

Coalition For Prisoners' Rights Newsletter

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May 1999

MAYDAY MAYDAY



As the Nazi propagandist Goebbels said: "If you make the lie big enough, no one will have the nerve to challenge it." Those of us who know the reality of prison life - its brutality, danger and destruction - know well the frustration of trying to explain what prison is really about to those not yet personally touched by it.

As with the U.S. police, court and penal system, so too with U.S. foreign policy, one of the results of which has been the terrorist bombing of Kosovo this spring. Our access to complete, accurate information and analysis is very

limited, making it extremely difficult for us to understand what is really going on and why. We are not reminded, for example, that both the Clinton and the Bush administrations have long opposed independence for Kosovo. The U.S. government has, in fact, through much of the 90s, colluded with Milosevic, allowing him to maintain his hold on Kosovo and parts of Bosnia.

The U.S. drive to create a new world order has intensified, as has the effort to increase social control of the poor and people of color within the U.S. The recent

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MAYDAY, cont.

expansion of NATO to include Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic as well as NATO's upcoming 50th anniversary have been a part of the U.S. impetus to wage permanent war to secure what the dominant capitalists see as the "national interest."

As of this writing, the result of U.S. led NATO bombing has been increased devastation and the creation of many thousands of refugees. And the reign of terror is likely to expand further, in several possible directions. If U.S. ruling interests prevail, one result will be what is called the "viability" of NATO, which means it continues to be useful in the effort for the increased concentration of world power in the hands of the United States.

History reflects that countries intervene in other countries to advance what those in power see as the national interest, not for abstract "humanitarian" reasons. Common actual motivations include the guaranteeing supplies of raw materials, concern for political stability which affects economic stability and therefore international labor and goods markets and control of areas that are seen to have future strategic importance.

The U.S. doesn't want local solutions to local problems when the situation can be manipulated to benefit U.S. interests. The U.S. government creates enemies and client states as excuses to continue to operate unilaterally.

Other ethnic conflicts have resulted in far greater death and destruction than in Kosovo. There have been, for example, nearly 2 million deaths in Africa's Sudan and several hundred thousand in Rwanda. Over 5,000 children have been dying each month in Iraq as the direct result of the punitive economic UN sanctions there again led by the U.S. That and the on-going U.S. bombing of Iraq are barely mentioned in the deluge of factoids presented to us by the mainstream media. Of course not. The media's job is to keep us loyal to the actions of the U.S. government, no matter how brutal.

But you can't fool all of the people all of the time. These days both working people and prisoners are hard to fool. Many workers have inherited the determination and courage that enabled previous generations to struggle toward equality, freedom and justice.

May is the anniversary of one such struggle - the 1886 strike by 350,000 workers in more than 11,000 different workplaces. The strike, which began on May 1, led to the tragic Chicago Haymarket Square clash between workers and police. Although 4 labor leaders were executed as a result, the campaign for the eight-hour day - a goal of the strike - was ultimately successful.

La lucha continua. The struggle continues!

MAYDAY is an international signal of distress and comes from the French "m'aider," "Help me."

WHAT IS CRIME?

Why are we writing about workers as well as prisoners?

One reason is that the same people are sometimes workers and sometimes prisoners. There is no unbroken line between the two groups. Another reason is that the same social and economic system exploits us - in many of the same ways - when we are prisoners and when we are workers. But the most important reason is that we have all been had when we were taught to think about crime.

The Coalition for Prisoners' Rights believes that crime is the bad, oppressive things people do to each other. The more people you hurt, the bigger criminal you are.

So the big criminals in our country are the people who are rich when others are poor, those who make profits from other peoples' misery. The big criminals are the people who cripple us at our workplaces, control the manufacture of unsafe cars and other products, and send us to fight the people of other countries to make the world safe for their investments. The big criminals give us diseases through our food, air, medicine and water - cancer, black lung, birth defects.

Street crime is a very small part of all the crimes really committed each day. Even mobster crime is small in comparison to unemployment, homelessness, the bad food, education and medical care that hurts so many of us. Yet we have been taught to believe that street crime and organized crime are big enemies to us. And when we believe that, the real, big criminals are safe.

The Coalition believes that enormous changes are needed to rid ourselves of the system that results in the big crime in this country, and that workers and prisoners, the unemployed, the disabled, the retired - all poor, minority and working people - have to work together to stop the big crooks.

