

Lessons from the Attica prison uprising: 1971-91



Sept. 13 marks the 20th anniversary of the uprising at Attica Correctional Facility in New York. It is a good time for prisoners to ask, "Why an Attica Day?" There are several good reasons. First, it is important for prisoners still working for progress to honor their comrades who have fallen in the struggle for justice. Second, it is essential for us on the inside to understand the lessons of Attica, both positive and negative, so that such losses can be minimized in the future. Third, the uprising at Attica represents a symbol of resistance and the birth of a greater prisoners' movement.

To appreciate the events at Attica, it is first necessary to put them in proper political and historical context. Today many prisoners view justice as nothing more than a cop's bullet in the back or as endless years of meaningless confinement. That's bourgeois justice. What the brothers at Attica were fighting for is proletarian justice, which is an end to the system that perpetuates the destructive cycle that imprisonment represents. They wanted us to see their rebellion as one battle in a continuous struggle waged on an international level, not just one isolated incident.

The Attica uprising was a spontaneous event. It happened because the material conditions for resistance were ripe. There had been political study groups in most of the major wings, and prisoner consciousness had been developed to a point where the entire population could act as a single fist. Sam Melville, an Attica prisoner, had been publishing a little underground paper he wrote by hand, with as many carbon copies as he could make. It was called the Iced Pig.

Well-thought-out demands had been drawn up and submitted to the state's corrections bureaucracy for resolution. When no action was taken

by officials, prisoners backed their demands with a ten-day peaceful work strike. The strike ended with a shopping cart full of pious promises that were never honored. Then, on Aug. 21, 1971, when George Jackson was murdered at San Quentin, Attica cons wore black armbands and boycotted the mess hall for a day. All of these actions reflected a high degree of political unity.

On Sept. 9, 1971, less than a month after the boycott, a fight broke out in one of the wings. Through an unusual combination of circumstances, such as prisoners inadvertently gaining access to an important gate, the fight erupted into a riot and takeover of sections of the prison, including D-Yard. Even though the rebellion was not planned, D-Yard prisoners quickly and efficiently organized themselves into a commune. They had no weapons to speak of and their level of outside support was negligible.

The rebelling prisoners seemed to be aware of their weaknesses, as they immediately called upon cons in other New York prisons and the progressive community on the outside to back their play. This call was made through the mass media, the presence of which was a precondition to negotiations. Another precondition was the formation of an observer team selected by the prisoners. These and other threshold demands indicate how conscious the prisoners were of their vulnerability; they also reflect a deep level of understanding as to what was necessary to overcome their weaknesses.

The observer team consisted of liberals like Tom Wicker of the New York Times and leftist political organizers like Jesse Jackson. While the media and observer team were successful in terms of winning a substantial amount of public opinion in favor of the prisoners, the men in D-Yard needed more than moral support. No other

prisons went down. And the left did nothing to support the brothers.

To top it all off, when push came to shove, when the state told the observer team to clear the yard so they could launch their attack on the prisoners, these observers, the same men who had been championing the cause of the prisoners in the press, left the yard and thus exposed the brothers to the guns of the state. They were slaughtered at the hands of the state police and prison guards behind those guns. Forty-three people were killed.

Besides leaving the prisoners vulnerable by not joining them in the yard, the radicals and left leaders failed to mobilize the extensive progressive community in New York City. These people and the loved ones of the men inside could have surrounded the prison in a non-violent vigil until it was resolved. Moreover, due to a long and deeply entrenched tradition of opportunism, the left did not possess the capacity to defend people like the Attica brothers with all levels of support.

Given these weaknesses, it is easy to see why Gov. Nelson Rockefeller thought he could get away with ordering the Sept. 13 military attack on the unarmed prisoners.

The tactic implemented by the prisoners of Attica, although it exposed the naked violence of the state to a complacent public and raised prisoners consciousness to a higher level, was political defeat—and a very expensive one at that. This is not to say that D-Yard prisoners were all wrong. There were both positive and negative aspects to the uprising. In order to glean the lessons, however, we must examine the negative, the weaknesses, in an effort to transform weakness into strength. That's what the struggle is all about; fight, learn, fight some more, learn some more, and so on until victory.

