# French Radicals Sabotage Prison Project

Os Cangaceiros

1991

[Translator's note: Recently, a voluminous dossier began to circulate in France. The dossier, sent by Os Cangaceiros, included stolen prison plans and documents and a chronology outlining Os Cangaceiros's campaign of sabotage against the "13,000 project" (new maximum security penitentiaries with room for 13,000 prisoners), as well as reproductions of communiqués sent to those who were targeted. Interestingly, the police and companies which were attacked have been very discreet about this campaign, apparently wishing to give it as little publicity as possible. The following excerpts from the dossier have been translated from Mordicus, B.P. 11, 75622 Paris cedex 13, France, and Le Monde Libertaire, 145 rue Amelot, 75011 Paris, France].

The sabotage operation undertaken against different companies involved in the construction of the new prisons began at the end of April 1989. Whoever accepted to participate in this construction project found themselves, as a result, exposed to a number of our reprisals...

From the end of April until the end of June, we enter different sites (Aixles-Milles, Tarascon, Villeneuve-les-Maguelonne, Pontoise, Maubeuge, Bapaume), where we sabotage the cement intended for the sites using a procedure which is childishly simple. Sugar mixed with cement, in effect, in a proportion of one to one thousand (in other words, one kilo per ton), prevents the cement from hardening...

On May 1, in Tulle, we turn our attention to the case of BRUGEAUD. This public works company engaged in the construction of the Neuvic-sur-Isle and d'Uzerche prisons is kind enough to furnish us with a portion of the plans (measured in metres) and a sizeable bookkeeping dossier concerning the d'Uzerche site. After this break-in, the premises, files and offices are perfumed with ammonia.

On May 14, the Saint-Gely-du-Fesc branch of GTM is nicely vandalized...As well, we carry off precious booty from this expedition: detailed information about the participants in this venture, the plans of the Villeneuve-les-Maguelonne prison, along with technical documents concerning prison security...

On November 25, we take an interest in SCBTP of Pontoise, whose offense is performing a subcontracting job, doing the cleanup of the d'Osny prison for the Spie Batignolles company. Their building for pickup trucks and trucks goes up in smoke.

On January 25, 1990, we inflict irremediable damage on the electronic console of the cement factory in Salonde-Provence. The BETON DE FRANCE Company furnishes cement to the sites in the southern region. As well, acid is used to empty two cement mixers.

In a Bordeaux suburb, during the night of February 11 and the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup>, it is the FORCLUM Company's turn to be set ablaze and seriously damaged. This company, it should be noted, is in charge of furnishing anti-breakout devices for all of the western region, for which it provides prisons with alarms and video cameras and takes care of installing PCIs. [1]

On February 23, in Paris, the architect Christian Demonchy is ambushed on the route he usually takes to get to work. Two of us give him a drubbing while passersby look on. Already responsible, among other projects, for a Club Med in Morocco and, in the framework of the Badinter program, for the Mauzac prison, this faceless individual is working in the office of Janet-Demonchy on planning prisons in the northern region within the framework of the

Chalandon program. Shortly afterwards, by mail, we inform the other people in charge of planning the project of the price they might have to pay for such activity, so that it can no longer be pretended that they are unaware of it.

On February 21, in Vincennes, we sprinkle concentrated tear gas in the offices of the ASTRON Company, causing activity to come to a temporary halt. This company, which carries out research, takes care of everything concerning prison workshops.

In mid-April in Laon, as the ORSA cement mixers are going back and forth continuously to deliver cement to the site, it is the electronic console of the ORSA cement factory's turn to be destroyed.

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Beginning more than twenty years ago, a growing number of prisoners no longer accept being punished. Just as they reject the rules of the social game outside the walls, on the inside they refuse the penance and the sacrifice which, for almost two centuries, have constituted the prison morality whose goal has been to keep them trampled down. Today, the prisoners of democracy are not only clearly contesting the prison policies of one government or another, but are openly challenging the principle of detention itself. To deal with this unprecedented wave of protest, the Ministry of Justice has implemented a program of prison updating and modernization which is without precedent as well...

Using a proven technique and strategy, the sinister "13,000 Program" is above all a response to this situation of endemic revolt inside the walls. In the same manner that the state is restructuring the industrial apparatus, it is constructing "new norm" prisons, closing down certain prisons and renovating others. Ancient, crumbling prisons from which people have escaped are being replaced in the same way that the towers of subsidized housing projects, where people were revolting ten years ago, are being dynamited. To domesticate the rebelliousness of the people being dumped into new areas in the suburbs, these areas have been renovated in a police fashion and redone in the style of the day. Here, among the same misery, the attributes of every advanced society can be found: the police and the democratic lie.