The big crooks - the owners and bureaucrats and politicians who protect their interests at our expenses - don't have horns or fangs or shifty eyes, just like the people now in the pen don't. Maybe they're nice people, just trying to be comfortable like the rest of us. But the pursuit by these few of comfort and wealth and power means violence and oppression against the vast majority of us, and it's more than a crying shame. It's a crime.



VOICES FROM INSIDE



RIISING NUMBERS OF WRONGFULLY CONVICTED

Marysville OH March 20, 1999

...These Ohio convictions aren't proven beyond a reasonable doubt; they are motivated against people of color. No matter what evidence a person of color presents to the system to prove their innocence, they're guilty. It's as if the law read: "Guilty, until you're proven innocent." That would better justify their record.

INMATE LEGAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Parchman MS March 23, 1999

The Inmate Legal Assistance Program (ILAP) which was implemented at the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC), has severely limited access to the courts by those held prisoner within their control and authority. Mississippi has no legal assistance programs from outside organizations or organizations which will assist inmates here with the process of rehabilitation and initiation back into society...

MDOC has gone back to the dark ages with their treatment of inmates and their denial of legal and humane rights to those they have under their control...There are no advocates for us, but us and we must not allow ourselves to become lost in the system. We must keep trying to change things and not be afraid to ask for help in bringing to the public's attention the inhumane treatment of those imprisoned. To help with information/assistance contact: Daniel F. Goss, 33054 Unit 29 D, Parchman MS 38738.

EPOXY PROBLEMS

Hawkinsville GA March 26, 1999

...A year ago, while housed at Washington State Prison in Davisboro GA, I was assigned to a paint detail along with 12-15 other women. We were instructed to paint the shower and bathroom areas with some very toxic Epoxy primer and Epoxy paint. We had no ventilation at all for the first 3 or 4 days...I'm now having serious problems with my liver and am waiting for a biopsy to find out how badly my liver is damaged...

I've written OSHA and the Commissioner of Labor...I have yet to get a response. Can someone advise me on how I can get someone's attention who could help me file a suit? Linda Westfall, EF 206432 (E-4B-136), PO Box 839, Hawkinsville GA 31036.

Mailing list additions and address changes should go into effect within two months from their post-marked date. We don't have the resources to acknowledge these requests by letter. Requests for referrals and other correspondence will be answered within four to six weeks. Letters intended for publication must say "Do Print."

The Coalition makes information available on resources and services for prisoners. We strongly urge that readers keep copies of all papers, especially legal papers, sent to those offering assistance, and be careful about sending money. **In most cases we do not have direct experience with the quality or reliability of the services provided by the groups mentioned.**

CARIBBEAN AFRICAN UNITY

Elmira NY March 30, 1999

...The Caribbean African Unity Organization (C.A.U.) at the Elmira Correctional Facility has among its purposes and aims "to address and enhance the unique needs and aspirations of persons of Caribbean background, both offenders and ex-offenders...in both the United States and the Caribbean" and "to encourage the development of a strong self-help concept in preparation for eventual release."

...I have written Madeleine Albright, U.S. Secretary of State, concerning violations of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations which have led to the illegal convictions and imprisonment of countless Caribbean nationals, in violation of the 1st, 5th, 6th, and 14th Amendments to the United States Constitution...The reasons for the letter include hoping to motivate law scholars from the Caribbean to assist the C.A.U. in vindicating Caribbean nationals from illegal imprisonment. Those of us who are completely innocent may get the chance to prove our innocence and demonstrate that, had the Vienna Convention been enforced, we would have never been convicted. Carlton Walker, Executive Advisor, 85-A-1559, PO Box 500, Elmira NY 14902-0500.

THE SLEEPING GIANT

San Quentin CA April 6, 1999

...Three years ago, the Republican Congress, voicing complaints about endless death penalty appeals, agreed to revise the Federal Habeas Corpus Act...on the day the president signed the measure, defense lawyers in California filed a class action suit on behalf of San Quentin's Death Row population saying their clients should not be subjected to fast-track federal appeals because California's system of providing appellate lawyers was inadequate...In May, 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court tossed the lawsuit out. That decision, however, returns the issue to California, to be decided anew by federal judges. Legal experts say that California has 2 to 3 more years of litigation ahead before the "Effective Death Penalty Act" can have effect. California currently has over 500 prisoners on Death Row, and over 125 prisoners in the midst of their federal appeals...



