



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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U.S. prisoners take control of Walpole Prison, 1973

15 March

1973

to: 18 May

1973

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Walpole, Massachusetts*

Location Description: *Walpole Prison*

Goals:

An organization based outside Walpole, the NPRA, emerged in a position of leadership among the prisoners, and its usual goals included certification as a union, minimum wages for prisoners, and safety standards. The concrete goals of the campaign during the takeover were to exercise self-determination within the prison, and to demonstrate to the media and the public that the prison itself was unnecessary.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 4th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 5th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents

- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 6th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 181. Reverse strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- prisoners

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

National Prisoners Reform Association (NPRA), Robert Dellelo (chairman of the Inmate Advisory Council and first president of the NPRA at Walpole), Ralph Hamm (vice-president)

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Black African Nations Toward Unity (BANTU), Ad Hoc Committee on Prison Reform, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), participants in Observer Program (OP), John O. Boone (Corrections Commissioner), Reverend Edward Rodman, State Representative Bill Owens, Cadet trainee guards

Involvement of social elites:

Corrections Commissioner John O. Boone

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Black African Nations Toward Unity (BANTU)
- Cadet trainee guards
- John O. Boone (Corrections Commissioner)
- Participants in Observer Program (OP)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Bill Owens
- Ed Rodman

Segment Length: 11 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Walpole's prison guards, staff, and administration (excluding Corrections Commissioner John O. Boone)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents (147)

Walkouts (098) and Professional Strike (104)

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

On May 18, guards and state police entered with guns and ammunition, bringing a violent end to the prisoners' non-violent takeover of Walpole. Dellelo was beaten heavily and confined in a separate section.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The NPRA successfully exercised self-determination within the prison, but was not successful at demonstrating to the media and the public that the prison itself was unnecessary (as shown by public pressure to reinstate guards and fire Boone)

Although the NLRC denied the NPRA's petition for union recognition, prisoners nonetheless voted to keep the NPRA as their representative body. The Observer Program (OP) was dismantled after the take-over ended.

As outside allies became involved, the campaign experienced a large amount of growth. Over the course of the campaign,

more than 1300 civilian observers came through.

Walpole was a maximum-security prison in South Walpole, Massachusetts. The campaign by prisoners under the National Prisoners Reform Association (NPRA) to take control of Walpole Prison, with support from citizen observers, formed part of a larger movement of opposition to cruelties of the prison system. At the time, prison abolition was on the agenda in U.S. society as an idea to consider. A 1971 prisoner takeover at Attica Prison acted as a lightning bolt by showing the horror of the prison yard. The NPRA emerged on a national level in this context. Initially formed in Rhode Island, it intended to form chapters in prisons throughout the country, and hoped to organize prisoners into collective-bargaining units to counterbalance the powerful guards' unions during negotiations with prison authorities. Importantly, members did not advocate for prisoners' rights. Rather, they formed a labor union, and made it clear that they were producers—workers imprisoned and exploited under the law.

Prisoners at Walpole formed an NPRA chapter led by the democratically elected interracial leadership of Ralph Hamm and Bobby Dellelo, with support from Black African Nations Toward Unity (BANTU). White and Black leadership of the NPRA made a conscious commitment to stand together. By dealing with racism, the prisoners hoped to achieve unity. With the majority of prisoners working in assignments ranging from custodial jobs such as corridor maintenance to industrial jobs in the print shop and foundry, Walpole prison was most certainly a community of laborers. The framework for the NPRA included possible labor rights goals ranging from certification as a union to minimum wages and safety standards. The Department of Correction (DOC) gave them bargaining-unit recognition. Nevertheless, the NPRA sought out official union-certification from the National Labor Relations Committee (NLRC). “If the union was indeed recognized, the prisoners would not only have the arsenal of protections afforded organized labor, they would have a framework to access institutional power” (Bissonette). However, the underlying stance of the organization was oriented towards prison abolition. When prisoners took control of Walpole Prison from March-May 1973, the concrete goals of the campaign were to exercise self-determination within the prison, and to demonstrate to the media and the public that the prison itself was unnecessary.

At Walpole, the context of the time also made possible the appointment of John O. Boone as Corrections Commissioner. Boone was a prison abolitionist who believed that prisons needed to be phased out, and by the time he arrived at Walpole, prisoners had already adopted a nonviolent strategy to fight for small concessions during a back-and-forth of strikes and lockdowns. The context also made possible the recruitment of hundreds of outside volunteers to enter the prison as observers.