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Attica chronology

The chronology below describes the main prison-related events preceding, during and immediately following the Attica prison uprising in September 1971. Although Attica has become a symbol for the prisoner liberation movement and the lengths to which the state will go to crush it, it is important to remember that it was not an isolated incident. The Attica uprising took place in the context of an anti-imperialist movement that was sweeping the United States in the late 1960s and early 70s, and the state's reaction is reflective of the repression that was brought to bear on all factions of the revolutionary movement during those years.

October 1970: Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson is published. There were at least 16 prison protests during 1970, and Jackson, a member of the Black Panther Party who did ten years in prison for stealing \$70 from a gas station, served as an example to many prisoners of how to fight from behind the walls.

January 1971: Russell Oswald appointed New York State Commissioner of Corrections Services by Nelson A. Rockefeller. Oswald was considered a liberal who wanted to bring dramatic reforms to the prison system.

May 1971: The Attica Liberation Front forms within the prison, and sends a manifesto of 27 demands to Oswald. Members of the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the Weatherman, and other anti-imperialist groups are in the prison and Marxist-Leninist-Maoist study groups are taking place.

July 1971: Having received no response from Oswald, five prisoners send another letter reiterating the original demands.

Aug. 22, 1971: George Jackson shot to death at San Quentin prison in California.

Aug. 23, 1971: 700 Attica prisoners wear black armbands and fast in honor of Jackson. Says Herbert X. Blyden, a leader of the Attica revolt in a 1990 television documentary: "George Jackson's death I think impacted on me in such a way that even Dr. King's death didn't impact on me... So I think what I had to do at that point was to show that we can be strong even during trials and tribulations, much as George was strong to the death."

Sept. 3, 1971: Oswald responds to the ALF's demands in a tape-recorded message played over the prison radio system. He says he will institute some reforms but they would take time.

Sept. 8, 1971: A confrontation between guards and prisoners leads to two prisoners being dragged from their cells to another unit. Other inmates tell guards if anything happens to them, there could be reprisals.

Sept. 9, 1971: 8:50 a.m. A fight breaks out between a guard and the prisoners who threatened the guards on Sept. 8. With several guards distracted, prisoners seize the opportunity to break down a gate and gain access to all four main cell-blocks.

10:30 a.m. 1,281 prisoners assemble in D-Yard. They have 39 hostages and maintain control of half the prison. Prisoners elect a negotiating committee. Others are delegated to deal with security, clean-up, medical care, and communications. They ask 13 journalists, government officials, and political activists to come and observe the situation in the yard, and extend the invitation of safe passage to anyone who

History condemns prison

by MC11

On Sept. 13, twenty years after New York state troopers gunned down 32 defenseless prisoners in the D-Yard of the Attica Correctional Facility, prisoners in New York, Maryland and New Jersey who continue their comrades' struggle against political repression and brutal conditions will commemorate the Attica uprising by refusing to participate in any activities, MIM prison comrades say.

"In collaboration with the New York and New Jersey prisoners (whom I correspond with) we (all soldiers/comrades in the prisons) will not go to school, work, shop, etc. on Sept. 13, [1991] in commemoration of Attica," a Maryland prisoner writes. "We want to give honor to the martyrs and warriors who suffered, and are still suffering, under the suppression of the American prison system."

People on the outside will remember Attica on Sept. 13 as well: a watershed event in a turbulent period of American history, the uprising and subsequent massacre produced big headlines and moral outrage as Americans got a rare look at the realities of their criminal justice system. Commemorative ceremonies are planned in New York City, Buffalo, N.Y., Washington D.C., and Ann Arbor, MI.

But as liberals, shocked by the brutality of the state that was exposed in the Attica massacre, gear up to commemorate the uprising that left in its wake a trail of guilty consciences, bleeding hearts and reformist promises, prisoners in contact with MIM have one message for the would-be reformers: nothing's changed.

"On the question of the Attica uprising, it's the same situation over and over. Just the time and place are the only differences," a midwest prisoner writes.

Liberals vow reform

In 1972, the New York State Special Commission on Attica, appointed to investigate the slaughter, concluded, among other things, that overcrowding, inhumane conditions, and lack of educational and other rehabilitative programs were at the root of the uprising.