For the first time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the prison administration possesses a new tool, one which is adequate to apply the strategy of its choice on a large scale, rather than reacting to events one at a time. Up till now, the administration had only been losing ground by gradually liberalizing the prison system. Now, the 13,000 cells constitute a margin of manoeuvre which will allow prisoners as a whole to be more effectively administered. Since more or less systematic incarceration is the general policy, one can imagine the frantic use to which this surplus of places will be put by the judges. (It should be remembered that 100,000 prison sentences with no option for parole have been meted out). This program allows the Ministry of Justice to anticipate future prison policies. The scope of the means which were studied, if they cannot be prevented, to rapidly contain any uprising or collective movement, has reached such a point that it is claimed that even the idea of an escape will be snuffed out. [2] The prison administration has profited from studies inside its institutions, notably those which were carried out during the Badinter period. Gigantic prisons, Loos-Les-Lille, Baumettes, Fleury, etc., are often the first to rise up. The tense atmosphere which reigns in these prisons and the high number of prisoners reveal in what sense the "overpopulation problem" is ultimately only a relationship of power. It is a question, therefore, of systematically isolating the prisoners from each other...

The responsibility which is constantly invoked in order to force individuals to submit to the rationality of work is also invoked in order to subject prisoners to the rationality of prisons and to induce them to participate in the administration of their own sentences.

The new look [in English in the text] prisons are in line with the demands of the end of the century. One is obliged to state an apparent paradox: it is now the prisons which resemble factories. Not only does the layout of the premises impose rules of functioning which are those of the new techniques of organizing work, but everything is minutely thought out in order to hinder, if not prevent, all possible collusion. A sophisticated system grips the prisoner in a dense network of electronic surveillance, monitoring all of his or her movements, relayed at times by a system of magnetic badges. One would think oneself in the Forum des Halles [3] or in a head office of La Defense...Curiously, these techniques were tested out in the work sphere, then made common everywhere else before being imported into the prison universe. But if executives have completely internalized these restrictions, to the

point of turning them into something rewarding, prisoners, like non-management workers, immediately feel their completely oppressive nature. These techniques form the first line of approach to smoothing the explosive relations between the screws and prisoners, in order to make them as impersonal as possible. Just as the functional nature of the buildings attempts to eliminate ' points of friction, it throws the prisoner into an impersonal environment. Oppression becomes of the most abstract sort. Besides, it is less a question of meting out iron discipline to an undifferentiated mass of prisoners than of managing their incarceration down to the smallest detail. Since it forms the intrinsic backdrop to the prison universe, the repressive mode cannot disappear—rather it tends to dress itself in the cold and impersonal managing that characterizes our time so well.

The construction of the new institutions comes at a propitious moment to flesh out the arm of a justice system which is complaining about the poverty of the means at its disposal. Also, judicial institutions function according to the value of example. For an example to be effective, exceptions must not be allowed. This is what lays the basis for the all-powerfulness of the law. Thus, cells are specially reserved for the handicapped and there are special wings for drug addicts so that no one escapes incarceration. One can see in what way the antiseptic design of these "old people's homes" allows the judges broader possibilities of imprisonment. In a more general sense, no one must escape the all-powerfulness of this world. Whereas society has limited every human perspective to the logic of money—beyond which nothing else is conceivable—the modern prison necessarily seems like a hermetic universe from which there is no way to escape. Everywhere, triumphant capitalism has lent credence to the idea of an inescapable world. Within the walls, the same sentiment of fatality must reign.

The new fortresses are constructed in such a way that, concerning alternatives, the slim pickings are impressed upon everyone. It is either putting up with orders or undergoing the rigors of being excluded—through a profusion of technological means which are to be taken as unbeatable; through wings in which any contact with anyone else is almost impossible. With the principle of solitary and punishment areas reinforced, the prison administration at their leisure will be able to use the 22 new isolation areas to shuffle around the prisoners who do not buckle under. Everything has been devised so that the occupants, on the one hand, cannot look at what is immediately outside or at the rest of the prison, but also so that nothing can be heard filtering in. These areas are generally located on the upper floor of the building, level with barred courtyards which are assigned to them. The high transom windows of the cells make any view impossible.