Although the prisoners' campaign to take control of Walpole officially began on March 15, prior events led up to the nonviolent takeover. In December, guards denied men clean clothes, showers, and visits during a Kwanzaa lockup that lasted 2 ½ months for men in 9 and 10 Blocks. Afterwards, prisoners organized a general work strike on February 21, with the goal of the resignation of superintendent Raymond Porelle, and the allowing of 'citizen observers' to enter. On March 2, prisoners formally negotiated to end their strike in return for both goals.

Citizen observers began to enter on March 7. For more on the intervention by outside observers, see in this database “Outside observers campaign for prison reform at Walpole Prison, U.S., 1973”.

Reverend Edward Rodman, a radical young priest, told Boone that well-trained citizens documenting actions inside the prison could promote stability, and suggested that he view the observers as a third party nonviolent interventionary force. However, guards saw observers much as the prisoners did—as allies to the inmates, offering assistance for a change process in a power relationship that was shifting to the disadvantage of the guards.

The controversy emerged as a tri-polar struggle between inmates, the guards, and Boone, with the first two using nonviolent tactics to try to force Boone to go along with their opposing demands. The correctional officers union responded to the terms of settlement between prisoners and Boone and the arrival of outside observers with an unprecedented walkout and strike of their own. On March 9, when the first observers took their posts, 50 guards refused to punch in, and the entire 3 o'clock shift walked off the job.

Guards issued a strike ultimatum on March 14, when they demanded Boone's immediate removal. Those that reported to work complained about the presence of civilian observers. They resented that individuals could monitor job performance and report violations of prison regulations, and felt ganged up on by the presence of formerly incarcerated individuals. On March 15, eleven prisoners were released from 10 Block and entered the general population, and two hundred guards walked out of Walpole in an official guard strike. Guards that were normally present at all times in corridors left their positions entirely unattended. The guards' union continued to demand that Boone leave. Boone responded by suspending 150 of them for five days without pay.

The 15th marked the official start of the prisoners' campaign, because when the opportunity presented itself to takeover Walpole, concrete goals became to exercise self-determination within the prison, and to demonstrate to the media and the public that the prison itself was unnecessary. These goals differed from the earlier goals of Perelle's resignation and the arrival of outside observers, and were more radical than the NPRA's supposed framework of worker's rights.

During the time when guards staged their work stoppage, the NPRA established programs, and democratically determined policies, as part of working toward their goal to exercise self-determination within the prison. The NPRA structure included twenty committees, all accountable to the general prisoner population, to manage the hospital, the kitchen, mail distribution, educational programs, industrial production, and internal problem solving. A board of elected prisoners was set up to address any larger problems that might arise. This dispute-resolution system effectively replaced the prior arbitrary 'discipline' at the hands of the guards. Men took their own count, and elected representatives to observe the three tiers of cells from the guard's booth. Programs put together by the NPRA included a printing apprenticeship program directed at building skills and ensuring a higher wage upon exit of the prison. The union also furnished playground equipment and arranged for visits with families to take place outside. Prisoners also independently set up an Adult Prisoners Education Program that started with prisoners examining their own experience. The NPRA even took on the responsibility of admission procedures for new prisoners.

On the day that the old officers walked out, Boone recruited cadet trainee guards and put them through a training program to aid the observers in keeping the institution functioning. Unlike the guards, many cadets were young men of color who wanted to establish rapport with the prisoners and who felt responsibility to the population.

Prisoners requested more outside observers to come in and 'hold the place together.' Volunteer observers were admitted in continuous regular shifts at 7am, 3pm, and 11pm. They had been trained not to discipline, give orders, argue with the guards, or hold keys. Their role was to observe activity, report any abusive situations, and witness how the NPRA ran the prison. Although female observers were not admitted inside the prison, they acted as shift coordinators. Male observers wore identifiable armbands, and moved freely throughout all areas of prison, free to talk with and even eat with prisoners. Observers left behind daily reports, from which accurate information was to be released to the press to counterbalance false reports by the guards. Despite their purported role as 'neutral coordinators,' observers quickly became inmate advocates. As allies more and more explicitly on the side of the change process, they interviewed prisoners (but not guards) in order to document and report guards' abuses.

