

# Control Units and Torture Devices in US Prisons

by **Bonnie Kerness**,  
American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)  
and **Laura Williams**,  
Revolutionary Anti-Imperialist League (RAIL) -  
Ann Arbor

On March 20, RAIL held a teach-in on the u.s. criminal injustice system to kick off a week of events to educate about and organize opposition to the prisons system. Bonnie Kerness of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Prisons Project in New Jersey delivered the keynote speech. Much of this article is taken from Ms. Kerness' talk; additional information comes from both of our organizations' work with prisoners and our own and other activists' research. Check out RAIL's website at <http://www.etext.org/Politics/MIM/rail/rail.html> for the full text of Ms. Kerness' speech.

Bonnie Kerness has been a human rights advocate on behalf of prisoners in the United States for the past 22 years. She coordinates the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons, which monitors conditions and treatment in the Super-maximum security prisons in this country. Twenty-two years ago she would have denied any implication of torture in the United States. She would have denied the notion of US political prisoners. She would have denied any notion of a prison system that looks suspiciously like the system of slavery when one studies it in any depth. However, since Ms. Kerness began organizing with prisoners, she's seen too much proof for herself (or anyone) to deny these truths anymore.

In 1996, The World Organization Against Torture asked Ms. Kerness to sit on their Board of Directors and contribute to their report 'Torture in the United States - the Status of Compliance by the US Government with the International Convention Against Torture.' Reading the Convention Against Torture (CAT) and daily mail from prisoners and their advocates, there is no doubt that the US uses devices of torture with impunity. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, The World Organization Against Torture and Prison Watch Internationale (out of Paris) cite a persistent and widespread pattern of human rights violations in the USA. This is one of only two countries that have failed to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. (The other is Somalia, which has no recognized government.) It has failed to ratify that Convention because of the clause that prohibits the death penalty for children.

## Permanent Repression - Quelling Political Dissent

In control Unit prisons - or Supermaxes, because they are the highest security prisons in the u.s. - prisoners may be allowed into a bare concrete yard for exercise twice a week for an hour and a half. They may be allowed one five-minute, monitored phone call per day, or one call every three months, or no calls at all. Mail and reading material are censored. When prisoners leave their cages, they are strip-searched. This often includes a pointedly humiliating anal probe. They are shackled around their waists and handcuffed. Prisoners say that they remain constantly on the alert for their own mental and physical deterioration.

Research of the Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons has led activists to believe that approximately 10 per cent of the U.S. prison population lives in extended enforced isolation. The reports

coming in about the use of devices of torture have largely been from isolation units where there are few witnesses. In New Jersey, prisoner Ojore Lutalo has been held in the Management Control Unit in total isolation since February 4, 1986. He is let out for an hour and a half every other day. Ruchell Magee lived under these conditions in California for more than 20 years. Russell Shoats has been living in various Pennsylvania isolation units for 17 years.

Many of us trace the development of control units to the tumultuous years of the civil rights movement when many activists found themselves in US prisons. Sensory deprivation as a form of behavior modification was used extensively with imprisoned members of the Black Panther Party, Black Liberation Army formations, people fighting for Puerto Rican independence and white radicals. In later years we found jailhouse lawyers, Islamic militants and prisoner activists placed in extended isolation. Right now, another population filling the isolation cells is youth of color imprisoned as a result of racist crack-cocaine laws.

Jose Lopez organizes the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Prisoners of War and Political Prisoners. In October Dr. Lopez told RAIL that the 1968 Kerner Commission report - designated by President Johnson to explain the urban rebellions of the 1960s - contained grave implications for imprisonment of the internal colonies in this country: "The commission attempted to study the riots of the 60s, which was its purpose. [But] a riot is a spontaneous occurrence, a rebellion has a level of consciousness, and the Kerner Commission really focused on that and said look, there was a level of consciousness.

"What was happening in America was a reflection of what was happening across the world which were movements of national liberation. These movements of national liberation created a state of permanent insurgency, that the only way you could deal with this was to create a process of permanent state repression. When you look at prisons in this country, prisons are a form of permanent counterinsurgency."

## Torture in the USA: "Pain and Suffering, Inflicted to Punish, Coerce"

Some of the most poignant letters received at the AFSC Prisons Project offices are from those writing on behalf of mentally ill prisoners - like Frank Hunter, a mentally ill prisoner in a New Jersey isolation unit who was tortured to death. The guards would make Frank perform sexual acts on himself in order for him to get food or cigarettes. Article 1 of the U.N. Convention Against Torture prohibits "physical or mental pain and suffering, inflicted to punish, coerce or discriminate for any reason." Practices such as the indefinite use of shackles, involuntary administration of dangerous chemical treatments, or extended isolation put the US in violation of United Nations Treaties and Covenants, which it has signed.