"If the state is to take seriously its stated commitment to rehabilitation, and not custody alone, dramatic innovation is inescapably necessary," the Commission said in its report, hailed by the New York Times as a "superb document, sweeping in scope ... an urgent call for correctional reform."(1)

Some of the reforms recommended by the Commission and other liberal crusaders may have filtered into the prison system over the last 20 years. There may well be more "rehabilitation" programs and the pretense of more prisoner input into how the institutions are run. There may be more job training, and more intricate grievance procedures.

Certainly, the Department of Corrections (DOC) and some reformist prisoners' rights groups claim to have made great strides. The New York State DOC is commemorating the Attica massacre with a special propaganda packet on the improvements it has implemented in the prison over the last two decades. A special prison tour for interested representatives of the media is also in the works.

Prisoners, on the other hand, say the system of guard brutality and miserable living conditions remains the same.

"The oppressors have gone so far as to name A-block South Africa, and they thrive on oppressing, beating and living up to the expectations that the oppressors in South Africa represent," an Attica prisoner wrote in a letter to MIM in August.

Imperialism doesn't stop for bleeding hearts

But whether or not the "dramatic innovation" called for in the aftermath of the massacre actually took place over the last 20 years is not really the point. The Attica prisoners in 1971 were not asking for the sort of reforms liberals then and now are so anxious to implement in order to make themselves feel better. The Attica prisoners recognized the criminal justice system as a powerful weapon in the arsenal of the capitalist class, and they wanted to turn that weapon on their oppressors.

"We have discovered ... the frustration of negotiating with a political system bent on genocide," the prisoners wrote in a statement smuggled out during the week following the massacre.

"Killings are being committed not only in VietNam, but in Bengla Desh, Africa and South America. Is it not so that our Declaration of Independence provides that when a government oppresses the people, they have a right to abolish it and create a new government? And we at 'Attica' and all revolutionaries across the nation are exercising that right! The time is now that all third world people acknowledge the true oppressor and expose him to the world!!"(2)

Whatever the extent of prison reform, prisoners still experience the same political repression and daily brutality that triggered the Attica uprising, because capitalism still requires prisons to perform the same function as they did 20 years ago. Indeed, as U.S. imperialism is increasingly challenged by its imperialist competitors and its Third World colonies, its internal system of repression will only become harsher.

Same repression, different decade

Direct criminal justice expenditures for state, federal and local governments in the United States totaled \$7.5 billion in 1968.(3) In 1990, federal and state prisons alone spent \$15.4 billion just to operate their existing facilities, a figure that doesn't

account for the \$35 million slated for federal prison construction, the hundreds of millions states are spending to deal with their rapidly increasing population of prisoners, or the massive expenditures on local jails.

For example, New York City allocated \$770 million on jail operations in 1991, up from \$120 million in 1981, while New York state, which has opened 27 prisons in the past seven years, will spend \$3 billion for prison operating and construction costs in fiscal year 1990-91.(4)

And in case anyone was harboring any illusions, the consistent increase in prison funding over the years hasn't been sunk into decorating prison cells. It's been spent on repression, in all its varied forms.

When the all-white staff of Attica prison guards stormed the yard on Sept. 13, several yelling "save me a nigger!" the racist, imperialist ideology underpinning America's prison system was hard to overlook.(5)

New York Times associate editor Tom Wicker, a quintessential liberal, had been invited by the prisoners to observe the events that transpired in D-Yard, and he dutifully reported, with a healthy dose of moral outrage, the blatant racism of the situation.

"Certainly, the situation in D-Yard could not be separated from the racial divisions and animosities of a society throughout whose history the black-white line had been as insurmountable as a Berlin Wall of the mind," Wicker wrote in his book-length



Stripped prisoners lined up to be run through tunnels back to their by police and prison guards.

reform

account of the uprising which he dedicated to "the dead at Attica." (6)

Correcting the racial balance has been a prime target of prison reformists over the years, wracked as they were with white guilt in the aftermath of Attica and stuck on the mistaken belief that a few more dark-skinned people in pig uniforms would somehow make things better. A whopping 2% of Attica's 600 guards are now non-white. But the color of their skin does not prevent them from beating and harassing the prisoners.

