

An Alternative to the SHU

While campaigning to abolish Security Housing Units in prisons, people frequently ask us, “What’s your alternative?” This question usually comes from people who know that there is a lot of violence in prisons. So they argue that the SHU provides security to help avoid petty confrontations.

In practice however, it is the prison system and the Correctional Officers who promote and even create violent situations rather than preventing them. This is the product of a system that is set up to be every man for himself, where snitching is rewarded and violence is promoted as the way to solve problems. It’s the same old divide-and-conquer technique. When the people in an institution are there against their will, facing repression and inhumane conditions, the minority running the institution doesn’t want them organizing against their captors.

When addressing the question of abolishing the SHU we have to make it clear that MIM is not a reformist organization. We are fighting this campaign within the context of overthrowing the whole system and replacing the current criminal injustice system with justice for the people. Our goal is to transform society to eliminate the social causes of crime. Our long-term answer to the question of what to do with violent criminals is to build a system of re-education, reform and reintroduction to society for those who previously posed a threat to society.

In the short term we must fight to limit the oppression of the current system and abolishing the SHU is part of that fight. We know that the SHU is used for political repression. We know that everyone in the SHU suffers mentally and physically regardless of why they are in there. Therefore we often point out to those who are reluctant to sign our petition to abolish the SHU that these people are usually going to get out of prison some day and will only be more maladjusted than when they entered as a result of the isolation and torture they faced. Prisons can be made safer under the current system, but this goes counter to the interests of the prison administration to keep power over the imprisoned. Therefore until the proletariat decides who goes to prison and how the prison system is used there will be torture and violence in prisons.

When it does come time to build a new justice system in the interests of the people, we look toward the model of the prison system in socialist China (i.e. China under Mao). People who were successfully reformed through that system include two Amerikan students (Allyn and Adele Rickett) and the last Emperor of the Manchu dynasty, Pu Yi. All three of them have written about their experiences and provide some great insights into the socialist prison system. In our review of the Ricketts’ book, *Prisoners of Liberation*, we wrote, “a psychological approach to antisocial behavior takes agency away from the individual and the masses, and has as its goal teaching people to learn to adjust to their oppressive conditions (or their role as an oppressor) rather than struggling for political change.”⁽³⁾ Individualism leads bourgeois society to use psychology to explain and then treat crime rather than the sociological viewpoint of class struggle. By focusing on the societal sources of humyn problems we can actually eliminate their source.

The difference between our plan for prisons and the current prison system is that we see prisons as a means of re-education not punishment. When we bring up re-education under socialism suddenly liberals get indignant. This violates their individualist value system that considers people static rather than ever-changing products of society and their own experience. Because re-educating people to interact better with other people is taboo in Amerika, we are left with the option of punishment to deal with those who don’t play the game or who aren’t allowed to play.

Curiously, isolation and physical torture do not provoke the same indignation from many liberals as any mention of ‘re-education’ does. This can largely be explained by the fact that it is oppressed nations who are disproportionately suffering at the hand of the current punitive system. Especially in extreme instances of repression like the SHU we see the targeting of Black nationalists, Spanish speakers, members of lumpen organizations like B.L.O.O.D. or ALKQN, or others whose behavior is outside the norm set by white society. Meanwhile the biggest criminals in the world are living it up within U.\$. borders with no fear of reprisal by the current system. To talk about replacing this system with one that reeducates people to work together in a socialist economy turns the tables, making white Amerikans the biggest target. While the Black man selling rock on the street will be quick to give it up for a means of supporting himself by building his community rather than destroying it, the white man making millions by allowing that product to enter the country in the first place will be a lot more reluctant to change his ways. And he sure as hell doesn’t want the economy socialized.

But some people are just crazy

We often hear this line on the streets. Certainly it is prevalent in the bourgeois media. It may be true that some mentally ill people commit crimes because of their illness. But to quote the band Propagandhi, “Ordinary people do fucked up things when fucked up things become ordinary.” In other words, behavior is relative to the material conditions of a society.

We can say with certainty that the vast majority of people who have committed crimes against other people are not crazy and can be reformed. Evidence that crime can be largely eliminated can be seen in a comparison of violent crimes committed in the world today. Americans are willing to accept the idea that there are all these incorrigible crazies out there because our society has succeeded in creating excessive violence in individuals and the media turns around and feeds that to the populace as a scare tactic. A quick glance at an American prison yard will tell you something is not right when the vast majority of the people are not white, while white people still make up a majority of the US population. Unless one is a racist then one must admit that there are social factors involved in who goes to prison.

The same individualism that leads people to be more concerned about some static idea of identity than about physical abuse and mental torture is what allows people to act against the norms and interests of the society that they live in. Communists favor class struggle over the psychological approach. For example, “Rather than giving moralizing sermons, China strove to create in individuals a social conscience.”(3) In this way we can combat all sorts of social ills, from drug addiction and eating disorders to violence and other neuroses. Rather than brushing these problems under the rug, by trying to lock their victims up in prison and isolate them, we can involve those people in building a better society so that they understand the importance of their lives and the negative effects of their former behaviors.(3)

A prerequisite to eliminating antisocial behavior is to accept that we in fact live in a society that sets norms for how we behave. In fact, much of what is labeled ‘antisocial behavior’ in our society today is actually encouraged by our society; it does not exist because of some innate human characteristics. Americans look at how they think and see that their friends think the same. They’ve all been taught by the same school system, the same media, the same culture. And then they assume that that is how all people behave at all times. As Mao said, “what [petty-bourgeois intellectuals] call human nature is nothing but bourgeois individualism.”(4)

So for all who want to know what our alternative to the SHU is, it is building a communist society where no one has power over other people, where people see their importance as a part of a society rather than seeing every person as an island, and where social problems are addressed and reconciled rather than repressed and locked away to fester.

Notes:

1. *MIM Theory 9: Psychology and Imperialism, p. 39*
2. *MT9, p.36*
3. *For more on this read “Psychological Practice in the Chinese Revolution” in MT9*
4. *Mao Zedong, “Yenan Forum on Art and Literature,” in Selected Works, op. cit., Volume 4, p.90*

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