

Conscience in Prison

AN APPEAL FROM COs

A conscientious objector is a person who refuses to cooperate with the social evil of war. It is not surprising that of approximately 2,500 COs who have been imprisoned in America during the present war, some have found within the prison system social evils with which they can no more cooperate than with the military program.

A Witness for Interracial Brotherhood

"There is going to be no successful world order, no democratic international organization that will endure, no peace that will last, until men of all colors and nationalities are willing to sit down and break bread together," says Lillian E. Smith, editor of "The South Today."

In the Federal Correctional Institution at Danbury, Conn., 21 men are participating in a work strike which began on August 11 over the issue of racial segregation in the dining hall. They made the simple request that Negro and white prisoners who wanted to do so be permitted to eat at the same table. As a result they have been confined in isolation for 108 days.

In the Penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pa., COs attempted to break down similar segregation of whites and Negroes at meals. They were placed in isolation as punishment for their acts of protest.

A Wall of Silence

Punishment for refusal to work differed somewhat between Danbury and Lewisburg. In general it consisted, as prison punishments usually do, of the restriction or removal of "privileges." Among the "privileges" of a Federal prisoner are not only such things as attending movies and buying candy from the commissary, but also the more vital matters of correspondence and visits with his family, and access to books and study materials. Both correspondence and visits are very limited even for a prisoner not on punishment status. And study materials become intensely significant to men shut off for months at a time from human contacts and from normal work.

The strikers at Lewisburg for over six weeks were not even permitted to have a Bible. For the duration of their punishment they were allowed no other reading matter. Their correspondence was

limited to one letter in and one out each week, and these were strictly censored. The men from the beginning had found it next to impossible to communicate with outside friends about issues which were of significance to themselves and other prisoners. They became convinced that censorship is a "wall of silence which separates all prisoners from the outside world" and that it is a totalitarian method of control which permits the continuation of evils within the prison system.

Their petitions to the authorities and their conferences with the warden failed to bring adequate assurances that the Bureau of Prisons was willing to abandon the practice of complete authoritarian censorship in favor of inspection of mail (the need for which they readily admitted) and to recognize their right to reading and study materials. Thereupon, five of them began a hunger strike on September 29 and were joined by a sixth on October 10.

That there are no insuperable obstacles in the way of substantial alteration in the present censorship is indicated by the fact that these men are now allowed to correspond more freely than in the beginning of the protest. They are not seeking exemptions or privileges for themselves, however, and their proposal that the two rights mentioned in their letter, which we quote, be extended to all Federal prison inmates seems eminently reasonable.

Their fast still continues, although the painful process of tube-feeding was begun in the prison hospital on October 22.

Their Own Words

The following letter from the men in Lewisburg to James V. Bennett, Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, tells the purpose of their fast and expresses their willingness to negotiate over details:

We have always regretted the fact that our deep interest in the abolition of censorship has forced us to adopt the method of an indefinite fast. We are very anxious to maintain friendly mutually respectful relations with you and other officials, despite the fact that we have felt compelled to adopt this method which may seem extreme to you. We are afraid that the Administration's memorandum of our conference of Oct. 19 may not give an entirely accurate picture of the spirit and attitude we are trying to express. Perhaps there are other misunderstandings as well, resulting from the fact that we have not had direct contact with you.

From the first we have felt that there are two basic human rights that have not always been recognized in modern penology but are indispensable to the welfare of prisoners as human beings. Our fast is intended to bring these rights to the thoughtful attention of officials, prisoners, and outsiders. We feel that almost all persons will agree to these rights and will recognize their crucial importance, once they have given them serious, objective attention.

The first is the right of every prisoner to free correspondence with the outside world, at all times, regardless of his prison status.

The second is the right of every prisoner to access to uncensored materials for reading and writing, at all times, regardless of his prison status.

We believe that under the present set-up, authorities are justified in opening, inspecting, and reading mail in order to detect dope and plans of violence. But we feel that these precautions can be taken without interfering with the two foregoing rights. Similarly, we see no reason why special problems, such as that presented by pornographic materials, cannot be worked out without denying these rights.

In the last few years, the Federal Prison System has gone a long way toward recognizing these rights, and we feel that the logical next step is for it to give them complete and unequivocal recognition. Because these principles are so fundamental and because their denial causes such terrible suffering and embitterment to prisoners, their friends and families, we feel that we cannot stop our fast until they are clearly established. In this sense we have been accurately represented as being adamant. We cannot stop our fast or carry on successful negotiations as to details until these two rights have been recognized and until it is clear that there will be a basic policy change incorporating them into the Federal Prison System.

At the same time, it would be presumptuous of us to suggest that we know all the answers. We feel certain of the fundamental principles and we have some valuable experience, as inmates, concerning details. But it is clear that you and other administrative officials have other experience that must inevitably modify our suggestions. Therefore we are anxious to listen to reason on details and are ready to stop our fast without 100% incorporation of our own ideas—provided of course the modifications do not take the heart out of the two cardinal principles.

We feel that you agree with us that the proper place for such a policy to be established is in official regulations that come from Washington. This would not prevent local prisons from varying details in accord with local situations, provided again that the two basic rights are clearly maintained. But until such a change comes from Washington, local liberalization in one of 26 closely knit institutions is of little significance.

We entered this fast because of the tremendous need of the prisoners and because of our overwhelming conviction of the truth of these two simple principles. We are sorry for the obvious inconvenience it is causing quite a few people. We do not want to be rude or inflexible. Nor do we want to force you to act contrary to your judgment. But we have observed the sufferings of the prisoners, first hand, and we see no alternative but to go on fasting indefinitely, in as friendly and humble a spirit as we can, so as to bring the seriousness of the situation to your attention.

Meanwhile, we shall make every effort to be receptive to new insights through meditation, prayer, and open-minded discussion.

Signed:

Paton Price
Dave Duellinger
Bill Kuenning

Jack Dixon
Tom Woodman
Bill Lovett

Take Immediate Action

All freedom-loving Americans have a responsibility to support the purposes of the COs now on strike in the Federal prisons. Letters should be sent *week after week and month after month* to the authorities in Washington *on behalf of their aims*. Such letters will count because our government officials are still sensitive to public opinion.

WRITE urging that arbitrary censorship be abolished in favor of mail inspection. **WRITE** urging that prisoners at all times be allowed Bibles and study materials. **WRITE** urging the application of democratic American principles of brotherhood in our public institutions, that those of different color, who so desire, may break bread together.

WRITE TO:

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, White House, Washington, D. C.

Attorney-General Francis Biddle, Department of Justice, Washington, D. C. (Mr. Biddle is known to be genuinely concerned about the application of democracy in America. The Bureau of Prisons is in his Department, so it is especially important to let him know your concern about prison problems.)

James V. Bennett, Director, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Department of Justice, Washington, D. C. (Mr. Bennett is in a position to determine prison policies.)

Your Senators and your Congressmen. (Their job is to represent you in the national government. They can take action only if these issues are brought to their attention.)

Don't delay! **WRITE AT ONCE!** And then **WRITE AGAIN** every week!

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This appeal is issued jointly by:

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