

People Need Solutions, Not More Prisons

By Ed Mead

The state of Washington, like most other states in the U.S., is on an expensive prison building binge. The state's prison population has tripled since the late '70s, yet crime rates continue to soar. The same situation exists elsewhere across the country. Californians, for example, believe that the greater the number of cells, the safer they are. Since 1980, that state's prison population has grown 300 percent. Six percent of California's general fund is spent on corrections, up from 2 percent a decade ago. Yet FBI reports say violent crime in California jumped 4.3 percent last year.

The reasons for this are varied and complex, and beyond the scope of this article. It's enough to say that there is some evidence to suggest that imprisonment may actually increase post-release criminal activity. The December 1992 issue of Corrections Today reported on a recent study done by the RAND Corporation: "RAND analysts," the article said, "recently studied a 'matched sample' of California offenders convicted of similar crimes and with similar criminal records. The two groups differed only in their sentences -- members of one group went to prison, the others received probation. After tracking the groups for three years, researchers found consistently higher re-arrest rates for offenders sentenced to prison. Drug offenders who had been incarcerated were 11 percent more likely than their probation counterparts to be criminally charged again, violent

offenders were 3 percent more likely and property offenders 17 percent more likely."

A National Academy of Sciences panel recently concluded that drug clinics do more to rehabilitate drug addicts than prison, job training does more to reduce recidivism than incarceration, and early childhood prevention programs do more than any other factor to reduce a propensity to crime. Now, in the midst of a serious recession, when every additional corrections officer may mean one fewer teacher, and every prison cell constructed may mean a crime prevention program unfunded, public education is essential to meaningful change in our approach to the crime problem.

As things stand, the people who own the news media tell the public what to think about crime and how the problem is best dealt with. The news services then "poll" citizens and discover that they believe just what they were told to think (that locking more people up for longer periods of time is the best solution). Bourgeois politicians, who pretend to be acting on behalf of the public's will, use the results of these so called polls to justify the initiation of additional prison construction and ever more draconian crime bills.

The wait for the ruling class media or bourgeois politicians to correct this disservice to public safety will be a long and unproductive one. These are the very people who profit from the construction and maintenance of prisons. The task of public education must be taken up by the kind of people who read PLN. If the community's information needs

are not being met by the kept media, as is the case with the current level of sensationalized crime reporting, then it is necessary for oppressed people themselves to fill the information vacuum.

Short term answers are so simple. We need jobs! Not alienating, low-paying, dead end work, but employment that will give us a sense of self-worth and meaning. Some years ago prisoners at this facility successfully concluded a 2½ year struggle to get personally owned computers into our cells. We had the machines for three years without a single computer-related infraction being issued. During this period many prisoners were able to train themselves in areas such as computer programming, spreadsheets, word processing, and database management. Best yet, since inmates bought the units themselves, they were able to accomplish all of this at no expense to tax payers. Today these men are working in the computer industry on the outside, paying taxes, supporting their families, and making a good living.

Then along came some reactionary prisoncrat who up and ended this productive and cost effective computer training program. He did this for no rational reason. That was over 3½ years ago, and today we may be on the verge of once again obtaining computers in our cells. This ongoing struggle to serve both public and prisoner interests has been long and bitter. The big shame of the matter is that the resistance to innovative programs like this comes from those officially charged with the responsibility of protecting the public.

The ill advised suppression of successful programs such as the computers, and the official reliance on incarceration to solve the crime problem, will never change in the absence of a paradigm shift in the public's attitude toward criminal justice issues. Today they see punishment, pure and simple, as the best solution. It isn't that people are intrinsically vindictive or hateful. They simply don't want their VCRs stolen or their daughters raped. They are inculcated with bourgeois propaganda to the effect that the solution lies in ever increasing levels of repression (including the death penalty). The mental shift that must be made is from punishment outlook to more of a healing perspective.

Think of today's social order as a well worn suit of clothing *that's already covered with patches.* I for one believe this suit is worn beyond repair and needs to be completely replaced with a brand new suit. Yet most people aren't ready to toss out capitalism, as they see still more life in the system. They believe *get* another patch will do the trick. So you have this worn out suit and you notice a new tear in the fabric. Think of this new tear as crime. After all, criminality is only another symptom of the weakness in the social fabric. So what do we do, get angry and tear open this latest rip even further? Of course not! Anyone with an ounce of sense recognizes such weakness and sews on a patch. Similarly, rather than ostracizing the individual criminal, he or she should be seen as an area of the social fabric in need of strengthening. This takes the form of special education and training. Most of us wouldn't

be in prison if we had the skills to earn a decent living, we would not be raping our sisters if we had an anti-sexist consciousness that didn't view women as objects. But the prison does nothing to rectify either of these areas, or any others. It would cost the public less to send us to Harvard and make nuclear physicists of us than it would to keep us in prison. Yet the public's current level of understanding is still fixated on the counterproductive punishment mode.

"Why should I pay taxes to send a robber to collége," asks the worker, "when I can't afford to give my own son a college education?" While this begs the question of why a free education is not available to everyone who wants one, it nonetheless represents a widespread sentiment. The simple answer is that the offender represents a weakness that needs to be strengthened. If the number of patches we had was limited, we wouldn't add one to a part of the suit that wasn't in some way damaged.

Capitalism cannot of course provide jobs for everyone, nor education, or housing, etc. For truly restorative justice to really work we will need a society based on something more substantial than the drive to make a profit. And that too is beyond the scope of this article. For now I merely want to get the point across that alternatives do exist, but before they can be implemented even on a limited scale, the public's attitude must be changed. This is not a job that should be left to the bourgeois media or politicians; their interests lie elsewhere. It is, rather, a task those most

directly affected must undertake. Prisoners and family members need to highlight the failure of the existing criminal justice policies, and to inform the public about steps that can be taken toward a more restorative approach to the national crime problem.

This educational task should not be too difficult to perform. Conservative government statistics reflect a national recidivism rate of 62.5 percent within three years of release. The public pays between \$20,000 and \$40,000 a year per prisoner for this failure rate. Can you imagine a private industry surviving with a 63 percent failure or product rejection rate for each of the very expensive items it produces? Of course not! Instead of the nuclear physicists (or whatever) the public could be getting for less money, they get the enraged products of the state's dehumanization process. This rage then gets taken out on the community.

The interests of prisoners and those of poor and working class people are the same. There are legitimate alternatives that public deserves to hear. Yet it will take some building with our loved ones on the outside before it will be possible to communicate these alternatives. We will also need to defend against efforts by the anti-democratic and pro-slavery forces to censor our modest message.