Prisoners occupy Attica Correctional Facility for just treatment, 1971

- an example of paradox of repression [1]
- local community or neighborhood-level campaign [2]

Timing
9 September 1971
to:
13 September 1971

Location and Goals
Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Attica, New York
Location Description: Attica Prison
View Location on Map
Goals:
Prisoners campaigned for a host of issues, ranging from dietary demands to sentence amnesty.

Methods
Methods in 1st segment:

- 029. Symbolic reclamations
- 064. Withdrawal from social institutions

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 029. Symbolic reclamations
- 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
- 102. Prisoners' strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 199. Nonviolent confinement

Methods in 3rd segment:
• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
• 029. Symbolic reclamations
• 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
• 102. Prisoners' strike
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 4th segment:

• 029. Symbolic reclamations
• 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
• 102. Prisoners' strike
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 5th segment:

• 029. Symbolic reclamations
• 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
• 102. Prisoners' strike
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 6th segment:

• 029. Symbolic reclamations
• 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
• 102. Prisoners' strike
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 179. Alternative social institutions

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 199. Nonviolent confinement

Notes on Methods:
The nature of the holding of hostages is not clear from sources. In the beginning of the campaign the confinement of prison guards was nonviolent and protective, with an apparent absence of threats of physical harm. This justifies a classification of the method as "nonviolent confinement" in the 2nd segment. However, by the end of the campaign the well-being of the guards was threatened when inmates held them using knives. It is not clear when this transition occurred.

Segment Length:
Approximately 16 hours

Classifications
Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Economic Justice
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity
Group characterization:

- Inmates of Attica Prison

**Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:  
Members of the Attica Liberation Faction, politically radical inmates

Partners:  
The Observation/Negotiating Committee

External allies:  
Black Panther Party, prisoners throughout the U.S.

Involvement of social elites:  
The Observation/Negotiating Committee was comprised of a number of social elites, including national and state congressman and well-respected journalists

**Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Attica prisoners

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Sympathetic outside individuals

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Observation Committee

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:  
Approximately 16 hours

**Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:  
U.S. President Richard Nixon, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Corrections Commissioner Russell Oswald, Attica Warden Vincent Mancusi

Nonviolent responses of opponent:  
Not known

Campaigner violence:  
Many guards were injured--some seriously--by protesting inmates in the initial takeover of the prison, before a cohesive strategy was developed for the occupation. Two guards were injured on the morning of the 13th with minor knife wounds to the neck, though there is speculation these injuries occurred when the inmates holding
the knives were gunned down by State forces, and occurred unintentionally.

While at certain points inmates definitively held guards hostages with the threat of injurious force, at others their confinement was protective. Their treatment also varied from situation to situation.

William Quinn died as a result of his injuries from the takeover.

Repressive Violence:
State forces brutally repressed the Attica uprising with tear gas and hundreds of rounds of live ammunition, killing 29 inmates and wounding 89 more. Many were subjected to beatings by guards in the aftermath of the occupation, with some targeted specifically for their roles. Many faced legal actions as a result, though most charges were dropped.

**Success Outcome**
Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
0 points out of 6 points
Survival:
0.5 points out of 1 point
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points
Total points:
3.5 out of 10 points
Notes on outcomes:
While protesters' demands were not met, they managed to hold negotiations with key targets, and in the long-term, negative coverage of Attica increased media attention on violence in U.S. prisons, leading to public pressure calling for reforms and, more than likely, at least some material improvements for Attica prisoners post-1971. Attica also managed to make prison reform a national issue, drawing condemnation of police and state brutality.

*Editor's Note:* We recognize that the inclusion of this case in a database of nonviolent action may be controversial because of the campaigner violence at certain points during the campaign. However, we have concluded that the campaigner violence was minimal under the circumstances. We also believe that the inclusion of this largely nonviolent campaign will offer strategic lessons on the use of nonviolence in similar struggles. Many prisoners campaigns in this database have been focused around the method of the hunger strike. The use of additional nonviolent methods by prisoners beyond the hunger strike in this case further motivates us to include it here, despite the level of campaigner violence. We hope that the reader will come to their own conclusions about the effectiveness of both the violent and nonviolent methods utilized in this case.

Prisoners across the United States had been engaging in nonviolent direct action in the weeks before a group in Attica moved to occupy their New York maximum-security penitentiary in the fall of 1971. On 22 August, inmates sporting black armbands held a silent fast in mourning of George Jackson, a politically radical activist killed by guards while incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison in California. Jackson’s murder the day before sparked a wave of actions at prisons throughout the country, and was just one of many compounding factors leading up to the early September takeover. Despite attempts by prison officials to restrict political reading material, news of mass protests around the Vietnam War and civil rights, among a number of other issues, permeated Attica’s walls. This was partly due to the fact that racial tensions within the United States were made
particularly manifest within the prison, where 54% of the prisoners were African American and all of the guards were white.

Of most immediate concern to many inmates was State prison officials’ active disregard for laws guaranteeing rights to prisoners by federal mandate, itself a reflection of broader class and racial tensions within the larger penal system. Guards allocated each prisoner just one roll of toilet paper per month. Pork was a regular feature of meals, despite the prison’s sizable Muslim population. Inmates frequently found reading material as well as mail from friends and relatives censored by prison staff, particularly if it contained politically sensitive material. Furthermore, many inmates felt they had been illegitimately imprisoned, with many serving time for drug possession, property destruction or other property-related crimes that posed little or no threat to individuals’ welfare. An inmate-taught sociology course discussed deep injustices inside and outside of the penal system, as well as the possibilities for resisting them. Despite what may have seemed to be more pressing, prison-specific concerns, prisoners at Attica and in other prisons throughout the United States fought not only as prisoners, but as activists working in solidarity with comrades both outside their cell block walls and inside of others.