A mentally ill prisoner from Texas wrote to Ms. Kerness: "I was sprayed with so much gas that I lost consciousness. I was kept naked this way for 8 or more hours." This type of treatment is frighteningly familiar to Shirley Stuve, a local advocate for the mentally ill in prison who addressed the teach-in before Bonnie Kerness spoke. Mrs. Stuve organizes with the Alliance for the Mentally Ill (AMI) and has a 35-year old son in prison in Michigan. Her son is in prison for a sex crime that he committed while unable to obtain medical care for his mental illness. When she dared to speak out for her son, Mrs. Stuve was warned that her advocacy would only "make it worse for him." But thanks to her advocacy, her son now has the care he needs, one and a half years later. Most prisoners do not have such advocacy on the outside. Yet Mrs. Stuve argues that if mentally ill and substance abusing prisoners were released into correct care the prison population would be cleared out by 75% or more.

Prisoners' self-reports of deteriorating mental health resulting from extended isolation are also very disturbing. So much so that it is often other prisoners who write, appalled at the treatment of the mentally ill in the cages near them. They report mentally ill prison-

ers' head banging or ceaseless screaming often with no attention being given to them other than overuse of psychotropic drugs.

Every day we see racially-based application of the death penalty, physical abuse of women in prisons and the mentally ill, involuntary human scientific experimentation and violation of children's rights. We see this country using - and exporting the products of - prison labor, people dying under privatized medical care and shocking treatment of people being held in INS detention centers. While specific conditions in isolation prisons vary, the goal of these units is clearly to disable prisoners through physical, psychological or spiritual breakdown.

Dr. Stuart Grassian is one expert on the psychological effects of living in extended isolation. He talks about interviewing people who cut themselves in order to feel something. He speaks of the panic attacks prisoners in solitary endure and their progressive inability to tolerate ordinary stimulation. Isolation has been documented as a cause of paranoia, problems with impulse control, delusions, restlessness, suspiciousness, confusion and depression. Ojore Lutalo once wrote asking Ms. Kerness "how does one go about articulating desperation to another who is not desperate? How does one go about articulating that people are waiting for me to self-destruct? I did not do anything to deserve this..."

## Criminal Injustice in the Prison-Industrial Complex

Some say that the criminal justice system doesn't work because it is non-rehabilitative. I've come to believe exactly the opposite - that it works perfectly as a matter of both economic and political policy. Prisons are one of the largest growth industries in the United States today; they are the single largest growth industry in Michigan. The Prison Industrial complex now houses more than 1.8 million people in state and federal prisons. That number is not reflective of children's facilities, immigration detention centers or municipal lockups. There is no way to take the prisons or the wider criminal justice system in the US outside the context of colonialism and white supremacy. There is often little hesitation on the part of Departments of Corrections to acknowledge that guards who are Klan members run certain prisons.

Efforts to expand the solitary confinement population are based on overall expansion of the prisons system. Corrections personnel report that the nation-wide move to expand the use of isolation is fostered loosely by the guard unions. These unions are now contributing heavily to the political campaigns of law and order candidates. Guards reportedly feel that these types of units provide a safe working environment. Isolation units also provide them with a place in which to engage in unwitnessed torture. For her advocacy, the California Department of Corrections has named Ms. Kerness as a subversive. RAIL's and MIM's correspondence with prisoners is consistently tampered with and censored by prisons in all states.

The wall of silence that's been built around prisons and prisoners has to be broken down. We need to develop a popular understanding of what is happening in this country's justice system and make it relevant to the public. We need to put a human face on those people living so alarmingly out of our sight. We need to call for a zero tolerance of brutality policy. Work on these issues is particularly important because the US is exporting not only the concept of extended isolation, but the devices of torture as well.

We can raise awareness and understanding of what is going on inside this country's prisons by publishing our own and prisoners' views and research on the criminal injustice system; by organizing with prisoners in support of MIM's Free Books for Prisoners Program; and by working with the Prisoners' Legal Clinic - a Serve the People program staffed wholly by prisoners.

RAIL will be raising awareness of educational issues in prisons at the University of Michigan May, 1999 graduation. Contact us to find out more about this and other projects. Send email to [railaa@mim.org](mailto:railaa@mim.org) or call 734-930-6452. ☑

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