Similarly, much horror was expressed in the New York State Commission's report at the blatant exploitation of prisoners' labor reflected in their salaries of 35 cents a day or less. Yet today, after 20 years of inflation, prisoners' salaries range from 98 cents a day to \$6.35—except for the lucky (and tiny) percentage of those rented by the state to work for private industries. They get a top salary of \$25.24 a day.

But the most telling comparison of the present with the past is that the prisoners that populate the Attica of 1991 are pulled from the same class and the same oppressed nations as were those behind the prison's bars in 1971. Although there are no available statistics on the income level of Attica prisoners, their educational level—a fairly accurate barometer of class—has remained virtually the same over the last 20 years. DOC statistics show that 80% of the 1971 prison population had not completed high school, compared with

77% in 1991. And the percentage of prisoners from oppressed nations within Amerika still far exceeds their corresponding proportion in the U.S. population: in 1971, 64% of the prisoner population were oppressed nationalities, compared with 81% today. The only difference over the last two decades is that even less whites are being locked up in Attica.

Not surprisingly, Amerika's capitalist ruling class has continued to identify its enemies as the poor and the members of its internal colonies. The U.S. prison population has more than tripled since 1970 to its current peak of more than one million.

Twenty years later, the capitalists have not lost sight of the benefits of keeping a substantial number of people from these groups incarcerated.

"Every prison is Attica."

"That the explosion occurred first at Attica was probably chance," the New York State Commission wrote in its report. "But the elements for replication are all around us. Attica is every prison; and every prison is Attica." (7)

Such stirring words were meant to inspire—and did, in fact, inspire—a wave of reform that would prevent the replication they foretold. But the level of violence in the prison system today reflects the failure of reform efforts. The Commission's warning still holds true, as does the warning they didn't utter. Just as the conditions that caused the Attica prisoners to rise up still exist, so do the conditions that caused the state to shoot them down. And it happens all the time.

Despite the lack of revolutionary support on the outside, or perhaps because of that lack of support, prisoners still resort to

risking their lives by staging rebellions and protests in attempts to resist and change their oppressive conditions.

According to the New York state DOC, 2,849 Attica staff members were involved in "unusual incidents" from 1985-1990, more than 15% of whom reported some sort of injury related to the "incident." For example, MIM Notes 43 and 44 reported on the May 1990 murder of Attica prisoner James Charles, as well as the prisoner protest and guard retaliation that followed.

Nationally, the frequency of prison uprisings also remains high. The June 1991 edition of Corrections Compendium lists 138 "inmate riots or disturbances" in the state and federal prison systems between 1988 and 1990, most involving well over 100

prisoners.

Although there are many examples of recent uprisings that demonstrate the failure of two decades of prison reform, the May 1991 uprising at Southport Correctional Facility, another New York state prison, is particularly compelling in its almost eerie echo of the Attica script on a smaller scale.

Southport prisoners seized control of a prison yard, took hostages, issued a set of grievances and demands for more humane conditions, and called in media observers. The prison administration negotiated with them for a day, then called in the state troopers to retake the prison by force. (8) And, following the pattern of events at Attica, prisoners involved in the protest were subjected to severe retaliation after the T.V. teams left. (9)

A report issued in June by the Prisoners' Legal Services of New York states:

"It is clear that just as in the aftermath of the Attica uprising, 20 years ago, no plans were made for the provision of appropriate medical care or other necessary services following the ending of the uprising, resulting in much needless suffering by inmates who had nothing to do with the disturbance." (10)

At Attica, immediately following the massacre, prisoners were forced to strip and run through a gauntlet as guards beat them with nightsticks. In the weeks following, they were burned, beaten, shot and denied medical care. (11)

At Southport, prisoners were beaten, denied medical care, forced to live in grossly unsanitary conditions and submit to several other forms of abuse in the weeks following last May's uprising. (12)

Unfortunately, Prisoners' Legal Services, an organization formed as a result of the Attica uprising, confined itself to the same sort of reformist conclusions in its report on Southport as the New York state commission did in its report on Attica: more educational services, better medical care, expanded visitation rights, etc.

Liberals and reformers who intend to use the 20th anniversary of the Attica uprising to push for more reforms or celebrate those that have already been made would do well to look at where reforms have gotten prisoners over the last 20 years.