These prisons have no reason to be jealous of their big sisters, the American high-security prisons. To the muscled arbitrariness of the screws is added an antiseptic terror. In making strenuous efforts to refine the abolition of the idea of any outlet except sports, studying, and work, [4] the planners of this project have as their real goal the limiting of the mental universe of the prisoners. Pushing isolation and the loss of any reference point even further by standardizing detention in the prisons according to the standards of high-security penitentiaries—this is the humanizing concern which is announced.

The high walls in the heart of the cities loomed as an advertisement, a call to order, but at times they allowed curiosity and support from passersby if unrest occurred. It is far away from friendly voices, without witnesses, and outside the city walls that prison power now manifests itself.

All of this arsenal of technology has not prevented the Villeneuve, Tarascon, Neuvic, and Saint-Mihiel prisons from experiencing protest movements already, in the first weeks after they began functioning, and even before they were totally occupied. In spite of the mechanisms deployed to prevent them from gaining access to the roofs, the prisoners in revolt made it up. From the outset, prisoners attacked the most modern aspects of their incarceration: monitoring with magnetic cards; the increase in prices and rationing resulting from the privatization of the distribution of meals and of the canteen; individual cells. It is obviously no more human to be alone in a cell than to be piled up in one. The silence to which many people in society have resigned themselves enhances the dignity of the prisoners in revolt all the more. In spite of the risks, they have known how to make themselves heard with enough force to trouble everyone who governs by blows and scorn. With every food strike, every refusal to return to their cells after exercise periods, every time the institutions are smashed up, every time there is a revolt, the demands which are advanced are always the same: the elimination of isolation areas, the hole and of holding cells; automatic granting of parole; permission for prison leave and conditional liberation; minimum wages for prisoners who are working; visiting rooms in which people can be intimate; and amnesty for all prisoners refusing to submit who have been punished or sentenced. It was our wish to render to them the homage they merit by making

public the plans and technical documents concerning some of the new prisons to which they risk being transferred (without neglecting the possibility of having these plans reach the prisoners by appropriate means). We salute the spirit of revolt which animates them.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Computerized Security Post
2. The repugnant demagoguery concerning this consists of going on and on about so-called lax conditions of detention which favor repeated escapes. The reality, unfortunately, is something else entirely. The escape rate is an average of 0.08% per year for the 48,000 prisoners as a whole. In passing, let us salute the 60 escaped prisoners who recently thumbed their noses at the screws.
3. Forum des Halles: an area in downtown Paris which was razed and now contains expensive boutiques and offices.
4. Also included in this list is the word "firole" (which I learned means sleeping pill or tranquilizer).

## Newspaper Raided by Police

*FE Note:* As we were laying out the above article, the translator of it received the following communique from the Mordicus editorial collective. Our thanks to Michael and Tom in Montreal for translating and typesetting both pieces.

"13 people, including several involved with Mordicus and people in our milieu, were arrested in Paris the morning of January 23 by police. The film necessary for publication of Mordicus No. 2 was seized. This sweep occurred in the context of an inquiry concerning the Os Cangaceiros group which is fighting against the prison system. A number of other French journals published excerpts from the "13,000 Project" dossier of which 10,000 copies were distributed by Os Canaceiros of our December issue.

It is clear that the goal of this police operation is to prevent the regular appearance of a journal with a print run of 30,000. At the hour of the sacred union, the rare voices which object to the consensus must be silenced. If there is already a state of emergency, let them say so!

The Mordicus Editorial Collective

## Letter to an Architect

Subject: Ambush

Are your wounds well healed, architect? Did you figure out why?

Shamelessly, with no discretion of any kind, centimetre by centimetre, you have conceived these cages in which even the handicapped will be locked up. Inside the walls which you have designed, individuals who are worth more than you will be beaten up on a regular basis. It is good that you have received an appetizer of what thousands of prisoners will have to endure to the nth degree.

To be sure, architect, this is not your company's first infamy. Considering what you build to house normal citizens, one can guess your competence to shut away delinquents. One moves easily from the tower blocks of the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement [an area of Paris] to prison cells.

Scum, looking at your mug, we were able to note from your tired face how deeply you involve yourself in your projects.

Before you were building walls, now you're going to keep a low profile.

Os Cangaceiros Lyon, 29/03/90



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/336-spring-1991/french-radicals-sabotage-prison-project>  
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