On the morning of 7 September, there were rumors that two prisoners involved in a fight the previous night would be disciplined; the details of the precipitating incident vary across sources. Most, however, state that after breakfast, guards unexpectedly moved prisoners back to their cells rather than to the recreation yards as usual. Whatever the exact incident was, hundreds of inmates in Company 5 quickly overtook guards, broke through the yard gate and into “Times Square,” the prison’s center. Prisoners quickly moved to take the rest of the cell block, and finally D-yard in what appeared to be a relatively spontaneous set of initial events. Many physically assaulted guards at the beginning of the riot, sometimes brutally. One report states that, following the attacks, a number of Muslim inmates gathered and encircled injured guards in a human chain to protect them from further violence. Prisoners requested medical attention for one severely injured guard, William Quinn, but authorities failed to answer their call for several hours.

By the end of the morning, prisoners were occupying B and D blocks and yards, Times Square, and the facility’s catwalks and corridors, with D-yard as the locus of most activity. Guards and state police moved to regain control of what areas occupiers had left behind. An estimated 1,281 of the prison’s 2,000 inmates were participating. They had taken 43 guards hostage, in large part to protect them from brutal reprisals from other prisoners.

Participants, through elected spokesperson Rick Smith, articulated a set of 6 demands, addressed to U.S. President Richard Nixon and New York Governor Nelson D. Rockefeller. Requests ranged from basic rights already guaranteed under federal law to the hiring of more guards of color. A few were more drastic, calling for the immediate release of all inmates and, less practically, subsidized transportation to a non-imperialist country.

That afternoon, Law Professor Herman Schwartz and New York State Assemblyman Arthur Eves, whom prisoners had demanded as a preferred negotiation mediator, came to speak with inmates for a short time. They returned a few hours later with Attica’s Corrections Commissioner Russell Oswald. In July, prisoners in the Attica Liberation Faction had sent Oswald a “July Manifesto,” outlining 27 demands similar to those presented in September. They received no response, and had been pressuring Oswald throughout the summer. That night, prisoners presented Oswald with a list of 15 “Practical Proposals.” These were addressed to “The People of America” rather than Rockefeller and Nixon, and included such things as proper medical treatment, a healthier diet for inmates, and an end to guards’ censorship of prisoners’ mail.

In just a few hours, Attica inmates had taken control of a sizable portion of the prison, maintained a peaceful occupation, articulated demands, and brought a target to the negotiating table.

On Friday, 10 September, inmates elected a representative council, many by cell block (two per block) and
some by popular acclaim among participants for previous leadership. Most of those elected were young, many under the age of 22. This was not unlike other movements at the time, many of which had a strong, often driving youth presence. That evening—per inmates’ demands—33 independent observers, including Congressman Herman Badillo, author Tom Wicker, civil rights attorney William Kunstler, Amsterdam News publisher Clarence Jones, chairman of the Senate Committee on Crime and Correction John Dunne, and a representative of the Black Panther Party, arrived to hear and discuss the occupiers’ demands. Wicker took particular note of the atmosphere of racial solidarity in D-yard.

The next afternoon, a few of the observers met with Oswald to negotiate for prisoner’s demands. As a result of these negotiations, the inmates’ initial 6 demands and the 15 Practical Proposals presented later were distilled into a list of “28 Proposals Acceptable to Commissioner Oswald,” presented to and discussed—by some observers—with inmates later that day. Eventually, the proposal was rejected, with inmates continuing to demand Attica Warden Vincent Mancusi’s firing and amnesty from criminal prosecution. The latter was particularly relevant, as Attica guard William Quinn, injured in the initial takeover, had died. All prisoners involved might now be held liable for his death.

On Sunday, prisoners (via the committee of observers) requested negotiations with Governor Rockefeller, even after Commissioner Oswald’s urging. That afternoon, Oswald had issued an ultimatum to inmates and the observation committee that proposed negotiation on neutral ground and the release of guard hostages. The alternative, Oswald writes, is a violent take down of the occupation. On Monday morning, Rockefeller authorized the New York State Police and National Guard to carry out such an action from his mansion nearly 400 miles away.

At 9:46 on Monday morning, a National Guard helicopter dropped CN and CS gas on roughly 1,300 prisoners and 40 hostages. State forces on the ground began opening fire on the unarmed occupiers, tear gas clouding both sides’ vision of the other, though State forces had the benefit of gas masks. Ahead of the action, prisoners had placed 9 guard hostages on Attica’s catwalks, inmates standing behind them with knives to their necks. Minor knife wounds on two of the guards’ necks were the only other injuries to hostages since inmates had taken control of the prison on the 9th. 2200 bullets were fired in 6 minutes. 29 prisoners and 10 hostages were killed, with 89 wounded. Around 10 AM, State forces rounded up the remaining prisoners, forced them to strip naked and isolated individuals for more intense brutality, dependent on how involved they were deemed to have been in the uprising. For some, this treatment continued for days. Officials had made no arrangements to provide medical treatment to prisoners; the first medics arrived over four hours after shooting began.

In the immediate aftermath of the occupation, it was prisoners, not police, who were held responsible for the massacre at Attica. While a state panel found over 90% of inmates had been brutalized in the attack, 37 indictments were filed on 61 inmates. 63 inmates were charged for 1289 crimes. Over the next 30 years, however, a complicated legal battle was fought that gradually cleared those implicated of charges and which—in 2004—saw the 1,280 prisoners brutalized by State forces on “Bloody Monday” finally relieved of their guilt and remunerated up to $8 million in a class-action law suit.

Research Notes
Influences:

Prisoners were influenced by the work of a number of contemporary movements, from civil rights to the Vietnam War to other prisoner actions (1).
Sources:


Additional Notes:
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