"These brothers whose lives were taken by Rockefeller [ex-New York governor] and his agents did not die in vain. Why?" the Attica prisoners wrote in their statement following the massacre.

"Because the uprising in Attica did not start here nor will it end here!" (13)

To continue the revolutionary struggle that the Attica prisoners were a part of, those both outside and inside the walls must adopt a revolutionary strategy. Twenty years later, that much should be glaringly clear to those who would like to count themselves in solidarity with the Attica prisoners and the prison struggles that continue today.

Notes:

1. Attica: The Official Report of the New York State Special Commission on Attica, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1972, p. 8.
2. Berkeley Tribe Vol. 6, no. 8, Oct. 1-7, 1971.
3. Op. cit. 1, p. xxiii.
4. The Correctional Association of New York
5. The Nation 3/25/91, p. 364.
6. Tom Wicker, *A Time to Die*, New York Times Book Co., New York, 1975, p. 146.
7. Op. cit. 1, p. xii.
8. MIM Notes 54.
9. MIM Notes 55.
10. Southport 1991: Conditions Before and After the Uprising, A Report By Prisoners' Legal Services of New York, June 24-26, 1991. For a copy, write to: PLS, 102 W. Street, Ithaca, New York, 14850.
11. Op. cit. 1, p. 443.
12. Op. cit. 9.
13. Op. cit. 2.

wants to come in.

12:00 p.m. State police assume attack positions outside the yard.

2:00 p.m. Oswald visits the yard. He is given a list of demands, including improved living conditions, payment of minimum wage for prison labor, passage to a non-imperialist country for those who wanted it, and amnesty.

Sept. 10, 1971: 33 observers visit D-Yard twice, speak with prisoners and prison officials. With Oswald, the observers draw up a compromise document. It does not include amnesty. News that prison guard William Quinn, injured during the takeover and surrendered by the prisoners so that he could get medical care, has died leaves prisoners at risk of the death penalty without the promise of amnesty. They reject the compromise proposal.

Sept. 12: Observers plead with Governor Rockefeller to come to Attica. Commissioner Oswald issues a statement to prisoners telling them to release the hostages and continue negotiating on "neutral ground." Observers visit the yard again. Rockefeller refuses to come.

Sept. 13: 7:40 a.m. Oswald reads an ultimatum to the prisoners, telling them to release the hostages and "join with me in restoring order to the facility." He demands a reply within the hour. The prisoners discuss the ultimatum. Only one speaks in favor of accepting it. In an effort to forestall the impending assault, the prisoners bring eight blindfolded hostages to the catwalks. Eight prisoners stand behind them with knives at their throats.

9:45 a.m. State troopers drop gas on D-Yard from helicopter. A task force of 211 state troopers begin firing from the roofs. After five minutes of heavy fire, 32 prisoners and 10 hostages lie dead or dying. Hundreds are wounded.

Afternoon. Prison guards regain control of the prison and begin to torture the prisoners, some in public, some in private. Frank "Big Black" Smith, a leader of the uprising, describes the aftermath of the massacre in a television documentary: "They ripped our clothes off. They made us crawl on the ground like we were animals... And they lay me on a table, and they beat me in my testicles. And they burned me with cigarettes and dropped hot shells on me... They set up a gauntlet in the hallway and they broke glass up in the middle of the hallway and they made people run through the gauntlet. They had police on each side with the clubs they call nigger sticks and they was beating people."

October 1971: The New York State Special Commission on Attica releases its report calling for massive reform of the prison system. "With the exception of the Indian massacres in the late nineteenth century, the State Police assault which ended the four-day prison uprising was the bloodiest one-day encounter between Americans since the Civil War," the Commission said.

Sources:

- Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson, Bantam Books, New York, 1970.
Erik Ottin Wright, *The Politics of Punishment*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1973.
Attica: The Official Report of the New York State Special Commission on Attica, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1972.
Eyes on the Prize, video from Blackside Productions, 1990.
Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, editors, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*, Bantam Books, New York, 1990.



ills; during this process they were repeatedly clubbed and beaten

Uprising leader: 'The state learned from Attica, too.'