The inmates developed a high degree of organization. According to one observer: "When we visited Walpole, the prisoners had ended their work strike. The guards were still out. And we found a complex society at work, a society that puts out official state documents, records and printed forms, building materials, light handicrafts, license plates and 18,000 meals a day for its population...it has its workers, its employers, its organizations, its cooks, craftsmen, educators, even its artists."

Information became available about prisoners' lives before the strike. After their first week in the prison, observers compiled a list of complaints from the prisoners about prison conditions. "The prisoners described being sprayed with fire extinguishers and being left behind locked solid steel doors rather than the customary grates. Guards would cut off the electricity... deny them showers, and put things in the food" (Bissonette). Observers also documented the overmedication and denial of medical attention, noting that at times, the only way to get medical attention was to get stabbed or to slash one's wrists. As one observer reported following their shift, "It is imperative that none of the personnel formerly in Block 9 ever return. It's worth paying them to retire. The guards are the security problem."

While the NPRA bore responsibility for programs, industrial production, and conflict resolution, cadet trainee guards held the keys to the blocks. All the while, civilian observers monitored conditions and reported issues. Meanwhile, on March 22, the Boston Globe reported on NPRA's request for union-certification from the NLRC, engaging the public in a wider conversation on prison reform with questions spanning from 'Are prisoners employees?' to 'Are prisoners entitled to a fair wage?'

On March 19, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ordered guards to return to the prisons. All were mandated to undergo retraining and learn new regulations, and their presence was initially confined to security control points such as the observation deck and the visiting room. Nevertheless, guards undermined the cadets and observers, and increased tension by disrupting the prisoner count, arbitrarily changing mealtimes, and slashing tires of civilian observers.

From March 15 to May 18, the NPRA both functioned as the elected representative of the prisoners at Walpole, and was responsible for running nearly the entire institution. Prisoners ran a school, conflict resolution, and counseling, and demonstrated the inadequacy of the traditional 'correctional' workforce. During the whole time of the non-violent takeover, not a single outbreak of murder or rape occurred.

However, Governor Sargent and the public were putting pressure on Boone to regain control, put guards completely back at posts, and shut down the NPRA. Embarrassed by his perceived lack of control, Boone gave in to pressure and created a task force to determine how to reintegrate guards to Walpole, with the NPRA excluded from negotiations. Members of the task force decided on a lockup and shakedown of the prison. When NPRA attempted to negotiate with the active superintendent about the terms of the lockup, they left empty-handed, and unaware that state police had already been put on warning to enter.

On May 18, the NPRA decided to use nonviolent direct action against the imminent lockup by having prisoners prop open cell doors so that guards could not close them by remote control. Observers still in the prison recorded that it was 'quiet as a morgue.' Nevertheless, when false reports of mass destruction reached the superintendent, he called in state police. Outside allies Ed Rodman and state representative Bill Owens joined observers. After acting superintendent Walter Waitkevich commanded observers to assemble in the waiting room, guards and state police entered with guns and ammunition, and brought a violent end to the prisoners' nonviolent takeover of Walpole. Dellelo was beaten heavily and confined in a separate section.

Following rumors of a riot, state troopers and corrections officers returned again with clubs and dogs on May 20. Observers were excluded during the shakedown, and although some returned afterwards, the civilian observer program was suspended for good in July. Governor Sargent, who had initially hired Boone, fired him because he could not 'maintain a chain of command.' Although the National Labor Relations Committee (NLRC) denied the NPRA's petition for union recognition, prisoners nevertheless voted to keep the NPRA as their representative body.

Research Notes

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Additional Notes:

While chapters of the prisoners' union NPRA existed elsewhere, only at Walpole did it become a temporarily recognized bargaining unit. During the prisoner takeover of Walpole, the NPRA framed its goals in terms of labor rights. However, the underlying stance was oriented towards prison abolition. The aftermath of a 1971 prisoner takeover at Attica Prison showed the horror of the prison yard and informed the climate at the time – 39 prisoners were left dead after state police regained control. Prisoners, their families, their allies, prison administrators, legislators and advocates resolved to pursue radical reform towards prison abolition. Many hoped to depopulate prisons and involve prisoners in the public discussion on solutions to crime.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Anjali Cadambi, 18/10/2010

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