VOICES FROM INSIDE continued

WAKE UP!

Fairfax SC April 6, 1999

Clinton and America are quick to condemn other countries for desecration of human rights. We should look at ourselves. This country is near the top for human rights violations.

Prisoners are stripped of most of their rights under the 1st, 4th, 5th, 6th, 8th and 14th constitutional amendments. They are degraded and dehumanized by the use of solitary confinement, restraint chairs, shackles and chains, overcrowding, restrictions on personal hygiene and the death sentence.

The Prison Litigation Reform Act has gutted equal protection of the law for prisoners. The United Nations Convention Against Torture (CAT) which has been ratified by the U.S. is international law. It prohibits physical or mental pain and suffering inflicted to punish, coerce, or discriminate for any reason. The U.S. violates this within its prisons and jails...

Nearly 22 million American pass through the jail and prison systems annually. There are almost 1.8 million incarcerated! Wake up! It could be you or a loved one next. It only takes a second to make a mistake in your life that could take years to amend in prison. Stop human rights atrocities in this country first, before worrying about foreign countries' problems...Millions are suffering right here!

PROMOTE SOCIAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Cameron MO April 12, 1999

The Missouri Prison Labor Union welcomes all prisoners to join and support us in promoting social justice, human rights and the rights of prisoners through legal, civil, moral and corporate means. Anyone who is willing to join or support the M.P.L.U. please contact: National Communications Office, Missouri Prison Labor Union, PO Box 22774, Seattle WA 98122-0774.

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What Is Justice ?

When our Coalition says that the court and penal system is another example of what is unfair in this country in general, the next question that comes up is, "What would be fair; what is justice?"

We believe that the first condition of justice is not having the bad things that people do to one another, face-to-face and at a distance, happen. Justice is a process, something that has to be worked on every day. We are very far from it.

When bad things happen to us and we react by hurting the people who we think have hurt us, that is not justice - that is punishment. Punishment can only come after injustice. Punishment does not work toward creating justice, it works toward keeping things as they are. Which is how people in power want them to be - the way they are, only more so.

Many of us are so angry about how we have been treated in our lives that it is hard for us to think about how to change it. We are encouraged to use all our energy to think of how we can get back at people and get more for ourselves. And all the institutions that exist now, such as police, courts, prisons,

encourage us to think like that.

Putting people in jail won't make them stop drinking; offering support and assistance will. Killing people who are convicted of killing other people won't make people stop killing; making sure that everyone has a decent chance in life will. Kicking people out of school who don't come regularly won't help them get an education; changing schools so they are more respectful of the people who don't like them and feel like failures there will.

The second condition of justice, being fair, includes sharing equally. We live in a rich country. Even if we stopped taking more than our share from other countries there could still be enough here for everyone to have what they need. For some people to have a lot of money while others don't have enough to cover their basic needs isn't justice.

Having power to control our lives, to work to improve our lives, is a third condition of justice. How can we even talk about having justice when 44% of young Black men can't find work, and 60,000 people are homeless in the streets of New York City?

Working for justice is hard work, especially since it goes against so many of the lies we have been brought up with. There can only be justice for one when it is there for all.



Crime of the Month

While the media buzzed for the last couple of months with stories on the recent "spy scandal" at Los Alamos New Mexico national lab, ^{the} FBI has yet to make an arrest.

That didn't stop Los Alamos from firing Wen Ho Lee, who is suspected of passing "secrets" about nuclear warhead development to the Chinese. Lee has been a U.S. citizen for 20 years and was born in Taiwan, hardly an ally of China. The case against him is based on a trip to China in 1980s. There he was asked some inappropriate questions concerning weapons development that were outside his field of work. Since such approaches are supposed to be reported, he was ostensibly fired because he did not report the incident until the FBI questioned him.

aka Crimetoppers

All this intrigue prompted congress to propose spending another \$6 billion on the THAAD missile defense system, which just last week failed once again at a cost so far of \$50 billion. And this week the Wisconsin Project on Arms Control issued a report that lax federal export controls have allowed China to buy \$15 billion in high tech equipment from the U.S., used to build nuclear weapons and cruise missiles. The report concluded that U.S. corporations made thousands of federally approved sales and that this represents a greater threat to U.S. security than the theft of U.S. nuclear secrets.

So who needs spies? Not China, but our government badly needs a patsy and that is our Crime of the Month.



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