The class-action suit brought by the Attica prisoners against former New York State Correction Commissioner Russell Oswald, former Superintendent Vincent Mancusi and former Assistant Deputy Superintendent Karl Pfeil—held up in America's "justice" system for 17 years—is scheduled to come to trial late this month in Buffalo, N.Y.

Although a federal judge ruled in 1988 that the estate of former New York state governor Nelson Rockefeller could not be held accountable for the massacre he ordered, the surviving prisoners will try this month to convict the three remaining defendants of their crimes during the aftermath of the massacre—such as standing by while hundreds of inmates were beaten and brutalized, and failing to provide adequate medical care for the prisoners gunned down and gassed by state troopers and guards.

Akil Aljundi, a former Attica prisoner injured in the state's assault on D-Yard, is the chief plaintiff in the suit. MC67 spoke with Aljundi by phone last month. Below is a partial transcript of the interview.

MIM: What is your hope for the outcome of the trial?

Aljundi: We never put our trust in the judicial system, but we feel we have one of the best suits that's been put together, and if we can put forth our side of the case, I think the jury will find them guilty.

MIM: The New York State special commission that investigated the circumstances around the uprising concluded that poor conditions such as overcrowding and idleness were the motivation behind the uprising. Is that the case? Would easing overcrowding and improving conditions have prevented the uprising from taking place?

Aljundi: I don't think overcrowding or

idleness were any two factors for what happened on September the ninth, 1971 at Attica. And I don't see how less overcrowding could solve anything. A couple of months ago they had an incident that happened here at another prison near Elmira, New York [Southport prison] and one of the questions that came up there was a question of overcrowdedness.

See, overcrowdedness tends to be an easy way out for some folks to look at stuff as opposed to having to deal with the real conditions that affect prisoners and inmates. So instead of really dealing with the problem which calls for people to do something concretely, they say, oh, overcrowdedness. If you keep saying overcrowdedness it allows for certain legislators to allocate more money for the building of more jails and more prisons. And once you build a prison or a jail you must populate it, so more people get taken off the street, as opposed to dealing with the real problem.

MIM: Do the same problems exist in the prison system today as existed at Attica in 1971?

Aljundi: In a lot of ways it's gotten worse. What has happened is the state has had an opportunity to learn off of Attica, so they've adopted measures that are more repressive and in a lot of cases they've given prisoners things that look like panaceas, you know, quick-solution stuff which basically is to keep people from stating what the problems really are. So nothing has really gotten better. There are more prisoners in prison, more younger prisoners than before, people are growing up with more time, less people are getting released from prisons, and they have to fend for themselves when they get out—the prison counselors are certainly not finding jobs for anybody.

MIM: Could Attica happen again



Prisoner negotiating committee with Commissioner Russell Oswald in D-Yard, Sept. 9. Standing from left: Frank "Big Black" Smith (with sunglasses), Roger Cahmpen, and Elliot Barkley. Barkley, 21, was shot in the back by a single round from a state police .270 rifle during the assault. He died in D-Yard.

today?

Aljundi: At any time, prior to Attica and since Attica, any prison can go up.

MIM: In Peru, several years ago, the government massacred several hundred prisoners who were members of the Maoist party there, known as the Sendero Luminoso. But at the same time, Sendero has taken over several prisons, and freed hundreds of prisoners. That may be a far cry from what can happen today in the United States, but it's something to think about if you have a strong organization on the outside.

Aljundi: Yeah, sadly, we're not at that stage in the United States. See I think that a lot of that should be credited to the role of COINTELPRO. [The FBI's counterintelligence program against groups and individuals deemed subversive and dangerous to the United States government—MC11]. At one time there was a strong prison movement in the United States, and that movement was as strong as the respective move-

ments outside were. Not to say that there aren't some strong movements now. But I think what's happened is the state has become more sophisticated, they've got a better grasp on some of us, they've done more intelligence, more investigations, and they've set up a lot of obstacles.

So we are not as sophisticated in the United States on a lot of levels as we should be. Not to say that we won't be, but we currently aren't. I know we can learn from the lessons of other forces outside the country. We just haven't got to that stage yet. At one time we thought we were getting close to that, but we're not there now.

MIM: What lessons should be drawn from the Attica uprising?

Aljundi: Never trust the state. Always be prepared to look for the worst to happen. Be firm in your demands. Be clear in your objectives. But also realize that the state can be vicious.

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One central weakness of Attica stands out: the general absence of prisoner organization until after the uprising was accomplished. Of course people sometimes erupt into spontaneous and violent resistance to their oppressors—who can blame them? But if the object is to win, as it must be, then political action should be organized and disciplined and guided by advanced political theory. And when these things exist, it is not necessary to resort to such self-destructive tactics as those used at Attica.

The high degree of political consciousness possessed by the Attica rebels is reflected in their demand for transportation to a non-imperialist country. Yet, either because of a lack of patience or allowing unfolding events to get ahead of them, they did not build any formal organization prior to the revolt. With the necessary organization and theory, they could have organized themselves, then other state institutions, developed outside support networks, and otherwise set the stage for a long-term mass struggle.

Naturally it is easier to view past events from the comfortable perspective of hindsight than it is to actually participate in a complex experience like the uprising at Attica. Nothing said here should be construed to detract from the strong spirit of the comrades who made those terrible sacrifices in D-Yard. But since Attica did happen, future generations of prisoners can learn from the experience. The Attica cons went too far, too fast; moving without taking the time to build a broad base of support. The state's response was to ruthlessly smash these budding efforts to resist, a job that was made easier through the exploitation of prisoners' weaknesses.

As mentioned earlier, this Sept. 12 marks the twentieth year since the massacre at Attica, an anniversary that

should be honored by prisoners everywhere. These 20 years have not been good ones in terms of progress for prisoners. Dozens of prisons have experienced riots and hostage takings during this period; most of which ended in the loss of prisoner lives (either by their captors or, as in the case of New Mexico, at the hands of their fellow prisoners). There is little to indicate that the lessons of Attica have been learned, let alone internalized.

As a result, the situation today is far worse in most respects than it was then. There is no decent level of outside support. Prisoners are not organized by institution, let alone on a statewide or national level. And the current degree of political sophistication on the inside is shallow at best; in most joints downright reaction reigns supreme. It doesn't appear as if this will change any time soon.

Who is to blame for today's material conditions? If one puts the finger on opportunist leadership they would probably not be far off the mark. But a more important question to ask is where to go from here? This writer has not run across anyone with all the answers. Still, a few general lessons can be drawn from past experience.

The advocates of "off the pigs" and "burn it to the ground" should have their perspectives examined in the light of reality. They burned McAlester down in the early 70s, but has that improved the lot of prisoners there? No! The same for New Mexico. Prisoners in those joints are still overcrowded, degraded, powerless, and no nearer to making forward progress. Similarly, prisoners in California have been killing guards (when they aren't busy murdering each other) for years without any substantial change resulting from it. Instead of acts against low-level flunkies or quickly replaced prison property, people should prepare for the long-range struggle that lies ahead.

One area of important work that can be done now is the

formulation of study groups aimed at deepening our understand of progressive political theory. Prisoners' Legal News will soon be offering books on the philosophy of dialectical and historical materialism. Unlike organizing on the inside, studying politics in an area of activity protected by the First Amendment. Building such study groups will be an important step for those who would hope to pick up and carry the banner of Attica.

MC11 adds: MIM agrees with the author's analysis: as a Maoist revolutionary party, we follow the strategy of building public opinion through forums like study groups and this newspaper in order to create a broad base of support for revolution. We struggle with people on the outside over many of the same issues the author raises—both those who want to take up arms immediately, despite the inevitability of defeat, and those who waste time trying to reform the oppressive system rather than preparing to overthrow it.

But MIM takes the author's assertion of the need for political education and organization a step further—we contend that such activities need to take place under the guidance of a revolutionary party in order to be effective in working for revolution. A study of the history of attempts at revolution shows that in addition to having a mass base of support, the leadership of a communist party is necessary to achieve success. The party also distributes books by Marx, Lenin and Mao free to prisoners.

This article, written by a Washington state prisoner, will be published in the September issue of Prisoners' Legal News, a monthly newsletter written and produced by prisoners that contains valuable information and analysis on prisons. For subscriptions to PLN, write to P.O. Box 1684, Lake Worth, FL 33460.